

PRAGMATISM TODAY

ISSN 1338-2799

The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum

RORTY and AMERICAN POLITICS TODAY

Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2019





INDEXED BY: The Philosopher's Index
Scopus

EDITORIAL & ADVISORY BOARDS

GUEST EDITORS

Wojciech Matecki

University of Wrocław, Poland
wojciech.matecki@uwr.edu.pl

John Giordano

Merrimack College, USA
giordanoj@merrimack.edu

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Alexander Kremer

University of Szeged, Hungary
alexanderkremer2000@yahoo.com

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Don Morse

Webster University, USA
dj.morse@yahoo.com

Henrik Rydenfelt

University of Helsinki, Finland
henrik.rydenfelt@helsinki.fi

Philipp Dorstewitz

American University of Ras-al-Khaimah, UAE
philipp.dorstewitz@aurak.ae

ADVISORY BOARD

Lyuba Bugaeva

Saint Petersburg State University, Russia

Gideon Calder

University of Wales, United Kingdom

James Campbell

University of Toledo, USA

Ramón del Castillo

Universidad Nacional Educación a Distancia, Spain

Vincent Colapietro

Pennsylvania State University, USA

Michael Eldridge †

University of North Carolina, Charlotte, USA

Tigran Epoyan

UNESCO Moscow Office, Russia

Susan Haack

University of Miami, USA

Richard Hart

Bloomfield College, USA

Larry Hickman

Southern Illinois University, USA

Dorota Koczanowicz

University of Wrocław, Poland

Leszek Koczanowicz

*University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Poland*

Alan Malachowski

University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

Armen Marsoobian

Southern Connecticut State University, USA

Carlos Mougán

University of Cadiz, Spain

Miklos Nyiro

University of Miskolc, Hungary

Gregory Pappas

Texas A&M University, USA

Ramón Rodríguez Aguilera

University of Sevilla, Spain

John Ryder

American University of Malta

Herman Saatkamp

Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, USA

Richard Shusterman

Florida Atlantic University, USA

Radim Šíp

Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Charlene Haddock Seigfried

Purdue University, USA

Paul Thompson

Michigan State University, USA

Christopher Voparil

Union Institute and University, USA

Kathleen Wallace

Hofstra University, USA

Gert Wegmarshaus

DAAD, Germany

Nina Yulina †

*Institute of Philosophy,
Russian Academy of Science, Russia*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

RORTY AND AMERICAN POLITICS TODAY: INTRODUCTION <i>Wojciech Matecki and John Giordano</i>	5
<hr/>	
THE DARK YEARS <i>Richard Bernstein</i>	9
RORTY'S POLITICS: FROM ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY TO MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN <i>Walter Benn Michaels</i>	16
CLASS POLITICS AND CULTURAL POLITICS <i>Susan Dieleman</i>	23
ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT: RORTY ON CULTURAL POLITICS <i>Richard Shusterman</i>	37
'THE LAW OF THE LAND HAS GOD'S ANOINTING' — RORTY ON RELIGION, LANGUAGE, AND POLITICS <i>Tracy Llanera</i>	46
WHY WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT 'HOME': THINKING ABOUT RORTY'S COSMOPOLITANISM <i>Marianne Janack</i>	62

**RORTY AND AMERICAN POLITICS TODAY:
INTRODUCTION**

Wojciech Matecki

University of Wrocław, Poland

wojciech.matecki@uwr.edu.pl

John Giordano

Merrimack College, USA

giordanoj@merrimack.edu

In the fall of 2016, when the world was still in shock after the result of the American presidential election, many started to scour the past for prognosticators who had potentially foreseen the improbable outcome of the election, most likely driven by the thought that there are important lessons in knowing how somebody had been able to predict the unpredictable.

The search was not in vain. For instance, it turned out that there is a public opinion agency in the Republic of South Africa that predicted not only Trump, but also Brexit, all thanks to a unique methodology that involved analyzing various trends in comments on social media (McKenzie and Swails 2016). Then, people reminded themselves that at the time when most commentators still did not treat Trump seriously, Michael Moore had warned the public that Trump would win (Guerrasio 2016). And finally, they discovered that the American philosopher Richard Rorty predicted something very much like the Trump scenario well before Moore, almost two decades earlier in fact, in the following fragment of his 1998 book *Achieving Our Country*:

members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The non-suburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. A scenario like Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here* may then be

played out. For once such a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen. In 1932, most of the predictions made about what would happen if Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor were wildly overoptimistic.

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words “nigger” and “kike” will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet (Rorty 1998, 89–90).

The eerie similarities between Rorty's prediction and the Trump scenario were first noted on social media and then the news spread like wild fire, quickly reaching mainstream media outlets including major newspapers in the United States and elsewhere such as *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and *The New York Times* (Helmore 2016; Mangold 2016; Senior 2016; Žižek 2017; Lepenies 2016).¹ Riding on this wave of interest in Rorty's strongman prediction, the latter newspaper even published a new book review of *Achieving Our Country* – written almost twenty years after its publication – explaining how Rorty had been able to offer his prediction (Senior 2016). That review also informed the reader that the book's publisher, Harvard University Press, would be working on a new edition of the book as the previous edition had recently sold out. Numerous pieces thus ensued in newspapers and magazines in late 2016 and throughout 2017 pointing to Rorty's prescient thoughts on why the American left's turn away from the economic realities of post-industrial workers opened the door to the fact that the rise of a strongman figure could indeed “happen here.” These developments have catalyzed a renewed interest in

¹ It is worth noting that Rorty's “Trump prediction” was invoked in the context of the 2016 presidential election even before it turned out to be true. For instance, Australian Political Theory PhD student Luke Hennessy posted an image of the now-famous Rorty passage on Twitter on September 27th, 2016. Hennessy's tweet was retweeted after the November, 2016 election by Canadian law professor Lisa Kerr, whose followers retweeted the original tweet until it went viral.

Rorty's thinking about American politics and offered that there may be more in Rorty's thought relevant to understanding and addressing the country's current realities than just the strongman prediction (Voparil 2017; Mendieta 2017).

However, most of these discussions have thus far taken the form of popular pieces; we felt there was a need to address and assess Rorty's newfound political relevance in a more scholarly context. The purpose of this special issue of *Pragmatism Today* is to do just that. The articles included here address that relevance from different points of view – positive and critical, general and detailed – and have been written by authors representing different academic fields and traditions. They are Richard Bernstein, Susan Dieleman, Marianne Janack, Tracy Llanera, Walter Benn Michaels, and Richard Shusterman, and their essays can be roughly divided into two groups: historical-exegetical and applicatory. The historical-exegetical essays interpret Rorty's ideas and evaluate their validity, while the applicatory essays use Rorty's ideas to think about problems Rorty himself did not consider, with essays by Bernstein, Dieleman, Michaels, and Shusterman falling into the former and the essays by Llanera and Janack into the latter category.

The special issue opens with Richard Bernstein's essay, which details across Rorty's thought a "dark vision" that questions whether liberal democracies can sustain themselves in the 21st century. Drawing particularly on Rorty's interpretation of George Orwell's *1984*, as well as the 1996 article "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," Bernstein delves into the side of Rorty's thought that warns of the rise of a global elite prone to eschew liberal democracy in favor of authoritarianism in the years to come, a view that stands in contrast to Rorty's more optimistic hope for American commitments to ongoing social reform grounded in fraternity and solidarity. Bernstein shows that Rorty's predictions in *Achieving Our Country* and the warning he offers in "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," serve to remind the reader that democracy is a fragile and contingent project in need of ongoing social reform of

the sort exemplified by the Progressive era reformist Left in the early 20th century.

Walter Benn Michaels, a longtime critic of what he sees as Rorty's relativism regarding literary interpretation, takes up a discussion of the turn to identity politics in academia that Rorty saw as working against the reformist left's historical commitment to economic equality. While Benn Michaels questions Rorty's insistence on creative misreadings of literature, he acknowledges Rorty's careful distinction between the Left that is concerned mainly with in cultural politics and one that focuses more on political reforms that address economic fairness. Yet, Benn Michaels questions if Rorty analysis of the failings of the contemporary Left to address economic fairness in fact "reproduced the structure of identitarianism" that Benn Michaels sees as fueling both left and right politics today.

Susan Dieleman's contribution to the issue also focuses on Rorty's observation of the Left's failure to foresee the political consequences of emphasizing racial and gender inequality over economic inequality. In keeping with the trajectory of the articles in this issue, Dieleman foregrounds Rorty's understanding that the cultural Left was mistaken to think it could make gains by working exclusively in the realm of cultural politics outside the purportedly unredeemable political system. The cultural Left's view that human suffering could be reduced by greater acceptance of marginalized identities overlooked the importance of addressing the sort of suffering that results from economic inequality. Therefore, a return to "real politics" is a return to "class politics," which require an understanding that economic security has to serve as a foundation for the sort of solidarity that prevents the suffering that is anathema to liberal society.

Richard Shusterman departs to some extent from the view that Rorty makes a clear distinction between cultural politics and real politics. Taking an approach through which he looks at Rorty's views in relation to his own somaesthetic philosophy, Shusterman investigates a shift away from Rorty's earlier view that literary and

philosophical activism on college campuses cannot translate to real political change. As Shusterman sees it, college classrooms, as well as new policies and cultural institutions can, catalyze the sort of thinking that leads to real political change, a view that aligns with Rorty's ideal of philosophy as cultural politics. Shusterman argues that Rorty would agree culture is vital for creating the conditions conducive to the sort of affective experiences that lead the public to widen their circle of democratic community. For Shusterman, attention to affect and wider somaesthetic commitments inform political commitments in ways that are compatible with Rorty's hope for a return to real politics.

In her paper, Tracy Llanera attends to Rorty's concern over the use of religious language in the public sphere, situating it in the context of Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war. Using Rorty's writings on religion and American politics, Llanera aims to show that the use of religious language by militant religious groups in the Philippines in support of Duterte's drug war reflects what Rorty saw as an irresponsible use of religious language in the public sphere, a manner of employing religious language that ultimately undermines democratic societies. Llanera goes on to question a firm eschewal of religion in the public sphere by asking if such a delineation forecloses the potential for religious leaders in the tradition of Martin Luther King to catalyze social change. That said, Llanera suggests that the kind of tactics that conflate religion and politics in the Philippines are being used by Trump to shift American politics toward the priorities of religious fundamentalism, a turn of events that suggests American politics must respond to the pernicious harm that results from the political use of religious language.

Marianne Janack's contribution weighs the complex associations surrounding the concept of "home," a sight of both nostalgia for what is no longer and a desire for rootedness in the present. Where once an Enlightenment ideal of "extending the embrace of 'us'" undergirded Western liberalism, such an ideal, according to

Janack, has come to be challenged by "the homeland" or a nation state. Janack argues that Rorty's particular views on the notion of home are contradictory in that he embraces both an ethnocentrism that understands that we cannot truly escape our national or regional values and a cosmopolitanism that demands a rootless interest in expansive community free from geographical borders. Janack goes on to suggest that Rorty would embrace the migrant and refugee populations central to discussion of national borders today, yet adds that fully embracing those populations requires us to move beyond an interest in welcoming others toward a greater understanding regarding the motivations behind leaving homes and homelands for security in foreign lands.

We would like to thank the authors of the papers for their contributions and patience, the reviewers of the papers for their insights, and the chief editor of the journal for his faith in this project.

References

- Guerrasio, Jason. 2016. "Michael Moore Predicted Trump's Path to Victory Exactly Right." *Business Insider*. December 11, 2016. <http://www.businessinsider.com/michael-moore-predicted-trump-path-to-win-2016-11>.
- Helmre, Edward. 2016. "'Something Will Crack': Supposed Prophecy of Donald Trump Goes Viral." *The Guardian*, November 19, 2016, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/19/donald-trump-us-election-prediction-richard-rorty>.
- Lepenies, Wolf. 2016. "Richard Rorty Sah Schon 1997 Das Szenario Trump Voraus," November 7, 2016. <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article159316646/US-Philosoph-sah-schon-1997-das-Szenario-Trump-voraus.html>.
- Mangold, Ijoma. 2016. "Identitätspolitik: Die liberale Gesellschaft und die irre Suche nach ihren Feinden." *Die Zeit*, December 2, 2016, sec. Kultur. <https://www.zeit.de/2016/50/identitaetspolitik-debatte-rassismus-rechtsextremismus-linke-rechte-liberalismus>.
- McKenzie, David, and Brent Swails. 2016. "They Predicted President Trump and Brexit." CNN. November 15, 2016. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/15/africa/south-africa-brandseye-trump-brexite/index.html>.

Mendieta, Eduardo. 2017. "Rorty and Post-Post-Truth." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. July 22, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rorty-and-post-post-truth/>.

Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Senior, Jennifer. 2016. "Richard Rorty's 1998 Book Suggested Election 2016 Was Coming." *The New York Times*, November 20, 2016, sec. Books. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/books/richard-rortys-1998-book-suggested-election-2016-was-coming.html>.

Voparil, Christopher J. 2017. "The Truth Doesn't Matter." *Boston Globe*, June 7, 2017.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/06/07/the-truth-doesn-matter/l4fy2nu99KnViMINTkIOCP/story.html>.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2017. "Mehr Selbstkritik, bitte! | NZZ," February 3, 2017.

<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/zukunft-nach-trump-mehr-selbstkritik-bitte-ld.143572>.

THE DARK YEARS

Richard Bernstein

The New School for Social Research

BernsteR@newschool.edu

ABSTRACT: This paper details across Rorty's thought a "dark vision" that questions whether liberal democracies can sustain themselves in the 21st century. Drawing particularly on Rorty's interpretation of George Orwell's *1984*, as well as a 1996 article "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," the paper delves into the side of Rorty's thought that warns of the rise of a global elite prone to eschew liberal democracy in favor of authoritarianism in the years to come, a view that stands in contrast to Rorty's more optimistic hope for American commitments to ongoing social reform grounded in fraternity and solidarity. The paper shows that Rorty's predictions in *Achieving Our Country* and the warning he offers in "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," serve to remind the reader that democracy is a fragile and contingent project in need of ongoing social reform of the sort exemplified by the Progressive era reformist left in the early 20th century.

Keywords: Rorty, liberal democracy, authoritarianism, American politics

No one was more acute than Rorty in echoing and epitomizing the accusations and taunts of his critics. In "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" he tells us that conservative culture warriors characterize him as "one of the relativistic, irrationalist, deconstructing, sneering, smirking intellectuals whose writings are weakening the moral fibre of the young" (Rorty 1999, 2). Leftist radical thinkers accuse him of being one of those intellectual snobs who care only about the learned cultured elite to which he belongs. "I am sometimes told by critics from both ends of the political spectrum, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts" (Rorty 1999, 5). These sharp criticisms and the dismissive reviews of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* provoked Rorty to write his autobiographical essay, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," where he explains how he came to his present views, especially about the relation of philosophy and politics and why "they were not adopted for frivolous reasons" (Rorty 1999, 5).

Rorty was clearly responsible for some of these caricatures. He taunted Marxist critics by championing "bourgeois liberalism"; he accused conservatives of being "greedy and selfish"; he defended the need for patriotism at a time when many academic Leftists thought this was little more than an apology for American imperialism. Nevertheless, the portrait of Rorty as a clever, light-hearted, sneering intellectual snob is a gross distorting caricature. It misses the dark side of his thinking and his profound worry about the fate of liberal democracy. When we fully appreciate this dark streak in Rorty, then many of his key concepts including contingency, irony, solidarity, and social hope take on a deeper and richer meaning.

Consider his essay "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," originally published in *The New York Times* in 1996. In this imaginative reconstruction of America's history, Rorty claims that "our long, hesitant, painful, recovery, over the last five decades, from the breakdown of democratic institutions during the Dark Years (2014-2044) has changed our political vocabulary, as well as our sense of the relation between the moral order and the economic order" (Rorty 1999, 243). Rorty adopts the optimistic stance that by 2096 there has been a recovery from the Dark Years. According to Rorty's narrative a sense of fraternity and moral progress had characterized America from its origins, despite many setbacks and shameful events in its history. However, things began to change in the 1980s when a sense of fraternity and solidarity became a faint memory.

A burst of selfishness had produced tax revolts in the 1970s, stopping in its tracks the fairly steady progress toward a full-fledged welfare state that had been under way since the New Deal. The focus of racial hate was transferred from the rural South to the big cities, where a criminal culture of unemployed (and, in the second generation, virtually unemployable) black youths grew up—a culture of near violence, made possible by the then-famous American 'right to bear arms'. All the old racial prejudices were revived by white suburbanites' claims that their tax money was being used to coddle criminals. Politicians gained votes from their constituents on prisons rather than on day care. (Rorty 1999, 247)

In Rorty's imaginary scenario a military dictatorship takes over in 2014 and is finally toppled by the "Democratic Vistas Party" in 2044. By 2096 there is a resurgence of a feeling of fraternity as our most cherished ideal. Rorty's primary concern in this essay is the ominous threat to liberal democracy. In a 1997 interview Rorty was quite bleak about the future. "I don't have much faith that we can keep liberal democracy going... I expect we'll get more dictatorships in the future" (Rorty 2006, 60). "There is a crisis coming for all the old industrial democracies. I don't think culture and ideas have much to do with it. The idea of solidarity of which I wrote – that was just an optimistic scenario about how America might eventually get itself back together again after a fascist revolution. For all I know, this time the fascists will win; the dictators will be there forever" (Rorty 2006, 60-1).

This dark prognosis is already anticipated in Rorty's interpretation of George Orwell's *1984*, especially his interpretation of the last part of the novel that centers on O'Brien who declares "The object of torture is torture." Some literary critics think that this is where Orwell's novel begins to deteriorate; they discount his "apocalyptic desperation." Rorty, on the contrary, argues that Orwell "sketched an alternative scenario, one which led in the wrong direction. He did so by convincing us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible" (Rorty 1989, 175).

In the view of *1984* I am offering, Orwell has no answer to O'Brien, and is not interested in giving one. Like Nietzsche, O'Brien regards the whole idea of being "answered," of exchanging ideas, of reasoning together, as a symptom of weakness. Orwell did not invent O'Brien to serve as a dialectical foil, a modern counterpart to Thrasymachus. He invented him to warn us against him...He does not view O'Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and as *possible*. (Rorty 1989, 176)

One of Rorty's most pessimistic passages occurs in the context of his discussion of Orwell.

I do not think that we liberals can now imagine a future of "human dignity, freedom and peace." That is, we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future. We can picture various socioeconomic setups which would be preferable to the present one. But we have no clear sense of how to get from the actual world to these theoretically possible worlds, and thus no clear idea of what to work for... We liberals have no plausible large-scale scenario for changing the world so as to realize the "technical possibility of human equality"... Sometimes things prove to be just as bad as they first looked. Orwell helped us to formulate a pessimistic description of the political situation which forty years of further experience have only confirmed. (Rorty 1989, 181-2)

I suspect that if Rorty were alive today he would say that recent experience has substantially confirmed this pessimistic description. Ironically, O'Brien is Rorty's fictional double. I mean this in a precise sense. O'Brien would completely agree with Rorty that socialization "goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first" (Rorty 1989, 185). After all, O'Brien himself affirms that "men are infinitely malleable." Iris Murdoch once shrewdly remarked "it is always a significant question to ask any philosopher: what he is afraid of?" The answer for Rorty is clear—that something like O'Brien's post-totalitarian scenario—the world that Orwell described so vividly—will actually come to be. In such a world the very idea of "liberal democracy" will be obliterated. There isn't even a word for it in the eleventh edition of *Newspeak*—the authoritative lexicon in the world of *1984*.

Rorty's dark vision of what is dangerous and yet possible is directly related to the passage from *Achieving Our Country* that went viral on social media. Rorty identifies himself with the "Reformist Left"—a term he uses "to cover all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964 struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong" (Rorty 1998: 43). He contrasts the "Reformist Left" with the "New Left" —a label he uses "to mean the people—mostly students who decided, around 1964, that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the

system" (Rorty 1998, 43). During the 1960s there was the beginning of the eclipse of this Reformist Left and a turn by the New Left to cultural issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. The great achievement of the New Left and its legacy has been a decrease in the types of sadism and humiliation evidenced in issues of race, gender and ethnicity, but its great failure, according to Rorty, has been its neglect of poverty, unemployment, and the widening gap between the rich and poor. Since 1973 "the assumption that all hardworking American married couples would be able to afford a home, and that the wife could then, if she chose, stay at home and raise kids, has begun to seem absurd" (Rorty 1998, 85) There has been a split among those who think of themselves as Leftists—a disconnect between those who have been primary concerned with economic issues and diminishing the gap between the rich and the poor and those who focus their attention almost exclusively on cultural issues. Left radicals have been primarily located in the academy; their books and articles are read almost exclusively by other academic radicals. They have virtually no connection with the working poor. Furthermore, the economic consequences of globalization are producing "a world economy in which an attempt by any one country to prevent immiseration of its workers may result only in depriving them of employment. This world economy will soon be owned by a cosmopolitan upper class which has no more sense of community with any workers anywhere than the great American capitalists of the year 1900 had with immigrants who manned their enterprises" (Rorty 1998, 85). If this trend continues, then "not only in the United States but in all the old democracies we shall end up in an Orwellian world." (Rorty 1998, 87)

In such a world, there may be no supernational analogue of Big Brother, or any official creed analogous to Ingsoc. But there will be an analogue to the Inner Party—namely the international cosmopolitan super-rich. They will make all the important decisions. The analogue of Orwell's Outer Party will be the educated comfortably off, cosmopolitan professionals... the people like you and me. (Rorty 1998:87)

Rorty feared the reality that we are now living through. Here is the full passage from which selections went viral on social media.

[M]embers of labor unions, and the unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. A scenario like that of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here* may then be played out. For once such a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen. In 1932, most of the predictions made about what would happen if Hindenburg names Hitler chancellor were wildly overoptimistic.

One thing that is likely to happen is that the gains made in the past fifty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back in fashion. The words "nigger" and "kike" will again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having manners dictated to them by college graduate will find an outlet (Rorty 1998, 89-90)

But how is this pessimistic—or rather, all too realistic—scenario related to the themes that resonate throughout Rorty's corpus—themes such as contingency, solidarity, irony, and social hope? Rorty is not only concerned with the contingency of language and selfhood, he is deeply concerned with the contingency of a liberal community. The practices of a liberal democratic community are the result of a series of fortunate chance events in the past. There are no metaphysical, philosophical, or political guarantees that these practices will continue to survive.

Prior to the 1980s, Rorty did not explicitly deal with political issues in his major publications, but from the 1980s until his death in 2007, Rorty increasingly turned

his attention to what he perceived as political dangers—and to what might be done to counteract them. Rorty's disillusionment with Philosophy with a capital "P" and with foundational projects was, in part, motivated by its failure to address concrete political and economic issues. This is even suggested by the title of his provocative paper, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" where he argues that liberal democracy doesn't require or need *philosophical* justification or legitimation. A primary reason for Rorty's attraction to John Dewey is his pragmatic concern with those obstacles that threaten liberal democracy and with social reforms required to further the development of "creative democracy." The gravest threat to liberal democracy is the undermining of a sense of fraternity and solidarity. Solidarity, for Rorty, is a "sense of other people and ourselves as being 'we'—we feel that what affects them affects us because we, to some extent identify with them" (Rorty 2006,32). Throughout *Achieving Our Country*, and in many of his other political writings, Rorty emphasizes how the growing disparity between the rich and the poor—the increasing acceptance and even celebration of greed and selfishness destroys the fabric of solidarity. In an Orwellian world human solidarity is obliterated. "What Orwell helps us to see is that it may have *just happened* that Europe began to prize benevolent sentiments and the idea of a common humanity, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments and any such ideas" (Rorty 1989, 185). We are tempted to think that solidarity, our recognition of one another's common humanity, stands outside of history and institutions. This is reflected in the way in which we speak of universal human rights or inalienable rights grounded in human nature. Rorty argues that we should resist this temptation. In the final chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty writes: "I have been urging in this book that we try not to want something which stands beyond history and institutions. *The fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that*

this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (Rorty 1989, 189, my emphasis).

The view that I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But this solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities in pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us" (Rorty 1989, 192).

There is no necessity or grand narrative that guarantees moral progress. It can all too easily be reversed. If this regression is to be countered, it is not going to happen as a result of philosophical or religious treatises, but rather as a consequence of detailed descriptions of the pain and humiliation that people experience. This is why Rorty puts such emphasis on novels and journalistic reports of pain and humiliation in order to cultivate solidarity. Solidarity is not a given; it is not intrinsic to human nature; it is fragile achievement that requires constant vigilance.

We can also see how irony is related to Rorty's political worries about the fate of liberal democracies. Despite Rorty's emphasis on "private irony," there is a public face of his conception of irony. "Final vocabularies" consist of those sets of words that we employ to justify our actions, beliefs, and lives. They are "'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (Rorty 1989, 73). There is no neutral ground; nothing to which we can appeal that is outside history to justify our final vocabularies. Rorty tells us that "ironists" are those who realize that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed and he knows that this claim is double edged. O'Brien, with his doublethink, is a master of redescription. Unlike the ironist, O'Brien does not have any real doubts about his final vocabulary. But if we are to counter the danger of the sophisticated

fanaticism that O'Brien epitomizes, then the liberal ironist must attempt to describe democracy in a way that makes it as attractive as possible in hope of motivating people to vigilantly defend it. This is what Rorty seeks to do in many of his political writings, especially in *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty hopes that someday that nation-states will yield their sovereignty to a world federation, but "such a federation will never come into existence unless the governments of individual nation-states cooperate in setting it up, and unless citizens of these nation-states take a certain amount of pride (even rueful and hesitate pride) in their governments' effort to do so" (Rorty 1998, 3).

"Achieving Our Country" is a phrase that Rorty appropriates from James Baldwin's critique of violent white racism in America. In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin writes: "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and which neither time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it." Although Baldwin condemns this crime as unforgivable, he nevertheless does not "give up" on America. He concludes his book by expressing his hope. "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (Baldwin quoted by Rorty in 1998, 12-13). Baldwin expresses the social hope that someday this racial nightmare will end and we may collectively achieve the type of democracy that both Whitman and Dewey projected for America. Rorty contrasts this hope with the story that Elijah Muhammad tells about white America—that there is no hope that white devils will ever change. In contrasting the stories that Baldwin and Elijah Muhammad tell about America, Rorty wants to make a more general point—the difference between agents and spectators—a distinction

that he draws from Dewey. Rorty stresses what Hilary Putnam claimed to be at the core of pragmatism—taking the agent's point of view as fundamental. Rorty's critique of the academic Left is that it too frequently assumes a detached spectatorship in condemning the "system," "global capitalism," "neoliberalism." Frequently, academic critics seek to outdo each other in the theoretical sophistication of their critiques. What is lacking in these endless critiques is the attempt to connect with "real politics," with formulating and advocating specific social policies and legislative programs that can alleviate human misery. Despite Rorty's many sharp criticisms of Marx, Rorty does think that Marx was absolutely right in stressing the importance of the economy in determining the character of human life, but today the idea of a proletarian revolution no longer makes sense. In a Deweyan spirit Rorty thinks that the only "realistic" alternative for achieving equality between the rich and the poor is gradual social reform. The Left for Rorty is the party of hope. Rorty hopes for a reinvigorated Left that will combine the virtues of the Reformist Left and the cultural legacy of the New Left—a Left that will fight against both selfishness and sadism, a Left that will mobilize Americans to become political agents for social change. The Left needs to realize that America has never been a morally pure country. There has been a history of extreme violence in America as well as the projection of democratic ideals. But if one focuses exclusively on the intense shame of past (and current) horrors then there is no possibility of encouraging ordinary citizens to work for reform. If a Left wants to persuade citizens to mobilize themselves to further a type of solidarity that can effect improvement, then it needs to "remind the country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past—episodes and figures to which the country should remain true" (Rorty 1998, 3-4). This is what Rorty does in celebrating the democratic visions of Whitman and Dewey. The history of Leftist politics in America "is a story of how top-down

initiatives and bottom-up initiatives have been interlocked" (Rorty 1998, 53). Top down initiatives come from people who generally have security, power and money but are nevertheless concerned with people who have less. They include the muckraking journalists, novelists and scholars. "Bottom-up Left initiative comes from people who have little security, money, or power and who rebel against the unfair treatment which they, or others like them, are receiving" (Rorty 1998, 53).

Rorty cites a number of examples in American history where these two initiatives reinforced each other such as the early attempts to organize unions to fight for decent working conditions and the civil rights movement. "The people at the bottom took the risks, suffered the beatings, made all the big sacrifices, and were sometimes murdered. But their heroism might have been fruitless if leisured, educated, relatively risk-free people had not joined the struggle. Those beaten by goon squads and the lynch mobs might have died in vain if the safe and secure had not lent a hand" (Rorty 1998, 54).

Prior to the 1960s the non-Marxist American Reformist Left was motivated by the conviction "that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy—that a cooperative commonwealth could be created by electing the right politicians and passing the right laws ... But the Vietnam War splintered that Left" (Rorty 1998, 55). Many Leftists gave up on the system, gave up on American constitutional democracy and began to call for a Total Revolution (although it was never clear what the "Revolution" really meant). The mid-Sixties saw the beginning of the end of a tradition which dated back to the Progressive Era. This Left Reformist tradition did succeed in initiating the social democratic changes characteristic of the New Deal. Rorty expresses his dismay that this reformist tradition has not been reconstituted. There has been a failure of the Left to forge alliances with unions, unskilled workers, and those who have suffered the demoralizing consequences of globalization. Today there is still too little evidence of a revival of the Reformist Left movement in America. The failure of the

Left to forge alliances with blue collar workers—the traditional base for the Democratic Party—has led many of them to become fervent supporters of Trump.

Rorty could not have fully anticipated how throughout the world, the intractable problems created by masses of people fleeing their countries and seeking immigration would lead to consequences that threaten liberal democracies and create conditions that favor authoritarian politics, but I don't think he would have been surprised. He anticipated and feared that there would be an outburst of resentment and the real possibility of the collapse of progressive social democratic ideals.

The question then arises, for anyone that professes to be pragmatic, what is to be done? Frankly, I don't think Rorty offers much helpful advice. He is much more effective rejecting what he takes to be dead ends. One may agree that the insouciant use of vague terms like "late capitalism," "globalization" or "neoliberalism" is not helpful in coming up with specific social policies. "The voting public, the public which must be won over if the Left is to emerge from the academy into the public square, sensibly wants to be told the details. It wants to know how things are going to work after markets are put behind us. It wants to know how participatory democracy is supposed to function" (Rorty 1998, 104). Rorty criticizes the cultural Left because it has no answers to demands for concrete details. He "thinks that the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy. This was the business the American Left was in during the first two-thirds of the century" (Rorty 1998, 105). But when we ask Rorty to be specific and concrete about which "piecemeal reforms" are to be favored, he doesn't offer answers—except in the most general and abstract terms. It is not enough to be told that we need reforms that will lessen the disparity between the super-rich and the desperate poor. How is this to be achieved? And what is going to motivate the electorate to bring about economic redistribution? One can agree with Rorty that the Left needs to build alliances between different constituencies and social movements.

But, once again, if we ask the question how this is to be achieved, Rorty is not really helpful. In Rorty's defense, one might object that such criticisms are unfair because Rorty's aim in *Achieving Our Country* was to provide a critical narrative of the history of the Left in twentieth-century America, not to engage in the practical politics. But such a response is not adequate. One may have serious doubts whether the type of reformist politics that Rorty advocates still makes much sense today. Rorty was committed to the American constitutional system of electoral politics. He wanted to see the revival of the type of Left Democratic Party that characterized the New Deal. He takes pride in the heritage that many members of his family played in advancing concrete social reforms of the New Deal. But given the paralysis of politics in the United States today, the sophisticated digital techniques for manipulating "public opinion," the power of money in shaping politics, the disarray within the Democratic Party, the persistent failure for left intellectuals to establish politically effective alliances with blue collar workers, Rorty opens himself to the criticism that he slips into a nostalgia of a past era that is no longer relevant. Rorty, of course is not naïve. He expressed his pessimism about America's future and the future of liberal democracy over and over again. When asked directly in 2003 about whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about the future of America, he did not hesitate to answer "very pessimistic indeed" (Rorty 2006, 160). He sounded the alarm that America was moving toward a new form of fascism. But he refused to give into resigned spectatorial despair. "There is, to be sure, plenty of reason for pessimism, but it would be better to do what one can to get people to follow an improbable scenario than simply throw up one's hands" (Rorty 2006, 101). This is a key reason why Rorty insisted upon "ungrounded social hope." I do not know whether Rorty would have supported Bernie Sanders as the Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election. But I feel fairly confident that he would have praised the energy and dreams of many of his supporters. He would have taken it as evidence that the spirit of achieving our

country is not dead—that there are still many ordinary citizens committed to Whitman's and Dewey's vision of a decent society where freedom and equality flourish. If we are ever to recover from the Dark Years that we are now living through, there will need to be a renewal of solidarity — "fellow feeling and the ability to sympathize with the plight of others" (Rorty 1999, 249). Rorty was at once brutally realistic about the present and passionately committed to the ideals he hoped the country might achieve. He believed that "you have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to dream a country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual" (Rorty 1998, 101). Rorty's hope and legacy is not to give up on the dream of achieving our country, not to give in to becoming cynical spectators, to take pride in what is best in the American democratic tradition. In this respect, Rorty remains true to the pragmatic emphasis on agency and contingency. Liberal democracy is fragile and contingent. Rorty knew all too well that it could end, and some new form of fascism might arise. If this is to be avoided (and there is no guarantee that it will be avoided) then we have to keep alive social hope; we have to be active and vigilant in defending liberal democracy; to encourage ordinary people to exert their political power to institute social policies and practices that will bring us closer to achieving our country.

References

- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1998. *Achieving Our Country*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books.
- _____. 2006. *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, edited with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

**RORTY'S POLITICS:
FROM ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY TO MAKING AMERICA
GREAT AGAIN**

Walter Benn Michaels
University of Illinois at Chicago
wbm@uic.edu

ABSTRACT: This paper takes up Rorty's critique of the turn to identity politics in academia and in particular his argument that this turn worked against the Left's historical commitment to economic equality. While acknowledging Rorty's careful distinction between the Left that is concerned mainly with cultural politics and one that focuses more on political reforms that address economic fairness, the paper attempts to show that both Rorty's literary critical attachment to creative misreadings and his refusal of the notion of a class politics actually reproduce the structure of the identitarianism to which he himself objected and which, the paper argues, fuels both left and right politics today.

Keywords: Rorty, left politics, identitarianism, class, culture

A few months before he died, the philosopher Richard Rorty wrote a little piece in *Poetry* magazine, declaring that in the face of death poetry had been of more "use" to him than philosophy and going on to regret that he hadn't "spent more of [his] life with verse." Encountered as I first encountered it, on the Poetry Foundation website (Rorty, 2007a), there's something both creepy and attractive about this piece. The creepy part is seeing Rorty's death-bed conversion deployed as one of those testimonials to the power of poetry brought to us regularly by the legacy of the Lilly millions; the attractive part, of course, is the promise that poetry will make you feel a little better about dying. And to some extent, at least, the attractive part mitigates the effect of creepiness; if poetry really does produce consolation in the face of death, then the Poetry Foundation's promotional efforts are probably a good thing.

Furthermore, there's an important sense in which Rorty, despite his neglect of verse, had already spent a good deal of his life as himself a promoter of poetry, in, as he put it, "the extended sense." In fact, the remarks which have provided the occasion for this special issue – his now celebrated prediction of the rise of a right wing

populism and the emergence of a figure like Trump – were not only made in a book which is significantly about what he considered to be the importance of the literary but were made also in response to what he considered to be the failure of literary critics to recognize the particular character of that importance, in particular the failure of those "teachers of literature" who belonged to what Rorty's longtime friend Harold Bloom called the "School of Resentment": "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors" (Bloom 1994, 20). Bloom thought what the Resenters were missing was the aesthetic value of literature; Rorty, preferring the term "knowingness" to resentment, thought what they were missing was the way in which literature offered an alternative to philosophy – more precisely, an alternative to the idea that the most important thing for intellectuals was to know the truth about the world. In other words, the critics who belonged to what he called the School of Knowingness were too much like philosophers.

By contrast, Rorty preferred the kinds of literary critics least likely to be taken for (or to take themselves for) philosophers – for example, Bloom himself, who was more concerned with what he called "strong misreadings" of texts than with correct interpretations of them. Hence Nabokov's Charles Kinbote (the commentator of *Pale Fire*) was (epistemologically anyway) an exemplary Rortian critic because the commentary he produces can hardly be understood as an interpretation of the poem to which it is a response. Rorty's idea here is not that Kinbote is "'making something up' when he reads the story of Zembla between the lines of Shade's poem" (Rorty 1989, 160). Rorty's denial that "truth" is "out there" (5) is not, in other words, a kind of idealism, which is to say, he isn't claiming that the reader constitutes the poem. And it isn't that Kinbote is "representing [the poem] inaccurately" either. Rorty is no more attached to the value of false interpretations than he is to the value of true interpretations. The point is rather that Kinbote is representing the poem neither accurately nor inaccurately because he isn't representing it at all; "He is reacting to a stimulus, and thereby creating a new

stimulus" (160). Reactions to a stimulus may be strong or weak, influential or inconsequential, interesting or boring. But they can't be true or false. The "important" thing, "to see" about Kinbote's response, then, is that it is powerful because he "cares a great deal about Shade's poem even if for all the wrong reasons. He thinks very hard about it, even though his thought goes in utterly different directions from Shade's. "This illustrates the point," Rorty says, "that a perverse egocentric commentary – what Bloom calls 'a strong reading' – is still a commentary"(Rorty 1989, 160).

There are two different and, as it seems to me, not entirely compatible ideas at work here. The first is the description of reading as reacting to a stimulus; the second is the claim that a perverse commentary is still a commentary. The difficulty is that if the first claim is true, it's hard to see what the point of the second one is supposed to be. If, that is, a reading of a text is a response to a stimulus, then either no reading is a commentary, or all readings are commentaries. In which case why insist that Kinbote's reading is? But if Kinbote's reading is a commentary in the sense that it's meant as an account of what Shade's poem means (even though it's a perverse account), then it's obviously not just a response to a stimulus, not just a record of what the poem makes Kinbote think of or how it makes him feel. So even if Rorty is absolutely right to say that Kinbote's commentary is a commentary (mistaken commentaries are no less commentaries for being mistaken), this claim makes sense only because his first point – that a reading is a reaction to a stimulus – is wrong. Not because we don't respond to texts but because our responses to a text are not, as such, interpretations of the text. The thing that transforms a response to a text into a reading of that text is the claim the reading makes to be about the text, the claim to represent it "accurately" (whether or not it actually does). But, of course, it is just this claim to represent the meaning of a text that makes Rorty unhappy.

Thus he values literary texts that seem to him indifferent to questions of truth and he also presents his own

writing about them as similarly indifferent. The main point of his essay on Orwell, for example, is – against all those critics who read him as a "realist philosopher," teaching us to "set our faces against those sneaky intellectuals who try to tell us that truth is not 'out there'" (Rorty 1989, 172) – to describe him instead as a writer who really cared not about truth but about freedom. What Orwell thought, according to Rorty, was that "if we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself," and the point of the famous defense of Winston's belief that two plus two equals four is that "it does not matter whether 'two plus two is four' is true ... All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt" (176). But in presenting this revisionist (and, as it turned out, highly controversial) reading of *1984*, Rorty does not claim that Orwell *isn't* a realist; he says instead that he "is not usefully thought of" as a realist. Orwell's indifference to what is true is thus mirrored in Rorty's commentary; the pragmatist or anti-foundationalist vocabulary of utility takes the place of the foundationalist claim to truth.

Does this substitution work? For the reasons suggested above (and elaborated at much greater length in *The Shape of the Signifier*), I don't think so. After all, you can't judge whether something really is useful (or even understand what is meant by "useful") without having lots of beliefs about what is true. Furthermore, it's not at all clear how much stock Rorty himself put in his attacks on the idea of getting things "right." We know that in 2000 he declared himself "persuaded" (by Bjørn Ramberg) to "abandon" his own doctrine "that the notion of 'getting things right' must be abandoned" (Rorty, 2000, 393). And in his account of *The Middle of the Road* in "Honest Mistakes," his summary of "what Trilling is saying" is unconcernedly prefaced by the qualification, "If this reading is right..." (66). The critique in this essay is not of the idea that people can get things right but of the idea that when they have failed to do so they "have sinned against the light" (Rorty 2007b, 67).

From this perspective, we might say that the skepticism that mattered most to Rorty was about the

value rather than the possibility of true interpretations, and that this was one reason why the idea of literary criticism was so attractive to him. For even though literary critics are no doubt deeply committed to the truth of our readings, we can hardly help but be aware that not everything hangs on their actually being true and that the intellectual attractiveness of what seems to us really good work is not necessarily eliminated when we don't agree with it. So it may be that it doesn't really matter whether Rorty is characterizing his own interpretations as useful or as true; what he's doing instead is asking us to read *1984* in the way he reads it without worrying too much about whether the way he reads it is the way it really is. Of course, the idea that we shouldn't worry about what *1984* is really about is weaker than the theoretical claim that it makes no sense to say that *1984* really is about anything, and the idea that we needn't always care about the truth is much weaker than the idea that there is no such thing as the truth. More generally, the claim that the value of our interpretations may not entirely depend on whether they're true or false is weaker than the claim that the interpretations are neither true nor false.¹ But it's also a lot more convincing. And from this perspective, literary criticism might be understood to have provided Rorty an institutional if not in the end an epistemological alternative to philosophy.

In the event, however, his enthusiasm for actually existing literary criticism was nowhere near as great as his enthusiasm for his idea of literary criticism. He went pretty quickly from happily proclaiming that "in England and America philosophy has already been displaced by literary criticism in its principal function – as a source for youth's self-description of its difference from the past"

¹ This last formulation seems to me the best but probably not the most Rortian one. I think it's the best because it's odd to imagine us not caring about the truth of our beliefs inasmuch as them seeming to us to be true is what it means to believe them. It's not the most Rortian because Rorty did often write as if caring about the truth of our beliefs somehow added something to just believing them, and as if what he was doing was urging us not to care. But, with respect to literary criticism, it's not an implausible one.

to unhappily complaining about the "state of soul" of "teachers of literature" whose "knowingness" prevents "shudders of awe" and who "can explain everything but idolize nothing" (Rorty 1998a, 126-27) – the "School of Resentment." If the attractiveness of Rorty's ideal of literary criticism was that, unlike philosophy, it didn't insist on the importance of knowing things, what was unattractive about the reality was that most literary criticism was actually more interested in knowledge than in inspiration and that more critics were committed to becoming what he and Bloom thought of as social scientists than to becoming the kind of "moral advisers" (Rorty 1989, 80) he wanted them to be. The critic "now," (in what he was still in 1989 hopefully calling our "Orwellian-Bloomian culture") "is expected to facilitate moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisers, and suggesting ways in which the tensions within this canon may be eased – or, where necessary sharpened" (82). But the feminists, Marxists, multiculturalists, et al., whom Bloom consigned to the School of Resentment were already failing to meet these expectations.

There's a certain sense in which this criticism seems a little unfair. You may not like the moral advice you're getting from feminism and multiculturalism but it's hard not to recognize it as moral advice. (Indeed, a more plausible critique would be that the criticism of the 80s and 90s he's referring to was nothing but moral advice.) But it's easy to see that if, like Rorty, you were committed to a left politics, its academic version – what he called the "cultural left" – might seem to you at best insufficient and at worst destructive. The alternative to a cultural left – an economic left – he thought, had been pretty much ignored. "Nobody" was "setting up a program in unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer-park studies" (1998a, 80). And while this may not have been entirely accurate (Whiteness studies loved trailer parks), it was certainly true that appreciating the culture of people in trailer parks could hardly count as dealing with the increase in "economic inequality and

economic insecurity" (83) that concerned Rorty and that had helped those trailer parks proliferate. And, of course, it's because of his alertness to those trailer parks and to the inequality that produced them that *Achieving Our Country* is a book that is now rightly demanding our attention.

But if we look at the terms in which Rorty articulated both his opposition to the "cultural left" (the schools of knowingness and resentment) and his support for a left that would focus at least as much on "money" as on "difference," we can begin to see some of the ways in which his own arguments were as much part of the problem as the solution. In 1994 (three years before Rorty gave the lectures that became *Achieving Our Country*), Bloom had published his *The Western Canon*, a book which began with his assault on the "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors," all of whom he understood as motivated by the School of Resentment's "cardinal principle": "what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle" (23). And, also in 1994, Rorty himself upped the ante; where Bloom just wanted his school of resentment to stop talking about class as a determinant of aesthetic value, Rorty called for his school of knowingness to stop talking about class altogether. We should "drop the terms capitalism and socialism," he writes, we should start talking about "greed and selfishness" and "differential per-pupil expenditure in schools" "rather than about the division of society into classes" (Rorty, 1998b, 229).

But in 1994, these exhortations were almost entirely supererogatory. Not only were almost no American literary critics Marxists,² almost everybody else on Bloom's list (including the "multiculturalists" he occasionally added in) were anti-Marxist. Indeed, Foucault (even more influential than Derrida among literary critics

in the 90s) crucially substituted power for capitalism in his thematics of resistance and replaced class struggle with the "struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission" (Foucault, 1982, 781) that he thought were becoming increasingly central.³ And the equally increasing centrality of feminist criticism, of queer theory and of racial identity as constitutive categories of analysis tended either to make the conflict between classes irrelevant or to preserve the concept of class as itself an identity, precisely along the lines of sex and race. (That's why trailer parks could count as expressions of a culture – white trash culture – more than as signs of defeat in the war between capital and labor.)

Thus, fighting cultural critics whose "cardinal principle" was the importance of class, Bloom and Rorty were engaging an enemy that basically didn't exist and, politically, they were allying themselves with rather than opposing themselves to the enemy that did. Which is to say, first, that Rorty and Bloom and all the Resenters and Knowers actually shared a commitment to the evacuation of class as a central category of analysis in literary criticism. And, second, that it wasn't just in literary criticism, of course, that the "division of classes" became increasingly irrelevant to ideas about social justice. Indeed, although Rorty was much more alert to economic inequality than was the cultural left, his ways of understanding it were basically the same.

Between 1979 (when *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was published) and 1998 (when *Achieving Our*

² Fredric Jameson is the great exception, and it's perhaps worth noting that for the last ten years – with the emergence of "surface reading" and "postcritique" – there's been a pretty strenuous effort to get rid of him too.

³ He explicitly acknowledged that "domination" and "exploitation" had not disappeared but his anti-Marxism left very little conceptual room for anything other than this lip service to class conflict. Today, of course, due to the work of people like Daniel Zamora, the degree to which Foucault's concern with the "question of the subject" committed him also to a certain sympathy with nascent neoliberalism is a highly controversial one but I think it's relatively uncontroversial to say that Foucault's version of a left politics had very little to do with questions of economic inequality and totally uncontroversial to say that his influence on literary criticism had nothing at all to do with questions of economic inequality.

Country came out), the share of U.S. national income going to the top 10% went from a little under 35% to 45%; real income for the bottom 90% of the population remained “stagnant” (“12 Charts on the State of Inequality in America” 2015); union membership, which was about 28% of all U.S workers, declined to about 17% (Perry 2011); between 1983 and 1998, the median net wealth of the bottom 40% declined not just in percentage but absolutely (Allegretto 2011). And, of course, since 2007 (after Rorty’s death) these numbers have mainly gotten worse.

But, bad as they already were, they are not what the School of Resentment resented or what the School of Knowingness knew. Indeed, the liberal discourse of inequality was not primarily interested in economic inequality as such; economic inequality mattered only insofar as it could be understood as a consequence of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. – in effect, only insofar as the problem of the division between classes could be redescribed as the problem of discrimination against identities. And to solve (or anyway to try to solve) the problem in this way was not to solve (or even to try to solve) it at all. If your idea of inequality is whites earning more than blacks or men earning more than women, then you are not trying to combat the phenomenon of a few becoming very rich while the many fall farther and farther behind. You’re trying instead to make sure that more of the successful few are black and are women, and that more of the failing many are white men.

Here of course is where Rorty was the exception. His concerns about poverty were not just concerns about the failure of equal opportunity and if he didn’t want to talk about class, he did want to talk about per-pupil expenditures in schools and even about the importance of unions.⁴

⁴ By contrast, the only comment on unions by Bloom that I’ve been able to find is his telling an interviewer that, unlike the “leftish theorists” by whom he imagined himself to be surrounded at Yale, he was himself an actual “proletarian”: “the son of a New York garment worker, who was an unwilling member of the

So what did it mean that he wanted to talk about inequality without talking about class and capitalism? One answer is just the obvious (and not wrong) one that he was an anti-communist liberal, and that what he wanted was a more humane capitalism. To the extent that this is true, he surely gets credit for paying attention to what very few others were paying attention to but there is nothing of any obvious philosophical interest about his politics – people tell other people to stop being greedy and selfish all the time. The philosophical interest, as Christopher Voparil has rightly suggested, is when what Voparil calls “the appeal to sentiment” is deployed in “a shift away from rationality and argumentation” (Voparil 2012). That is, when Rorty talks about trying to get “whites to be nicer to blacks, males to females, Serbs to Muslims, or straights to gays” (1998b, 178-79), “nice” is virtually a technical term, meant to designate a refusal of what seems to him the Kantian alternative: trying to get “rational agents” to “extend the respect” they feel for people like themselves to “all featherless bipeds.” The appeal to reason, he thinks, is specious, a form of the foundationalism (as if we could ever find “neutral premises” on which to base an “argument” for better behavior); what we need is not argument but sympathetic identification. In order to get “powerful people” to cease “oppressing others,” we need to “rely on the suggestions of sentiment rather than on the commands of reason,” “on mere niceness rather than... obedience to the moral law” (181-82). We need to take our “already” very “nice” students and make them even nicer: “producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students of this sort in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed all that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia” (179).

International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, which he always despised” (Woods 1999). One can’t, of course, visit the sins of the father upon the son, and no doubt many would not even regard Bloom père’s distaste for the union as a sin. Speaking, however, as a proud member of UIC United Faculty and as the great-grandson of Benjamin Schlesinger, the first president of the union Bloom’s father despised, I do.

Now, “professors, try and get your students to read and talk about the kinds of books (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* not the *First Critique*) that will encourage them to be nicer to the other” is a long way from “workers of the world unite.” As it was supposed to be. But, once again, it’s very close to the schools of resentment and knowingness. In fact, as Rorty’s own examples (whites to blacks, men to women, straights to gays) suggest, it’s exactly the social justice agenda of the cultural left. The difference is that Rorty wants to extend respect for the other to the poor. His version of “professors of the world, try and get your students to be nicer to the other” includes the employees those students (at Princeton, the University of Virginia and Stanford) will have when they graduate. Which is even farther from workers of the world unite; it’s closer, really, to capitalists of the world unite.⁵

But, as we’ve already noted, the “economic inequality and economic insecurity” that rightly concerned him had only been intensifying during the years in which niceness to the other (i.e. anti-discrimination) had become the foundation of liberal social justice. And that’s at least in part because when you understand the rich being nicer to the poor as a version of the employers being nicer to their employees, you can immediately see that it’s not quite the same as the men being nicer to the women and the whites nicer to the blacks. This is clear in Rorty’s own brief description of the “problem” produced by fact that “the wage levels and the social benefits enjoyed by workers in Europe, Japan and North America no longer bear any relation to the newly fluid global labor market” (1998a, 85). You don’t have to be a Marxist to recognize that the necessity for capital to pay labor less than the value of what it produces is what makes this problem a problem. Which is why, in the face of intensified “international competition” in the 1970s, “capital needed to control labor costs” and thus to find ways of “disciplining labor” (Cowie and Heathcott, 6). Employers needed, in other words, to be less nice to

their workers; in fact, being less nice to your workers is basically what “disciplining labor” means, and it’s a function of what you need to do to keep your business profitable, which is not a synonym for how selfish you are. Rich people can be nicer to poor people in a way that capital can’t be nicer to labor.

Here’s where a little more knowingness and a little less sympathy for the other would help. Insofar as the capitalists of the world are in competition with each other, they can’t really unite but they are, nevertheless, united in their commitment to the idea that respecting the other is fine precisely because it doesn’t stop you from exploiting the other. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the commitment to anti-discrimination is an ideal that both the corporation and the corporate university can embrace without reservation since rather than threatening the class structure, it seeks to legitimize it.⁶ And although Rorty, true to his sense that sympathetic identification was the key to a better future, worried that the “cosmopolitan upper class” (including professors) had no “sense of community” (1998a, 85), with the workers, he couldn’t help but notice also that what placed “the American leftist intelligentsia on the side of the managers and stockholders” was not just what they didn’t share – a sense of community – but what they did – “the same class interests” (89).

But “different class interests” were a problem for Rorty, precisely the problem that community instead of class was supposed to overcome. What you get with different class interests are capitalism and socialism and difference as division – not as the kind of thing you can tolerate or appreciate but as the conflict between classes that he wanted us to stop talking about. What you get with community is identity – differences which are not defined by their conflictual relation to each other and which can thus be subsumed under something larger; for Rorty, “Our Country.” Hence, although Rorty was essentially alone in predicting Trump, he joined many other

⁵ Median student family income Princeton: \$186,000; U of Virginia: \$155,000; Stanford: \$167,500 (median U.S. income \$59,000)

⁶ For a recent version of this argument, see Michaels 2018.

liberal nationalists in prefiguring him. What's the 21st century translation of Rorty's 20th century exhortation to intellectuals to get over their "knowingness" and "to mobilize what remains of our pride in America"? "Make America Great Again."

My idea here is not, of course, that Rorty's politics were the same as Trump's. It is instead that the substitution of community for political economy and of identity for class works in the end much better for the right than for the left. And my point here is not to rebuke Rorty. It is instead to suggest that insofar as we praise Rorty for foreseeing the rise of a right wing populism, we are right to do so but insofar as, like Chantal Mouffe, we seek to oppose that populism by invoking what she calls his reminder that "Allegiance to democratic values is a question of identification" (Mouffe 75), we are mistaken.⁷ Mouffe, like Rorty, inveighs against "those sectors of the left who keep reducing politics to the contradictions of capital/labour" (80). But the reason the contradictions of capital and labor matter is precisely because they're not a question of identification. From this standpoint, the great value of Rorty's political analysis is as a cautionary tale, one that gets its distinctive power from the fact that unlike most of us, he could see what was coming but, just like most of us, he nonetheless reproduced in his own writings the structure of the identitarianism that increasingly functions as the horizon of contemporary politics – both as problem and as solution.

⁷ The full quote is, "As Richard Rorty has often pointed out, a Wittgensteinian perspective makes us realize that allegiance to democracy and the belief in the value of its institutions does not depend on giving democracy an intellectual foundation. Allegiance to democratic values is a question of identification." *For a Left Populism*, 75. To which the relevant response must be that there are no such things as "intellectual foundations" but that the usual practices of giving reasons for our beliefs (in, for example, the superiority of democracy or the significance of class conflict) are in no way affected by their absence, any more than is the difference between class position and subject position.

References

- "12 Charts on the State of Inequality in America." 2015. World Economic Forum. April 25, 2015. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/04/12-charts-on-the-state-of-inequality-in-america/>.
- Allegretto, Sylvia. 2011. "The State of Working America's Wealth, 2011: Through Volatility and Turmoil, the Gap Widens." *Economic Policy Institute* (blog). March 24, 2011.
- Bloom, Harold. 1994. *The Western Canon*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Cowie, Jefferson and Joseph Heathcott, "The Meanings of Deindustrialization" Accessed July 8, 2018. <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1035&context=cbpubs>
- Foucault, Michael. 1982. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. 2018. "The Political Economy of Anti-Racism." *Nonsite.Org*, no. 23. <https://nonsite.org/article/the-political-economy-of-anti-racism>.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Perry, Mark. 2011. "Chart of the Day: Union Membership in the U.S. Falls Below 12% for the First Time in 2010." Bullfax. January 30, 2011. <https://www.bullfax.com/?q=node-chart-day-union-membership-us-falls-below-12-first-time>.
- Ramberg, Bjørn. 2000. "Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson." Essay. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, 351–70. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge U.P.: New York.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998a. *Achieving Our Country*. Harvard U.P.: Cambridge, Mass.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998b. *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge U.P.: New York.
- Rorty, Richard. 2000. *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B Brandom. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Rorty, Richard. 2007a. "The Fire of Life." Text/html. Poetry Foundation. November 18, 2007. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/68949/the-fire-of-life>.
- Rorty, Richard. 2007b. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge U.P.: New York.
- Voparil, Christopher J. 2012. "Rorty and the democratic power of the novel." Eurozine. November 21. <https://www.eurozine.com/rorty-and-the-democratic-power-of-the-novel/>.
- Woods, James. 1999. "Falstaff for Our Times." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media. March 6. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/mar/06/books.guardianreview5>.

CLASS POLITICS AND CULTURAL POLITICS

Susan Dieleman

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

sdielem@siue.edu

ABSTRACT: After the 2016 election of Donald Trump, many commentators latched on to the accusations Rorty levels at the American Left in *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty foresaw, they claimed, that the Left's preoccupation with cultural politics and neglect of class politics would lead to the election of a "strongman" who would take advantage of and exploit a rise in populist sentiment.

In this paper, I generally agree with these readings of Rorty; he does think that the American Left has made the mistake of putting class on the political backburner. However, I suggest that this position follows from his view that economic security is vital for solidarity. Because economic security is under increasing threat in contemporary America, so too is solidarity. If greater solidarity is a goal of liberal democracy, then class politics, aimed at ending selfishness, ought to be as much a priority for the American Left as is cultural politics, aimed at ending sadism.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser, solidarity, selfishness, sadism

Introduction

In *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty accuses the American Left of many failings. Some of these accusations became fodder for much of the commentary that accompanied the passage from *Achieving Our Country* that went viral after the election of Donald Trump to the American Presidency. Some commentators latched onto his claim that the contemporary American Left was (and continues to be) mistaken in its focus on ending sadism rather than selfishness. That is, Rorty's claims were – if not explicitly, then certainly implicitly – marshaled in support of arguments against politics that prioritize issues of identity and culture.¹ On this reading, the Left's

¹ As David Rondel puts it, "a majority of post-election commentators have tended to read *Achieving Our Country* as, among other things, an admonishment of so-called 'identity politics' in favor of an 'Old Left' politics of redistribution and economic justice" (Rondel 2018, 2). Of course, the skill with which Rorty's arguments were handled varied greatly, and according to the purposes of the commentators. For a sample of these commentaries, see Bérubé, 2016; Friedersdorf, 2017; Helmore 2016;

mistake in and leading up to the 2016 presidential election was to focus on racial, gender, and other sorts of identity-based inequalities while ignoring economic inequality. As a result, the Left made space for a "strongman" who could take advantage of and exploit a rise in populist sentiment. The neglect and marginalization of poor and working-class white people in the United States led those same people to turn to someone who would provide them with a way of achieving economic success rather than to deprive them of it.²

In this paper, I generally agree with these readings of Rorty; he does think that the contemporary Left in America has made the mistake of putting class on the political backburner. However, I want to delve deeper into why it is that Rorty seems to be so preoccupied with class in *Achieving Our Country*. The obvious reason would be that economic inequality causes undue suffering, which he argues a good liberal society ought to minimize. However, I suggest in this paper that Rorty's preoccupation with class politics in *Achieving Our Country* is in no small part a result of his view that economic security is vital for solidarity. Because economic security is under increasing threat in contemporary America, so too is solidarity. And if greater solidarity is a goal of liberal democracy – which, for Rorty, it is – then *class politics*, aimed at ending selfishness, ought to be as much a priority for the American Left as is *cultural politics*, aimed at ending sadism. Thus, even though Rorty speaks disapprovingly of cultural politics in *Achieving Our Country*, it is a mistake to think that Rorty's call for a return to class politics in this text means he is uninterested in cultural politics. Indeed, class politics and cultural politics are connected in complex, mutually-reinforcing ways that Rorty worries contemporary Leftists have failed to understand.

In the first section of this paper, I provide an overview of Rorty's claim that the American Left should

Illing, 2019; Kilian, 2017; Metcalf, 2017; Lara 2017; Seal 2016; Senior, 2016.

² Rorty's work was also called upon in debates about "post-truth," a topic I don't consider here, but is relevant to debates about the role of the American Left. See, for example, Mendieta 2017; Read 2016.

return to class politics, as it's presented in *Achieving Our Country* and supported by other writings. In the second section, I locate this claim in the larger context of Rorty's work, and in particular in relation to two of his papers from the 1990s: "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage" (originally published in 1996) and "Justice as a Larger Loyalty" (originally published in 1997). Relating his arguments in *Achieving Our Country* to the claims made in these two papers shows how Rorty thinks class politics and cultural politics are connected. In the third and final section of this paper, I conclude by showing how my reading of Rorty on class politics and cultural politics can blunt the edges of his debate with Nancy Fraser over whether redistribution or recognition ought to be prioritized in our theories of and attempts to minimize injustice. Ultimately, I argue that Rorty and Fraser share similar prescriptions for the American Left: it is time to pay attention to class again, because failing to do so risks the possibility of achieving our country.

I. Rorty's Call to Return to Class Politics

Rorty takes on two central tasks in *Achieving Our Country*. The first is to provide a redescription of the history of the American Left, which he traces through three phases.³ The first is what he calls the reformist Left of the first half of the twentieth-century, including those thinkers of the Progressive Era, as well as "all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong" (Rorty 1998a, 43). Rorty's term, "reformist Left," is a more capacious term than "Old Left," where the latter is a term that was used

³ Rortyan redescrptions, it is worth noting, are never really an attempt to accurately represent history or a particular state of affairs, but an attempt to render salient a particular way of looking at things, rather than another, and to achieve certain ends, rather than others. Thus, criticisms that his account of the history of the American Left is inaccurate because it leaves out one or another significant moment or movement miss the mark insofar as they are criticisms only of the accuracy of his (re)description.

by historians to distinguish early adherents to socialism from both the "New Left" which took over their cause, and early "liberals" who were not socialists. He refuses to buy in to a description of the American Left that sees some Leftists (namely liberals) as insufficiently radical to deserve the name. Rorty's reformist Left, therefore, includes both socialists and liberals of this early part of the twentieth century, and is intended to break down the rift internal to the Left between reformers and revolutionaries. Both liberals and socialists should be recognized as having been on the same side, he thinks, advancing "the cause of social justice" (45).

The second is the New Left that emerged around 1964 in response to the Vietnam War, and includes people who decided "that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system" (Rorty 1998a, 43). The New Left, made up mostly of students engaged with Students for a Democratic Society, "felt justified in giving up their parents' hope that reformist politics could cope with the injustice they saw around them" (66). Though Rorty criticizes the New Left for giving up reform in favor of revolution, he recognizes that they "accomplished something enormously important, something of which the reformist Left would probably have been incapable. It ended the Vietnam War" (67). In so doing, "the New Left may have saved us from losing our moral identity" (68). The moral identity that the New Left helped save is of a country that makes peace rather than war.⁴ The civil disobedience of the New Left during the Vietnam era, ranging from draft resistance to protests that broke through police lines, shut down induction centers, and blocked recruiters, helped prevent America from becoming a garrison state – that is, a state that prioritizes military matters over social, political, or

⁴ Rorty writes, "The Left, the party of hope, sees our country's moral identity as still to be achieved, rather than needing to be preserved" (Rorty 1998, 30-31). This is what distinguishes the Left from the Right, he thinks. Whereas the Left is hopeful that their vision of a better America can be achieved, the Right "thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact" (31).

economic ones. When compared with the garrison state that America could have become were it not for the New Left, Rorty argues that even the “many and varied stupidities” of the movement are excusable (70).⁵

The third Left Rorty identifies is the cultural Left, which grew out of the splintering of the New Left and now exists primarily in the academy. The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, emerged out of the confluence of the New Left’s adoption of the Marxist claim that the system cannot be reformed and the “widespread post-Watergate feeling that the American government is hopelessly corrupt” (Rorty, Nystrom, and Puckett 2002, 16). The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, has holed up in the academy and engaged, for the most part, in abstract theorizing that is of little help to the broader American Left that exists outside the academy. Though there are Leftists outside the academy, working as “labor lawyers and labor organizers, congressional staffers, low-level bureaucrats, ... journalists, social workers, and people who work for foundations” (Rorty 1998a, 77), they bear little resemblance to the academic, cultural Left. Whereas the former are interested in what laws need to be changed in order to create a hoped-for America, the latter have given up on the reformists’ hope that there is an America worth achieving.

One of the problems with this cultural Left, Rorty thinks, is that it has ignored economic inequality and focused on other, identity-based forms of inequality, like racial or gender inequality, instead. Or, to use Rorty’s terms, the cultural Left has been preoccupied with ending sadism, while forgetting to think about selfishness. While attempting to ameliorate racial and gender inequality is a laudable goal – one that Rorty himself has spent considerable time thinking about –

⁵ Of course, by that same measure, so too are the less revolutionary-minded activities and identity-based oversights of the earlier, reformist Left. Surely, when compared with the prospect of becoming a garrison state, even socialists must recognize that liberalism is a lesser evil. Thus, the animosity between reformists and revolutionaries is misguided, Rorty thinks, and the internal rift that divides them needs to be overcome.

what Rorty laments is the fact that this focus displaced the focus on economic inequality. As he puts it, “It is as if the American Left could not handle more than one initiative at a time – as if it either had to ignore stigma in order to concentrate on money, or vice versa” (Rorty 1998a, 83).⁶ So, Rorty argues that the Left needs to revisit the problem of selfishness by engaging in class politics, which it has largely abandoned as it retreated into the academy and turned its attention to the problem of sadism by engaging in cultural politics. To reinvigorate the American Left, Rorty thinks the cultural Left “would need to talk much more about money, even at the cost of talking less about stigma” (Rorty 1998a, 91). However, successfully engaging in class politics requires leaving behind the academy and the cynical and hopeless attitude about America that typifies it. Thus, the American Left should “put a moratorium on theory” and “try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans” (91-92).⁷ These prescriptions comprise the second task of *Achieving Our Country*.

Why is it important to “put a moratorium on theory” if the cultural Left is to reengage with class politics in America? Rorty worries that, “in committing itself to what it calls ‘theory,’ this Left has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion” (Rorty 2007, 95). This is problematic because it represents a decidedly un-pragmatic search for the Truth of what America is and has been – a search that displaces efforts to improve a country in favor of

⁶ This myopic or one-dimensional approach to politics plagues not just the cultural Left, however. Rorty notes that the reformist Left was notably weak on issues of racial or gender inequality: “most of the direct beneficiaries of its initiatives were white males” (75). But he does think that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. This isn’t to say that the work of the academic Left has been in vain – they’ve made American campuses into “morally better places” (260) – but it has, he thinks, run its course.

⁷ To these two prescriptions, Rondel adds a third: “the Left should abandon the ideological purity characteristic of Marxist revolutionaries, and adopt in its place a pragmatic, piecemeal, reformist attitude” (Rondel 2018, 7). I do not identify this as a separate prescription offered by Rorty, but as an element of the first: if one abandons theory, all that is left – aside from an apolitical quietism – is “pragmatic, piecemeal reform.”

a sort of theoretical “arms race” that aims for ever-higher levels of abstraction. The cultural Left is beholden to the Truth, where the particular Truth they are interested in is the Truth of America as, as Rondel puts it, “both unforgiveable and unachievable” (Rondel 2018, 10). This is their “redemptive truth” a term Rorty introduces to signal “a set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves” (Rorty 2007, 90). Redemptive truth, Rorty thinks, satisfies “the need to fit everything – every thing, person, event, idea, and poem – into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique” (90).⁸ Whereas religion used to provide this sort of redemptive truth to its followers, philosophy came to take on that role during the Enlightenment. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty’s claim is that the cultural Left still yearns for a redemptive truth; it has not been able to “kick its philosophy habit.” This yearning for a redemptive truth manifests in the cultural Left’s obsession with philosophical theorizing about America: “Redemption by philosophy would consist in acquiring a set of beliefs that represent things in the one way they truly are” (91). When it comes to America, the representation that the cultural Left has got hold of is of an America that is irredeemable and hopeless.

The search for redemptive truth, and especially the cultural Left’s assumption that discovering the Truth of America through abstract theorizing amounts to political activity, is what Rorty calls a “spectatorial approach.” He writes, “These futile attempts to philosophize one’s way into political relevance are a symptom of what happens when a Left retreats from activism and adopts a spectatorial approach to the problems of its country” (Rorty 1998a, 94). By “spectatorial,” what Rorty has in mind is that many cultural Leftists stand back in abject horror of what America has done and been, and what it continues to do and be.⁹ After standing back, all that

remains to such Leftists is to “theorize” America, prioritizing knowledge over hope: “Hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness” (37).

Thus, Rorty enjoins the cultural Left to abandon its spectatorial approach by abandoning theory. In so doing, Rorty thinks it must also thereby revive hope in what America can become. A reinvigorated Left would have to reclaim the sort of pride in America that animated the work of the reformist Left. He opens *Achieving Our Country* by writing,

National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can produce bellicosity and imperialism, just as excessive self-respect can produce arrogance. But just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely (Rorty 1998a, 3).

Rorty’s political turn that is worth quoting at length. He writes, “Rorty claimed that we should render our language of progressive political deliberation banal by abandoning high-theoretical talk long past its sell-buy date. By this he meant talk, rooted in the 19th century, of bourgeois ideology, capitalism, class divisions, commodification of labour, alienation and the like. We should instead revive more basic, down-to-earth terms such as ‘greed’ and ‘selfishness’, and replace earnest projects of cultural criticism or *Ideologiekritik* – which he felt had begun to slip into self-parody anyway – with enthusiastic discussions of practical options to make a liberal democracy yield obviously better socioeconomic results within its existing institutional framework. These might include proposals to deal with excessively low wages and unemployment, provide wider access to better and cheaper healthcare, and improve job prospects along with social mobility. Though he did not often say it, Rorty recommended that our whole political vocabulary, not just that of the Left, be pragmatized.

In recommending this, Rorty was not simply making one more move in the dreary game of normal politics, a move that could be seen (and was) as a conservative, or even reactionary, retreat to, or excuse for, a minimalistic capitalist *status quo*. He was trying to do for politics what he tried to do for philosophy: reset its common language to a level where it could be recognised as first and foremost a practical tool, a level where extraneous layers of theory and associated jargon no longer clouded the prospects for tangibly improving people’s lives” (Malachowski, 2019).

⁸ The search for a “redemptive truth” guided much of Rorty’s own, early philosophical endeavors, but he later abandoned these efforts to hold “reality and justice in a single vision” (Rorty 1999, 12).

⁹ Alan Malachowski provides an excellent account of

While philosophical theorizing about America is a symptom of hopelessness, engaging in debates about what America can do and become represents a hopeful attitude, and this hopeful attitude requires national pride.

Recall that the cultural Left is not just engaged in theorizing; the content of the theories that inform their work is of an irredeemable country that is fundamentally racist and sexist. Thus, the cultural Left has turned to an elucidation of the ways that America has and continues to perpetrate harms against marginalized groups. Some theorists, when faced with this evidence, have called for a “politics of difference” or a “politics of recognition” that, on Rorty’s reading, is about recommending a recognition of the inherent value of different cultures, including the cultures of historically marginalized groups, like women, African Americans, or the LGBTQ community.¹⁰ However, Rorty worries that the cultural Left’s emphasis on “difference” and “recognition” is both overly theoretical and inconsistent with national pride. While pride in one’s identity is “an entirely reasonable response to the sadistic humiliation to which one has been subjected” (100), the problem is that this pride often “prevents someone from also taking pride in being an American citizen” (100). The politics of difference and of recognition is, at best, a waste of effort and, at worst, a distraction from and impediment to achieving Leftist progress. This isn’t to say that Rorty is opposed to movements that aim to better the lives of members of oppressed groups; indeed, he is anything but. But it is to say that he sees nothing distinct about such movements; they should not be seen as a “new sort of politics” (Rorty 1999, 235).¹¹ Rather, they “simply add further concrete-

ness to sketches of the good old egalitarian utopia” (235). Such movements do not give us reason to “revise, as opposed to supplement, our previous descriptions of utopia” (236). Liberalism (of the sort recommended by John Stuart Mill or John Dewey) is not itself altered by a politics of difference, he thinks; it is merely fleshed out in greater detail. Movements like feminism and gay liberation render visible forms of suffering that were not previously visible, thus expanding solidarity by seeing these sorts of suffering as worth ending and achieving a hoped-for America.

Thus, rather than focusing on difference, Rorty wants to focus on commonality, in part for eminently practical reasons: “only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections” (Rorty 1998a, 101). Of course, American pride does not mean pride in what America *is*, but in what it *could be*. He argues,

You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual (101).

The dream country Rorty envisages – and the dream country that he thinks would best achieve the aims of those fighting for the recognition of marginalized groups – is one where differences of gender and race and sexuality (and so on) do not make a difference. It is one where “being American” is the only salient identity, and

like. This is what academics who work in such programs as Women’s Studies, African-American Studies, and Gay Studies do best. These programs are the academic arms of the new social movements - the movements which, as Judith Butler rightly says, have kept the left alive in the United States in recent years, years during which the rich have consistently had the best of it in the class struggle” (11). He adds that academics overestimate the “importance of their own expertise” in a desperate bid to see themselves as relevant to progressive politics, and as non-complicit with the suffering of marginalized groups. As he puts it, “academics are desperately eager to assure themselves that what they are doing is central, rather than marginal, to leftist politics” (13).

¹⁰ Rorty has in mind the work of theorists like Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, and Nancy Fraser.

¹¹ In “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?,” Rorty suggests that the cultural Left’s emphasis on the recognition of cultural differences can be traced to “a specifically academic set of circumstances” (Rorty 2000, 11). He continues, “The only thing we academics can do, in our specifically professional capacities, to eliminate prejudice is to write women’s history, celebrate black artistic achievements, and the

where that identity signals membership in one moral community. Theory of the sort the cultural Left employs, as we've already seen, is not suited to this task. It supplies a philosophical metanarrative about what America is and has been; about the atrocities it has committed – including against its own marginalized groups, and indeed, its role in that marginalization – which are unforgivable. To take the place of the cultural Left's metanarrative, Rorty recommends historically contingent, hopeful narratives: "The appropriate intellectual background to political deliberation is historical narrative rather than philosophical or quasi-philosophical theory. More specifically, it is the kind of historical narrative which segues into a utopian scenario about how we can get from the present to a better future" (Rorty 1999, 231).¹²

Rorty's recommendations to put a moratorium on theory and to mobilize American pride are both directed to a further end, namely, the reengagement of the cultural Left with "real politics." A moratorium on theory and a mobilization of American pride are not ends in themselves; rather, they serve the further end of reinvigorating the Left by bringing together the various Lefts which were torn asunder by the contingent facts of America's cultural, political, and economic history. By putting a moratorium on theory, the cultural Left will become more pragmatic; they will stop seeing philosophy as necessary for – even definitional of – political engagement. They will abandon their spectatorial pulpit and get involved in the political tasks of changing laws and proposing policies. They will become agents rather than spectators (a distinction I return to below). By mobilizing American pride, those on the cultural Left will see that their goals are better achieved by working across differences to forge a national identity premised

on the hope that a utopian version of the country can be achieved. They will stop thinking of America as an experiment worth abandoning, and start thinking of it as a project worth engaging.

II. The Role of Class Politics in Cultural Politics

The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, has become preoccupied with theoretical articulations of sadism, and it has failed to see how the forces of economic globalization have created an urgent need to focus on ending selfishness. Yet Rorty's call to return to class politics shouldn't be read as an admonishment to abandon questions of sadism, and it is a mistake to read *Achieving Our Country* this way. Rather, the two are connected in complex and mutually-reinforcing ways. A central reason Rorty wants us to talk more about class is because, without economic security, the solidarity he thinks is integral to a utopian liberal will suffer. I want to turn to a pair of Rorty's papers, "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage" (originally published in 1996) and "Justice as a Larger Loyalty" (originally published in 1997), to further explicate this point.

In "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," Rorty's ultimate goal is to rid us of the traditional view that loyalty and justice have different sources; whereas loyalty is based on sentiment, justice has its roots in reason. Thus, on the traditional view, hard choices between preferring one's family and friends over strangers is a choice between sentiment and reason. On Rorty's view, however, both loyalty and justice are matters of sentiment. Loyalty and justice are therefore not differences of kind, but of degree. Justice simply names the loyalty we might have to the largest community we can imagine: all of humankind, perhaps, or maybe just our own religious community, or, more problematically, those of our own race.

Since the moral community is a matter of sentiment rather than reason, rational insight into God's Will or Human Nature cannot determine who belongs or does not belong to our moral community. Instead, the basis upon which solidarity is built is contingent; it involves

¹² He continues, "A turn away from narration and utopian dreams toward philosophy seems to me a gesture of despair... [W]e are now in a situation in which resentment and frustration have taken the place of hope among politically concerned intellectuals, and ... the replacement of narrative by philosophy is a symptom of this unhappy situation" (Rorty 1999, 232).

coming to see others as “like us” in the ways required for those others to be members of our moral community. Solidarity is created through the hard work of training our sympathies rather than through the recognition of antecedent criteria that stipulates what we have in common. We train our sympathies, Rorty thinks, by exposing ourselves to other ways of living and other forms of suffering. A liberal democratic culture is a culture that is “constantly enlarging its sympathies” and thereby expanding solidarity (Rorty 1991, 204).

The task of achieving solidarity is, for Rorty, divided up between agents of love (or guardians of diversity) and agents of justice (or guardians of universality). These two agential roles are presented together in “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz” (originally published in 1986). There, Rorty writes,

The moral tasks of a liberal democracy are divided between the agents of love and the agents of justice. In other words, such a democracy employs and empowers both connoisseurs of diversity and guardians of universality. The former insist that there are people out there whom society has failed to notice. They make these candidates for admission visible by showing how to explain their odd behavior in terms of a coherent, if unfamiliar, set of beliefs and desires – as opposed to explaining this behavior with terms like stupidity, madness, baseness or sin. The latter, the guardians of universality, make sure that once these people are admitted as citizens, once they have been shepherded into the light by the connoisseurs of diversity, they are treated just like all the rest of us (Rorty 1991, 206).

Agents of love are engaged in what Rorty calls “cultural politics,” which plays an important role in achieving greater solidarity and involves “arguments about what words to use” (Rorty 2007, 3). Cultural politics incorporates both positive and negative projects. On the negative side, it includes “debates about hate speech,” but also “projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse” (Rorty 2007, 3). Abandoning those terms and topics that block our ability to sympathize with others helps us achieve solidarity: changing our linguistic practices can increase “the degree of tolerance that cer-

tain groups of people have for one another” (2007, 3). On the positive side, cultural politics includes the development of new metaphors and new descriptions to expand logical space. New ways of speaking help “us” see that members of marginalized groups are not so different after all; in all the ways that count, these new ways of speaking help us see, members of these groups are “just like us,” and therefore deserve to be part of our moral community.¹³ Cultural politics thus involves imagining and articulating utopian visions. It involves forging solidarity around a new moral identity, where folks previously thought of as “them” become part of “us” instead. The task of cultural politics falls naturally to the Left, Rorty thinks, which is, “by definition, the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved” (Rorty 1998, 14).

Agents of justice play a complementary role to agents of love; they are responsible for securing the gains made by the connoisseurs of diversity. When expansions (or contractions) of everyday, normal discourse are achieved, one of the tasks of the guardians of universality is to preserve those expansions (or contractions). Agents of justice (or guardians of universality), are responsible for ensuring that, when members of marginalized groups are recognized as suffering in particular ways that the “rest of us” haven’t seen or have ignored, then agents of justice ensure that those forms of suffering are prevented. Agents of justice include judges and courts who “tell the politicians and the voters to start noticing that there are people who have been told to wait for ever until a consensus emerges – a consensus within a political community from which these people are effectively excluded” (Rorty 1999, 98). Thus, Rorty reads court decisions as saying, for example, that “like it or not, black children are children too” (Brown) and “like it or not, women get to make hard decisions too” (Roe) and “like it or not, gays are grown-ups too” (Bowers v. Hardwick, in a future reversal) (99).

¹³ I have written elsewhere in greater detail about how the work of agents of love proceeds. See, for example, Dieleman 2011; 2012; and especially 2017.

One of the roles of a liberal education, Rorty thinks, is to preserve the solidarity that has been achieved, and to strive to extend it as far as possible. This shouldn't be read as a return to the academic Left that Rorty criticizes in *Achieving Our Country*, but rather to an education system that helps develop the liberal virtues.¹⁴ As William M. Curtis puts it, Rorty's version of moral education includes "teaching stories that show how good things can be if people are more generous, tolerant, and sensitive, and also stories about 'the pain endured by people who seem quite strange to us, the humiliation and agony they suffer when we treat them as badly as we are often tempted to treat them'" (Curtis 2015, 160). These are the narratives (rather than metanarratives) that articulate a hopeful account of what American has been and could become. These narratives are used to nudge proceeding generations of students in the direction of greater solidarity. Rorty writes, "Producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students ... in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed, *all* that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia" (Rorty 1998b, 179-180).

So, the size of our moral community – the community to which we are loyal, with which we will feel solidarity – will depend on our ability to see "others" as like "us." But notice that Rorty also mentions that the students we train must be "well-off" and "secure" in addition to being "nice" and "other-respecting." This is because Rorty thinks that the community to which we feel loyalty will vary in accordance with our economic circumstances. When things get tough – when economic circumstances are such that we are forced to choose between feeding our families and feeding strangers – the community to which one is loyal will contract. As Rorty puts it,

Our loyalty to ... larger groups will, however, weaken, or even vanish altogether, when things

get really tough. Then people whom we once thought of as like ourselves will be excluded. Sharing food with impoverished people down the street is natural and right in normal times, but perhaps not in a famine, when doing so amounts to disloyalty to one's family. The tougher things get, the more ties of loyalty to those near at hand tighten, and the more those to everyone else slacken (Rorty 2007, 42).

Rorty thinks the sorts of moral dilemmas these cases present are not dilemmas between sentiment-based loyalty and reason-based justice, but rather felt conflicts "between alternative selves, alternative self-descriptions, alternative ways of giving a meaning to one's life" (45). Do I see myself as an American first, or as a citizen of the world? Am I the type of person who prioritizes family over strangers? Are non-human animals part of my moral community, or will they always be subordinate to human members of my moral community?

One's ability to identify with a larger moral community – to see oneself as a citizen of the world rather than as just an American, for example, or to see oneself as part of a diverse metropolitan city rather than as just a community member in one's affluent suburb – depends on one's economic circumstances. To say that someone is a member of one's moral community is to see that person as a conversation-partner, as someone who shares enough of one's "final vocabulary" to make meaningful conversation with them possible. Our moral communities increase in size when the work of agents of love is successful, when the differences between "us" and "them" are rendered inconsequential, and our similarities become consequential. Moreover, solidarity with the members of our moral community entails coming to their aid when required. Following the pragmatist insight that beliefs are habits of action, Rorty contends that to hold a belief simply means that one is inclined to act in certain ways and not in others. Thus, "to believe that someone is 'one of us,' a member of our moral community, is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they are in need" (13). This is because "Moral identification is empty when it is no longer tied to habits of action" (Rorty 1996, 14).

¹⁴ See also Rorty 1992, where Rorty discusses the role of the cultural Left in relation to education.

If we are unwilling to come to the aid of certain people, because they are members of a certain racial or ethnic group for example, then we would be lying if we said that group is part of our moral community, that its members are “one of us.” However – and this is a feature of Rorty’s work that has so far been overlooked – Rorty thinks that this unwillingness can be motivated by the belief that we are *unable* to help such people. That is, the moral community with which we identify depends on our ability to see generosity and sympathy as *feasible*. If we believe that such assistance is infeasible, triage is performed in the same way that nurses and doctors perform triage when there are not enough resources available to help victims of some catastrophe. If there are not enough resources – or even if we just believe that there are not enough resources – then we absolve ourselves, rightly or wrongly, from the obligation to render aid. To claim that a group is part of our moral community, but to fail to render assistance when that group requires it, renders our claim that they’re part of our moral community “empty” (Rorty 1996, 13). Rorty concludes by asserting that “thinking of other people as part of the same ‘we,’ depends not only on willingness to help those people but on belief that one is *able* to help them” (15). Thus “[A]n answer to the question ‘who are we?’ which is to have any moral significance, has to be one which takes money into account” (14).

This suggests that selfishness and sadism can work together to serve the function of “othering,” where “othering” is understood as the process of shrinking the moral community, of reducing the number of people to whom we have a moral responsibility. Solidarity is at risk when folks have to choose between looking after themselves and looking after others. Or, more accurately, solidarity is at risk when folks *believe* they have to make this choice. Thus, “selfishness,” for Rorty, can be best understood rather simply and straightforwardly as an unwillingness to help others.

For some people in America, the belief that they are unable to help others will be well-founded: the economic position they find themselves in really does

involve looking after themselves and their families because they simply do not have the means to also look after others. So sometimes, selfishness is justified given the situation that folks find themselves in. Surely it would be unreasonable to demand of those who cannot put food on their own table that they think about how they should be helping their broader community or country. And it would be wrong to hold them morally blameworthy for their failure to feel solidarity (in this more robust sense where it includes rendering aid) with a larger community. Such folks are responding in the same way any person in similar circumstances would respond, by looking after “their own” when times get tough and loyalty cannot extend beyond one’s closest communities. For others, even though they have the means to look after others as well as their own, they nonetheless believe that they do not. Indeed, a perverse outcome of a society that is characterized by vast economic inequality is that selfishness becomes seen as necessary. When there is not enough to go around, folks in the middle and upper classes look after their own: they secure a future for their own children by investing in private schools, and tutors, and elite colleges, without worrying about the educational opportunities of others. Economic inequality further entrenches selfishness, even among those who are less justified in their unwillingness to help others because they have the means to do so. Thus, Rorty’s admonishment of the American Left, I suggest, is an admonishment to think more carefully about how economic inequality threatens solidarity, and to develop concrete proposals for alleviating this economic inequality so that the unwillingness of some Americans to help others becomes unthinkable.

Of course, one might argue that Rorty gets the problem exactly backwards. That the super-rich are (usually) white men who are unwilling to come to the aid of women and people of color is no coincidence. It is not selfishness, but sadism, that has created the racial and gendered nature of economic inequality in America; women and people of color are not members of the moral community of white liberalism in America. I don’t

think Rorty would disagree, at least not entirely, with this way of seeing things. He admits that the reformist Left was shortsighted in thinking that “ending selfishness would eliminate sadism,” and that it was a valuable insight to realize that sadism has “deeper roots than economic security” (Rorty 1998a, 76). The problem with focusing on sadism comes when it ignores selfishness altogether, and when it disavows American identity as worthless. Prioritizing one way of othering – sadism or selfishness – at the expense of the other misses half the picture, and renders efforts to achieve a liberal democratic utopia less likely to meet with success. Ending sadism has been a good thing for America, and the fight against sadism has brought us closer to achieving our country. But Rorty worries that the project of creating an American moral community – a community that “can plausibly and without qualification identify itself as ‘we, the people of the United States’” – is a project that “is losing ground” because “the gap between rich and poor Americans is widening steadily, and the latter are increasingly bereft of hope for their children’s future” (Rorty 1996, 11).¹⁵

¹⁵ Rorty writes, “We all want to facilitate alliances between the victims of the Republicans’ soak-the-poor legislation and people who are stigmatised, or deprived, for reasons other than poverty. The two groups overlap, but are not identical, and the Republicans are getting good at playing them off against each other” (Rorty 2000, 18). In *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*, Rorty echoes this view, writing, “My feeling is that there’s been a tacit collaboration between right and left in changing the subject from money to culture. If I were the Republican oligarchy, I would want a left which spent all its time thinking about group identity, rather than about wages and hours” (Rorty, Nystrom, and Puckett 2000, 32).

This idea that the Republicans are good at playing poor white people off against groups marginalized for other reasons is echoed in a recent *Atlantic* piece by Joan C. Williams. That piece opens with a quote from Steve Bannon, President Trump’s former strategist, from an interview with *Prospect Magazine*, where he says: “The Democrats, the longer they talk about identity politics, I got ‘em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats” (Kuttner 2017). Williams suggests that many of Trump’s “carefully timed injections of racism” were aimed at the Left, “in an effort to keep liberals’ attention

Of course, just because the well-off have the means to render aid to more people, and therefore have less of an excuse for being selfish, this doesn’t mean they *will* render aid. Ought implies can, but it does not imply will. Having money is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for enlarging one’s moral community. This means that the American Left has to fight selfishness – fight the inclination among some Americans to be unwilling to offer help – for multiple reasons and on multiple fronts. The challenge for the Left is to make the belief that one is unable to help others unbelievable. For some, this will involve changing the economic circumstances they find themselves in so that they are not forced into a position where they have to choose between their families and strangers. For others, this will involve regulating behavior through law and policy. In both cases, these changes are the sorts of changes we pursue when we engage in class politics. They will likely involve all the usual sorts of measures Leftist thinkers and activists typically advocate, such as strengthening unions and ending precarious labor, alleviating student debt, strengthening the social safety net, universal health care, regulating big business, and introducing tax schemes that help the poor rather than the rich. At the same time, of course, it will also involve cultural politics so that identity-based stigmas do not impose arbitrary limits on who is counted as part of the moral community and thus is deserving of help.

focused on race rather than class. If Democrats were to focus more attention on economic issues, they just might be able to win back the non-elite white voters they’ve been bleeding for half a century. People like Bannon seem to realize this” (Williams 2018).

Nancy Fraser also remarks on the tendency of the Left to fall into the trap of pitting race against class. She writes, “Some resisters [to Trump’s presidency] are proposing to reorient Democratic Party politics around opposition to white supremacy, focusing efforts on winning support from blacks and Latinos. Others defend a class-centered strategy, aimed at winning back white working-class communities that defected to Trump. Both views are problematic to the extent that they treat attention to class and race as inherently antithetical, a zero-sum game. In reality, both of those axes of injustice can be attacked in tandem, as indeed they must be. Neither can be overcome while the other flourishes” (Fraser 2017, n.p.).

The importance of economic security for achieving solidarity helps explain why Rorty finds globalization such a vexing topic: it puts pressures on the ability of any nation to achieve the liberal utopia his heroes, like Whitman and Dewey, envisioned. Solidarity depends on economic security, but economic security is such that we (Western liberals) have to make a choice about the community to which we are loyal. In "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," for example, he writes,

Consider now the plausible hypothesis that democratic institutions and freedoms are viable only when supported by an economic affluence that is achievable regionally but impossible globally. If this hypothesis is correct, democracy and freedom in the First World will not be able to survive a thoroughgoing globalization of the labor market. So the rich democracies face a choice between perpetuating their own democratic institutions and traditions and dealing justly with the Third World (Rorty 2007, 43).

If the task of liberalism to extend beyond the nation to a global polity is to be achieved, then globalization presents a very real challenge. Rorty asks,

Do you save the working classes of the advanced old democracies by protectionism, or do you give up protectionism for the sake of the Third World? Do you try to keep the standard of living in the old democracies up in order to prevent a right-wing populist, fascist movement in the USA, or do you try to re-distribute the wealth across national borders? You probably can't do both. I wish I knew how to resolve the dilemma, but I don't" (Rorty 2002, 39-40).

Though Rorty thinks that appealing to "humanity as such" to ground justice is wrongheaded because it aims to identify what is essential about human beings that creates moral obligation, he nonetheless aims to weave solidarity out of the recognition of many, small similarities, and these similarities will not be limited to national borders. Rather, recognizing what we have in common with others pushes us toward a cosmopolitan moral outlook.

The difficulty arises when a cosmopolitan moral outlook cannot be economically supported – or, if it can

be economically supported, it currently is unclear how that might look. As Rorty notes, it's a risky business to focus on the forms of suffering experienced outside national borders. Part of the problem is that the cultural Left, in recent decades, has been "more interested in the workers of the developing world than in the fate of our fellow citizens" (Rorty 1998a, 89). The resulting economic insecurity experienced by a large number of Americans led them to support someone promised to protect their economic interests. This is Rorty's "strongman" that received so much press attention after the 2016 American election. This is why the Left must engage in both cultural politics and class politics; they must work to end both sadism and selfishness. When selfishness is ignored, the size of the moral community contracts, and it is no surprise that sadism again rears its ugly head.

III. Conclusion: On Redistribution and Recognition

This reading of Rorty, where sadism and selfishness are interlocking forces that put solidarity at risk, blunts the edges of one of the disagreements between Rorty and Nancy Fraser, who typically is one of his more insightful interlocutors. This disagreement is part of a larger debate about redistribution and recognition – two mutually exclusive alternative understandings of the nature of and remedies for injustice – where Rorty sees Fraser as taking up the "recognition" side of the debate, and Fraser sees Rorty as taking up the "redistribution" side of the debate. As noted above, Rorty finds Fraser's emphasis on "cultural recognition" to be misguided because he thinks she is trying to offer a new sort of politics – one that sees political value in emphasizing difference – where all he sees it doing is fleshing out the details of a less sadistic liberal democracy. For her part, Fraser worries that Rorty places too much emphasis on selfishness and not enough on sadism (to use Rorty's terms), or too much emphasis on redistribution over recognition (to use Fraser's terms). According to Fraser, Rorty – especially in *Achieving Our*

Country and “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Notion for Leftist Politics?” – takes up the redistribution side of the debate: he “insist[s] that identity politics is a counter-productive diversion from the real economic issues, one that balkanizes groups and rejects universalist moral norms” (Fraser 2003, 15).¹⁶ She argues that, for Rorty, “the sole proper object of political struggle is the economy” (15).¹⁷

It’s clear that neither Rorty’s characterization of Fraser’s position, nor Fraser’s characterization of Rorty’s position, is quite accurate. I hope I have shown in the preceding sections that Rorty’s account challenges the American Left to consider both maldistribution (arising out of selfishness) and misrecognition (arising out of sadism). Political struggle, for Rorty, involves both class politics and cultural politics. Similarly, Fraser thinks that the opposition between redistribution and recognition is a “false antithesis” and that subordinated groups regularly suffer both maldistribution and misrecognition. Thus, her goal, in “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation,” is to develop “an integrated approach that can encompass, and harmonize, both dimensions of social justice” (Fraser 2003, 26). In other words, any adequate theory of justice, as well as remedies for injustice, will be two-dimensional because they require attending to both redistribution and recognition.¹⁸ I also want to suggest that Fraser’s recent

work commenting on American politics lays bare a number of similarities between her own work and Rorty’s.

In a 2017 piece for *American Affairs* entitled “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond,” Fraser borrows Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” to understand today’s “widespread rejection of politics as usual” (Fraser 2017, n.p.). All hegemonies, she claims, are constructed out of two essential normative components: distribution and recognition. Through the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, American voters were forced to choose between two prevailing, opposed hegemonic blocs that were similar in terms of distribution, but differed in terms of recognition. Democratic Party politics represented a neoliberal politics of distribution and a progressive politics of recognition, whereas Republican Party politics represented a neoliberal politics of distribution and a reactionary politics of recognition (see table below). While voters could choose between a progressive and a reactionary form of neoliberalism, they were stuck with neoliberalism either way, and this neoliberalism left a “gap in the American political universe” because there was “no force to oppose the decimation of working-class and middle-class standards of living” (Fraser 2017, n.p.). Republican neoliberalism and Democratic neoliberalism left working-class people without a political voice, thereby leaving a gap in the prevailing hegemony that a counterhegemony – one that gave a political voice to working-class people – could occupy.

While the election of Barack Obama and the Occupy Wall Street movement presented two opportunities to fill this hegemonic gap, it wasn’t until Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump faced off in the 2015/2016 campaign that

¹⁶ According to Fraser, others who take up the redistributionist side of the debate include Brian Barry and Todd Gitlin. See Fraser 2003, 15.

¹⁷ She places thinkers like Iris Marion Young on the other side of the debate, as proponents of recognition over redistribution.

¹⁸ In the 1995 paper Rorty cites when he expresses confusion about “cultural recognition,” Fraser suggests that the remedy for cultural injustice “could involve upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups. It could also involve recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity. More radically still, it could involve the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change *everybody’s* sense of self” (Fraser 1995, 73; emphasis in original). However, in later work on the same topic, Fraser argues that whether

justice requires recognizing what is *distinctive* about individuals or groups, or whether it requires recognizing our *common humanity*, is something that can only be determined pragmatically (Fraser 1996; Fraser 2003). She writes, “everything depends on precisely what currently misrecognized people need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life” (Fraser 2003, 47). It’s not clear what motivates this change in her approach, but it’s clear that the latter is more amenable to Rorty’s own position.

viable populist options, which gave a political voice to the working class, were presented. One option embraced a progressive politics of recognition and the other option a reactionary politics of recognition (see table below).

		DISTRIBUTIVE ELEMENT	
		NEOLIBERAL	POPULIST
RECOGNITION ELEMENT	PROGRESSIVE	<i>progressive neoliberalism (Democratic Party)</i>	<i>progressive populism (Sanders)</i>
	REACTIONARY	<i>reactionary neoliberalism (Republican Party)</i>	<i>reactionary populism (candidate Trump)</i>

After winning the election, Fraser notes, Trump abandoned his populist politics of distribution in favor of a neoliberal politics of distribution, and doubled down on his reactionary politics of recognition. As a result, Trump's presidency represents a hyper-reactionary neoliberalism that is "chaotic, unstable, and fragile," leaving the working class still without a political voice as the working class (Fraser, 2017, n.p.). Of course, this bears a remarkable similarity to Rorty's prediction that the strongman elected as a result of American dissatisfaction with their economic situation would bring sadism back into style, but would do little to "alter the effects of selfishness" after making peace with the international super-rich (Rorty 1998a, 90-91).

Moreover, Fraser, like Rorty, claims that the economic inequality and insecurity created by a neoliberal politics of distribution leads to a breakdown in solidarity. She suggests that when working-class people are denied a political voice, when they are subject to a neoliberal politics of distribution that ignores and exploits their needs, they are condemned to "mounting stress and declining health, to ballooning debt and overwork, to class apartheid and social insecurity" (Fraser 2017, n.p.). These problems – problems that result from economic insecurity – are expressed in various symptoms, including "in

hatreds born of resentment and expressed in scapegoating, in outbreaks of violence followed by bouts of repression, in a vicious dog-eat-dog world where *solidarities contract to the vanishing point*" (Fraser 2017, n.p.; emphasis added). In short, the failure to address the economic insecurity that is produced by a neoliberal politics of distribution will continue to result in failures of solidarity. Economic insecurity breeds selfishness and selfishness breeds sadism. Thus, for both Fraser and Rorty, the American Left must address both class politics and cultural politics. In recent decades, the former has received greater attention than the latter, leading to failures of both distribution (manifesting in an increase of selfishness) and recognition (manifesting in an increase of sadism). It's time for the American Left to seek a balance between class politics and cultural politics, so that a hoped-for America can seem both worthwhile and feasible.

Works cited

- Bérubé, Michael. 2016. "The Strongman-Elect." *The University of Virginia Press Blog*. <https://www.upress.virginia.edu/2016/11/22/strongman-elect>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Dieleman, Susan. 2010. "Revisiting Rorty: Contributions to a Pragmatist Feminism." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. 25th Anniversary Special Issue 25.4 (2010): 891-908.
- Dieleman, Susan. 2011. "The Roots of Rorty's Philosophy: Catharine A. MacKinnon." *Pragmatism Today: The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum* 2.1 (2011): 123-132.
- Dieleman, Susan. 2012. "A Feminist Pragmatist Account of Epistemic Inclusion." In *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, edited by Maurice Hamington and Celia Bardwell-Jones. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Dieleman, Susan. 2017. "Realism, Pragmatism, and Critical Social Epistemology." In *Pragmatism and Justice*, edited by Susan Dieleman, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1995. "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age." *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68-93.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1996. "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and

- Participation." *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 19.
<https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/f/Fraser98.pdf>. retrieved June 3, 2019.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2003. "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation." In *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. Translated by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke. New York: Verso.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2017. "From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond." *American Affairs: Nobmer*, 20, 2017 I.4 (2017).
<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>. retrieved June 3, 2019.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. 2017. "The Book that Predicted Trump's Rise Offers the Left a Roadmap for Defeating Him." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/advice-for-the-left-on-achieving-a-more-perfect-union/531054/>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Helmore, Edward. 2016. "'Something will Crack': Supposed Prophecy of Donald Trump Goes Viral." *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/19/donald-trump-us-election-prediction-richard-rorty>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Illing, Sean. 2019. "Richard Rorty's Prescient Warnings for the American Left." *Vox*.
<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/2/9/14543938/donald-trump-richard-rorty-election-liberalism-conservatives>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Kilian, Crawford. 2017. "Why the American Left Failed, and What Canadians Can Learn." *The Tyee*.
<https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2017/08/14/Why-American-Left-Failed/>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Kuttner, Robert. 2017. "Steve Bannon, Unrepentant." *The American Prospect*.
<https://prospect.org/article/steve-bannon-unrepentant>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Lara, María Pía. 2017. "Richard Rorty's Legacy: Criticizing His Critics." *Los Angeles Review of Books*.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/richard-rortys-legacy-criticizing-his-critics>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Malachowski, Alan. 2019. "Rorty's Political Turn." *Aeon*.
<https://aeon.co/essays/richard-rortys-hopes-for-liberalism-and-solidarity>
- Mendieta, Eduardo. 2017. "Rorty and Post-Post-Truth." *Los Angeles Review of Books*.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rorty-and-post-post-truth/#!>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Metcalf, Stephen. 2017. "Richard Rorty's Philosophical Argument for National Pride." *The New Yorker*.
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/richard-rortys-philosophical-argument-for-national-pride>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Read, Rupert. 2016. "Richard Rorty and How Postmodernism Helped Elect Trump." *The Philosophers' Magazine*.
<https://www.philosophersmag.com/opinion/147-richard-rorty-and-how-postmodernism-helped-elect-trump>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Rondel, David. 2018. "Richard Rorty on the American Left in the Era of Trump." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 15: 1-19.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1991. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1992. "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left." In *The Politics of Liberal Education*, edited by Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1996. "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage." *Diogenes* 44 (173): 5-15.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998a. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998b. *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin.
- Rorty, Richard. 2000. "Is 'Cultural Recognition' a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?" *Critical Horizons* 1 (1): 7-20.
- Rorty, Richard. 2007. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard, Derek Nystrom, and Kent Puckett. 2002. *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/5015698.pdf>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Seal, Andy. 2016. "Why Richard Rorty Was Not a Prophet." *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*. <https://s-usih.org/2016/11/why-richard-rorty-was-not-a-prophet/>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Senior, Jennifer. 2016. "Richard Rorty's 1998 Book Suggested Election 2016 Was Coming." *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/books/richard-rortys-1998-book-suggested-election-2016-was-coming.html>. retrieved March 11, 2019.
- Williams, Joan C. 2018. "The Democrats' White-People Problem." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-democrats-white-people-problem/573901/>. retrieved March 11, 2019.

**ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT:
RORTY ON CULTURAL POLITICS**

Richard Shusterman
Florida Atlantic University
shuster1@fau.edu

ABSTRACT: After charting Rorty's shift from fiercely criticizing cultural politics (as distinct from and irrelevant to real politics) to his ultimate embracing of philosophy as cultural politics, this paper offers four reasons to explain this development in Rorty's thought while elaborating the different meanings of cultural politics and their relationship to what Rorty conceives as real politics. The paper then argues how this development remained incomplete through Rorty's rejecting the somaesthetic dimension of cultural politics, a dimension that is central to the affective elements that Rorty sees as more crucial than reason for progressive democratic ethics and political change. The centrality of affect and of the aesthetic for energizing politics suggests further corrections to Rorty's critique of contemporary American cultural politics.

Keywords: cultural politics, real politics, affect, somaesthetics, democracy

I

From the mid-1980s and through the mid-1990s, Richard Rorty sharply criticized what he called "cultural politics," contrasting it to what he distinguished as "real politics" and recommending that leftist thinkers should stop focusing on the former and stop seeing philosophical theory as the key tool for achieving their goals of progressive political reform (Rorty 1999, 14-15, 91-92).¹ These democratic goals for a more just society, Rorty argued, required instead the work of "real politics," where the notion of *real* is not meant as "a metaphysical status" but as "electoral politics" or "*real* actions and events in the political sphere ... likely to redress the balance of power between the rich and the poor" (Rorty 1991b, 488,489). Leftist cultural politics, he maintained, focused

¹ "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. They are spending energy which should be directed at proposing new laws on discussing topics ... remote from the country's needs." In fact, "the Left should put a moratorium on theory. It should try to kick its philosophical habit" and moreover "should try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans." Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th-Century America*, (1999); hereafter AC.

too narrowly on issues of identity (racial, ethnic, and sexual) and their related struggles of cultural (including academic) recognition. Moreover, with its focus on the issues and lifeworld of campus communities, cultural politics did not seem sufficiently continuous with real politics to contribute meaningfully to the latter. It was therefore surprising and certainly notable when Rorty argued for the central value of cultural politics in the last collection of essays he prepared before his death and even titled it *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Rorty 2007). What is perhaps even more surprising is that Rorty introduced this new collection by saying that "Readers of [his] previous books will find little new in this volume. It contains no novel ideas or arguments" (Rorty 2007, ix). However, Rorty's modest denial notwithstanding, the book certainly contains a radically new notion of cultural politics with a new positive assessment of its importance and philosophy's role in its pursuit.

I was personally very pleased with this change of attitude because from the outset I had been critical not only of his critique of leftist cultural politics on the campus but also of his own lack of political activism, on or off campus. Already in a 1990 New York Times article on Rorty, its author quotes me in noting Rorty's criticism from academics on the left. "Even younger philosophers generally sympathetic to his pragmatist approach, like Nancy Fraser of Northwestern University and Richard Shusterman of Temple University, have complained that he doesn't go nearly as far as Dewey in social criticism and political commitment. Shusterman compares Rorty to Gorbachev: 'He comes out of and comes at the end of a doctrinaire tradition – the analytic tradition – that has played itself out, and as a result he is historically placed where he can accomplish a lot, but he has been reluctant to take an active public role'" (Klepp, 1990).²

Part of what I meant (at that optimistic time when many were talking about post-analytic philosophy – a philosophy that preserved analytical clarity and argu-

² My criticisms of Rorty's neoliberal politics are most pointed and sustained in *Practicing Philosophy* (1997) but also are present already in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) and later in *Thinking through the Body* (2012).

mentative style but embraced a much wider palate of non-analytic authors and topics) was that Rorty enjoyed a position of prestige and power through which he could have established journals, institutes, academic programs to promote the new progressive pragmatism that he initiated and that was already gathering a strong following among young scholars in disciplines throughout the humanities and social sciences.³ My sense of Rorty's potential power for progressive cultural politics and my disappointment in his refusal to wield it was confirmed in 1991, when Richard Bernstein invited Rorty along with a group of those younger scholars (including Cornell West, James Kloppenberg, Casey Blake, Alan Wolfe, Robert Westbrook, William Sullivan, a few others, and myself) for a long weekend seminar up in the Adirondacks devoted to pragmatism and democracy and structured around Westbrook's recent groundbreaking intellectual biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Several of us at that meeting were keen on the idea of creating some sort of interdisciplinary collective to develop activist pragmatist programs (such as seminars, conferences, institutes, journals, etc.) to promote democratic praxis, and we looked to Rorty for leadership and encouragement.⁴ But we were disappointed not to find it.⁵ He remained skeptical, at that meeting, of what philosophy could do for real politics, and critical of its engagement in academic cultural politics, whose import he regarded as grossly exaggerated. Rorty's published writings continued to express such skepticism until we find a comprehensive reevaluation of cultural politics in the final essay collection he published in his lifetime.

³ For a discussion of such criticisms and a comparison of Rorty's and my account of cultural politics, see Alexander Kremer (2016, 79-86).

⁴ For a general account of that meeting, see Robert Boynton (1991).

⁵ I should note that Rorty, who encouraged me to take up pragmatism and come to the States to practice it, remained my philosophical hero. However, like many young idealists, I longed for my hero to be a *superhero*, devoid of any disappointing limitations. As I matured and got to know him closer and American academic life better, I came to a better understanding of his attitudes. See my discussion of him in *Thinking through the Body* (2012a), ch. 8.

In this paper, after briefly outlining his change of views, I offer some likely reasons for this evolution, which one could label "the cultural turn" in Rortian politics. Some of these reasons find subtle, indirect expression in his writings, others are not really articulated at all and may have simply worked in the background of Rorty's thinking leading him to develop toward his endorsement of cultural politics. However, I then suggest how this development remained incomplete, unfortunately arrested by Rorty's untimely death, and how it could have been more fruitfully completed by recognizing a role for somatic elements in the realm of cultural politics with a consequent role for somaesthetic philosophy in the project of philosophy as cultural politics.

II

Rorty's early critiques chided leftist cultural politics for being unrealistically totalizing in its pretensions and essentially negative in its approach. Rather than working on practical, piecemeal improvements to liberal democracy, Rorty claimed that campus cultural politics "calls for the total transformation of our society" (Rorty 1991b, 487) and that it works to achieve this by ideological unmaskings achieved through literary theory's specialist tools for deconstructing texts, its mastery of what Paul de Man calls the "linguistics of literariness" that "is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations" (Rorty 1991a, 134). He declares: "I have always maintained that one could approach the problems of ideology and by extension the problems of politics only on the basis of critical-linguistic analysis"(134). Rorty rightly criticizes this demand for an unarticulated total transformation of society through the putative master tool of language, describing this as a fall into the essentialism that deconstruction was meant to undermine – the "hypostatization of language" as an all-powerful essence (136).

Rorty sees de Man (and his deconstructionist influence) as central to the academy's efforts "to reinvigorate leftist social criticism by deploying new philosophico-literary weapons", rejecting "philosophical views which suggest consensual, reformist politics of the sort Dewey favored as

'complicit' with the 'discourses of power' which are the invisible regulators of life in the bourgeois democracies" (129, 133). Rorty argues that "Just as the Marxists of the 1930s thought of Dewey as 'the philosopher of American imperialism,' so the contemporary Cultural Left views us pragmatists as at best socially irresponsible and at worst apologists for a repressive ideology"(ibid.). In reactive defense of his own favored pragmatist and piecemeal political meliorism (which I largely share), Rorty attacked such cultural politics as hopelessly essentialist and totalizing, but he also discredited it as the simplistic, self-deceptive product of leftist academics' psychological needs and feelings of guilt. "For professors of literature who want a way of making their specialized skill and knowledge politically relevant, of getting leftist politics into their classrooms and their books, the writings of the later de Man are a godsend" (ibid.). This faith in literary studies not only involves a "simplistic and self-deceptive hypostatization of language or of literature" that functions like "Marxism" or "Science" as a master word believed to be the essential key to solving all political problems (136). It also allows leftist intellectuals a convenient way to satisfy their professional needs and sense of political usefulness: "to bring everything together – one's most private emotional needs and one's public responsibilities, one's secret self-image and one's shame at the leisure and wealth that permit one to devote oneself to the cultivation of that self-image" (ibid.).

Rorty blasts the idea of revolutionizing political realities and transforming society through activist literary and cultural studies on the campus as hopelessly absurd. But he is nonetheless shrewd and honest enough to admit that "saying absurd things is perfectly compatible with being a force for good"; that leftist cultural critics "are still doing a lot more good than most of their critics are doing"; and that even if their campus politics do not currently change political realities, they can eventually change people's attitudes that can in turn eventually change real politics (much as Deweyan cultural politics did in the 1920s and 1930s). "For the curricular emphases which [leftist cultural activists] initiate will, in the course of a generation or so, trickle down into the high schools, and the conventional

wisdom inculcated into young Americans will be changed" (137). These remarks are from a paper in Rorty's essay collection of 1991.

Greater recognition in his later years of the increasing power of this trickle-down effect is, I believe, one reason for Rorty's growing appreciation of cultural politics. In an essay published in 1998 we see this change of tone and an increased respect for leftist campus politics concerned with cultural recognition. Although Rorty still warns against "the dangerous consequences of developing a left that neglects class and money by focusing on [cultural issues of recognition for] the elimination of prejudice and sexism" and while he still insists on the cultural left's overestimation of academic philosophy's "political utility," he is "happy to agree that this sort of philosophical sophistication has been put to good use in the process of building up the academic wings of the new movements" (Rorty 2010b, 471).

III

A second likely reason for Rorty's warming to cultural politics is his recognizing that this concept has a very rich range of meanings and should not be limited to the campus politics of leftists obsessed with issues of identity and cultural recognition. Rorty does not attempt to distinguish the very different senses of cultural politics. For example, he ignores the meaning of cultural politics that is most prominent in Europe and that Dewey likewise highlighted. This is the politics that a government pursues with respect to culture in the social field over which it exercises political control; for example, when it establishes new museums, new cultural institutions, educational programs, or official policies to support the arts or redirect them in some way. Rather than analyzing the various senses of the concept of cultural politics, Rorty simply redescribes this concept in very different and much broader terms than he did earlier and redescribing it in a way in which philosophy plays a central role. Here cultural politics is not a matter of official government policy, nor is it narrowly focused on issues of identity politics of cultural recognition for socially underprivileged groups. Instead, cultural politics aims more generally to enrich humankind's ongoing conversation

about how to improve our lives and practices. It does this by criticizing and reconstructing established ways of living, talking, acting, and thinking, but also by proposing new ways of life; new practices and disciplines for improved experience or performance; new ideas of social life and community; new vocabularies, techniques, and roles for self-realization and ethical practice.

In *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Rorty describes his philosophical notion of cultural politics as emerging from Hegel's and Dewey's historicist views "that philosophy is its time held in thought," rather than an eternal, God's-eye vision of the world, and that the philosopher's job should therefore be "to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation" about how to improve our time and practices. "The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation. To suggest further novelties is to intervene in cultural politics," Rorty concludes, affirming Dewey's hope "that philosophy professors would see such intervention as their principal assignment," and endorsing "the pragmatist maxim that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy." He also cites Dewey's radically visionary claim that "philosophy is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge," but rather "a social hope reduced to a working program of action, a prophecy of the future" (Rorty 2007, ix). Rorty's citation perfectly captures Dewey's vision, and we can bring other quotes from Dewey to reinforce it. Chiding his philosophical contemporaries in the academy for "lack of imagination in generating leading ideas," Dewey claims philosophy can prove its value only "with the formation of directive hypotheses instead of with a sweeping pretension to knowledge of universal Being" (Dewey 1963, 11).

When philosophy is construed as cultural politics rather than the pursuit of absolute, eternal truth, then its history, says Rorty, "is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people's sense of who they are, what matters to them," and this leads to new images or ideals of self and society. "Interventions in cultural politics," Rorty continues, "have sometimes taken the form of proposals for new roles that

men and women might play: the ascetic, the prophet, the dispassionate seeker after truth, the good citizen, the aesthete, the revolutionary." But cultural politics, he adds, has also taken different forms, such as "sketches of an ideal community – the perfected Greek polis, the Christian Church, the republic of letters, the cooperative commonwealth" or "suggestions about how to reconcile seemingly incompatible outlooks – to resolve Greek rationalism and Christian faith, or between natural science and the common moral consciousness" (Rorty 2007, ix-x).

What Rorty asserts as common and crucial to these and other forms of philosophical interventions in cultural politics is that they aim to make "a difference to the way human beings live," not just to address specialist "technical debates" in the academic field (x). Philosophy as cultural politics, Rorty further insists, should have an interdisciplinary orientation. By engaging with other fields that deal with our multidimensional lives, philosophy can augment its resources for productively affecting our lives: "The more philosophy interacts with other human activities – not just natural science, but art, literature, religion, and politics as well – the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves" (ibid.).

Having briefly outlined Rorty's newer, broader conception of cultural politics, I wish both to note a form of cultural politics that Rorty superbly practiced and to suggest that his experience in this form of cultural politics may have been a background influence in the broadening of his thinking on cultural politics and thus a third cause for his growing appreciation of its value. As a firm believer in America's core values of democracy and freedom, with a staunch conviction that America did the right thing in its cold war against Soviet communist totalitarianism and its colonization of Eastern and Central Europe, Rorty practiced cultural politics in spending considerable time disseminating American philosophy in those newly freed cultures from Soviet domination. By spreading the democratic values of pragmatist philosophy and its emancipatory political thrust to intellectuals who were happy to be free from Marxist-Leninist doctrine but feared being absorbed into an

uncritical, uncaringly selfish version of American capitalism, Rorty's work helped educate the Central and East European intellectual public for the struggles of establishing and maintaining democracy in their post-Soviet nations. The existence of this journal *Pragmatism Today*, like the existence of its sponsoring institution, The Central European Pragmatist Forum, is due in large part to Rorty's cultural work in Hungary, Poland, and the nations that emerged from Czechoslovakia. This concerted personal engagement in international cultural politics effectively began after his 1991 essay collection and intensified at the turn of century. In Hungary, for example, after developing a relationship with the University of Pecs, Rorty gave lectures and seminars there in 2000, 2001, 2004 and became an official professor at their Doctoral School of Philosophy. Participants who attended those lectures and seminars testify to the importance of hearing Rorty's pragmatist views on democracy as an alternative to mass-movement, populist democracies, but also the importance of his introduction of pragmatist philosophy in general.⁶ I believe this personal engagement in creating a pragmatist intellectual culture in the new political societies of post-Soviet Europe made Rorty appreciate more fully the breadth of cultural politics and philosophy's crucial role in this arena.

IV

I now turn to a fourth likely reason for Rorty's move toward cultural politics. Rorty has increasingly insisted that our core ethical and political commitments concerning human rights, respect for others, freedom, and democratic process cannot be convincingly justified by pure philosophical reason or derived by appealing to a "putative" essential human rationality. Instead, affect rather than reason provides the real ground of morality, human solidarity, and the politics emerging from our ethical values. What makes us more

moral than other animals, Rorty claims in "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," is that, "We can feel *for each other* to a much greater extent than they can; and we progress in morality (both as individuals and as societies) the more we can feel for more kinds of people" (Rorty 2010a, 358). Noting that cultures who do not share our moral beliefs are perfectly able to perform all sorts of difficult rational tasks, Rorty argues that their immoral treatment of subordinate groups they oppress cannot be the product of irrationality, but is rather because they do not feel that the creatures they oppress are "people like ourselves" (Rorty 2010b, 53).

Moral progress, then, is "a progress of sentiments" (Rorty 2010a, 362). Thus, rather than focusing on the search for universal rational principles to ground our own core ethical and political beliefs and to convince others of their absolute validity, we should "put foundationalism behind us" and instead "concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education," so that we can empathize with more kinds of people and imaginatively feel ourselves "in the shoes of the despised and oppressed" (358, 360). "That sort of education sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human. The goal of this manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference" class of those we treat as humans like ourselves, of "people like us" (358), and moral persuasion is thus more essentially a matter of "rhetorical manipulation" of feeling than "genuine validity-seeking argument" (Rorty 2010b, 53).

Rorty celebrates literature as the best means of manipulating sentiments. So if literature has this special affective power, and our core ethical and political commitments are ultimately grounded on affect or feelings, then it follows that the cultural question of which literary works the public reads is of significant political importance. And if cultural politics is concerned with determining the literary canon and ensuring that the public reads authors who teach us how to empathize marginalized or disfavored social groups, then cultural politics must surely be politically significant for progressive politics and should not be

⁶ I owe these details to Alexander Kremer. (2018,318-326). For testimony of Rorty's influence in making pragmatism popular in Poland and the Czech and Slovak states, see the same article. See also Wojciech Malecki's "Pragmatism in Poland Today: A Report."

denigrated as not continuous with or belonging to real politics.

The argument that culture is extremely important for politics because culture effectively shapes the public's affective experience and values has a long, transnational pedigree. It forms the basis of Confucian political theory and finds expression in Western thought from Plato to John Dewey, just as it motivates the governmental conception of cultural politics that I noted earlier and that generates official ministries or departments of culture. Realizing "that emotions and imagination are more potent in shaping public sentiment and opinion than information and reason," Dewey reminds us of the old saying "that if one could control the songs of a nation one need not care who made its laws" (Dewey 1988, 70). He is also more insightfully comprehensive than Rorty in insisting on a wider range of aesthetic phenomena as effective for manipulating political sentiments. Taking the example of the Nazi state, Dewey argues that because works of art and culture "are the most compelling of the means of communication by which emotions are stirred and opinions formed," in Hitler's Germany "the theater, the movie and music hall, even the picture gallery, eloquence, popular parades, common sports and recreative agencies, have all been brought under regulation as part of the propaganda agencies by which dictatorship is kept in power without being regarded by the masses as oppressive" (Ibid.).

In short, it is a dangerous mistake of our dominant Kantian philosophical tradition to isolate the aesthetic from the political. The understandable reaction to the horrible results of the Nazi's use of aesthetics for realizing their fascist political aims has reinforced this philosophical attempt at this aesthetic/politics compartmentalization, which real politics continuously exposes as a wishful fantasy. My *Pragmatist Aesthetics* was devoted to combating that blind tradition of compartmentalization, and the book's choice of early hip hop (which was aesthetically and politically engaged) aimed to highlight the message that aesthetic and political values inseparably intertwine or merge through strong affective bonds. Just as aesthetic experience, through its powerful affectivity, shapes (and can

transform) our ethical and political perspectives, so I maintain that "the aesthetic power of an artwork or a life can be deeply enhanced by its political engagement, even if such aesthetic-political cocktails can have a dangerously blinding power that necessitates an always vigilant philosophical critique" (Shusterman 1997, 127).

V

In agreeing with this view, Rorty elides my reference to the aesthetics of life,⁷ signaling by this omission a set of issues on which we deeply disagree and regarding which his sense of cultural politics seems incomplete and his development toward the robust advocacy of philosophy as cultural politics seems arrested. I refer to his rejection of somatic philosophy, in particular my proposal of somaesthetics, as part of the field of cultural politics. Somaesthetics, a project devoted to the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the soma as a site of sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning, aroused Rorty's suspicions for a number of reasons. In response to my proposal, Rorty suggests that we do not "need a 'somatic aesthetics' because ... [we do not] need an aesthetic theory, or an aesthetic programme, at all" (Ibid).

His skepticism of somaesthetics is not only due to his distaste (which I share) for essentialist Kantian aesthetics, expressed in his (unfortunately excessive claim) that "'aesthetics' as a field of inquiry... [is] another of Kant's bad ideas" (Ibid). It stems more deeply from Rorty's fierce resistance to the somatic, which in turn derives from his rejection of the notions of experience and of nondiscursive understanding and value. These rejections rely, in turn, on his misguided assumption that if a philosopher asserts the importance of nondiscursive experience, she must be affirming its importance for justifying knowledge claims and thus falling into the epistemological fallacy of the myth of the given. We cannot justify propositions by mere experience, but only by giving reasons that are discursively formulated in language. But philosophy, in my view, is not

⁷ "I entirely agree with Shusterman that 'the aesthetic power of an artwork ... can be deeply enhanced by its political engagement'." See Richard Rorty (2001, 156).

limited to claims of knowledge and their justification. Philosophy can also be understood and practiced as a way of life, as indeed many ancient and some modern thinkers have done. Ethical virtue here involves something beyond and other than mere discourse, but Rorty claims that he simply “cannot see that talking about things has either ‘limits’ or an ‘other’” (Ibid). Yet even Rorty has at times argued convincingly for philosophy as an aesthetic life, albeit one confined to enriching or creating one’s vocabularies.⁸

However, if we start talking about the aesthetics of a life (including its experienced aesthetic quality), indeed, if we even start talking about feelings as the ground of ethics, we cannot avoid talking about the soma. As James and Dewey, and a legion of contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists recognize, there is no affect without the body. “A purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity,” in James emphatic words (James 1884, 194).⁹ While Rorty celebrates literature as the best means of “manipulating sentiments,” he should at least admit that feelings can be effectively manipulated through somatic means. We can bring strangers (and even enemies) to feel more comfortable with each other by having them share the pleasures of eating and drinking together. Athletes, soldiers, and lovers acquire feelings of intimate solidarity by sharing powerful somatic feelings of training, combat, or lovemaking. Rituals derive much of their binding affective power because their essential somaesthetic expression, as do protest marches and sit-in demonstrations. Just as William James famously argues, we can transform our own moods and feelings by taking on the postures and bodily behaviors of those feelings and moods we wish to feel, so I

⁸ See for example, Richard Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection” (1989, 143-163); and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). For a critical analysis of his account of the aesthetic life, see my *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), ch.9.

⁹ James writes: “A purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity. I do not say that it is a contradiction in the nature of things, or that pure spirits are necessarily condemned to cold intellectual lives; but I say that for us, emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable.”

have argued that we can do better in empathetically imagining what it feels like to be oppressed, when our somatic sensibility and awareness has been cultivated to be more keenly perceptive and subtle so that we can read this oppression in the bodily gestures of the oppressed, just as we can better read our own somatic gestures and feelings.¹⁰

There exists a deep connection between somaesthetics and the cultivation of sentiment that Rorty seeks as a means to moral progress, although he totally neglects it. His development toward a more robust cultural politics and feeling-based ethics and aesthetics seems arrested by his fear of the soma as a nondiscursively (but also discursively) experienced other that could lead to the myth of the given.

Having defended somaesthetics against such charges elsewhere, I will not repeat my arguments here.¹¹ Instead, let me conclude by suggesting how strong affect (often effectively aroused by somatic experience) could provide a key to resolving one of the problems of American leftist politics that Rorty sees as central. In *Achieving Our Country*, he bewails that the current intellectual left is not engaged in real politics but merely theorizes the political problems in abstract ways rather than proposing and working for concrete solutions, all the while pretending that these theoretical efforts are politically significant. Rorty builds his criticism on a contrast between activist agents and theoretical spectators. “The difference between early twentieth-century leftist intellectuals and the majority of their contemporary counterparts is the difference between agents and spectators” (Rorty 1999, 9). The cultural Left’s “futile attempts to philosophize [its] way into political relevance are a symptom of what happens when a Left retreats from activism and adopts a spectatorial approach to the problems of its country. Disengagement from practice produces theoretical hallucinations” like the “ubiquity of Foucauldian power” or “the hypostatization of language or literature” as the key to pursuing political reform (94, 95; Rorty 1991a, 136).

¹⁰ William James, (1983), ch. 4; Richard Shusterman, (2008), ch. 4-6.

¹¹ See my “*Practicing Philosophy*” (1997), ch. 6; and (2012a), ch. 8.

One should therefore ask what is capable of turning a spectator into an agent? What is the most effective spur to political activism? The answer, I believe, is powerful feeling, such as rage, fear, pity, or love (of country, cultural group, God, or cherished political ideals). Affect, I have elsewhere argued more generally, is the true motor of all action (Shusterman 2012b, 433-454). Reason will not do the job. Thinking in itself does not produce doing. Reflection, deliberation, and reasoning indeed inhibit action, as Dewey (following James) insists: "all thinking exercises by its very nature an inhibitory effect. It delays the operation of desire, and tends to call up new considerations which alter the nature of the action to which one felt originally impelled" (Dewey 1985, 189). Passion is likewise the motor for the action of sustained philosophical thinking that can energize a practical course of action. It is not surprising, then, that James characterized pragmatist philosophy in terms of "the strenuous mood."

There are effective somaesthetic means to arouse such potent, activating emotions and channeling them into political directions. The Nazis, unfortunately, were diabolic masters of such techniques, but we can find them also in progressive protest marches, hunger strikes, political rallies, politically motivated rock concerts like Live Aid, and even in the rhetorical gestures of body language and tone of passionate political oration. Affect, like knowledge, can serve both good and evil causes. James himself avows the wilder, disruptive aspect of the strenuous mood, particularly "its peculiarly destructive power over inhibitions" (Dewey 1985, 189).

In advocating somaesthetics, one is not disavowing language because speech itself is a bodily act. Moreover, language can be very helpful in cultivating a critical reflective consciousness of somatic experience, and it is absolutely essential in analyzing and evaluating somatic norms and techniques. However, language alone is often not enough for affecting the profound change of sentiments that leads to ethical and political transformations. As I argue in chapter four of *Body Consciousness*, linguistic arguments against racial and ethnic prejudice are rationally convincing for many individuals without in any way changing their

actual discriminatory behavior and their deep-seated prejudicial attitudes that often stem from discomforting somatic feelings aroused by those racial or ethnic others. If we completely "linguistify subjectivity" (Rorty 1999, 96) and ignore the nonlinguistic dimensions of experience as Rorty recommends, we seriously limit our potential for ethical transformation of feelings that can promote progressive politics for greater social justice and personal emancipation.

The ethical and political value of ardent affect leads me to another issue that troubles me in Rorty's excellent analysis of the malaise of American politics. I conclude this article with a brief discussion of it. In "Movements and Campaigns" (1999, first appendix), Rorty distinguishes between "campaigns," which are defined as practical and finite in their suggesting piecemeal improvements, on the one hand, and what he calls "movements" that are "exemplified by Christianity and by Marxism" that "are too big and too amorphous to do anything that simple," on the other. He rejects movements because they suffer from "the passion of the infinite" (114). My worry here is threefold. First, I think "the civic religion of which Whitman and Dewey were prophets" and that Rorty celebrates as "substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's spiritual goal" clearly exemplifies "the passion of the infinite" of a movement rather than a limited campaign. Indeed many see Dewey's civic religion of democracy as secularized Christianity. Second, I believe that precisely "the passion of the infinite" is sometimes necessary to stimulate the ardent affect needed to turn spectators into agents. Third, we should not take Rorty's meaningful distinction between campaigns and movements as the sort of dichotomous alternative his argument suggests. We can embrace them both, not only through the pragmatist strategy of the inclusive disjunction stance,¹² because they are not essentially contradictory and can be combined, but also because they can be (and have been) usefully

¹² For an explanation of this pluralist stance, see Richard Shusterman, "Introduction to the Second Edition," *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), x-xii, and *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 272.

integrated. Movements inspire and nurture campaigns, and campaigns (including unsuccessful ones) can refine and help transform movements. In the same way, somatic and literary techniques can be integrated in the mission of cultural politics to transform our sentiments in the quest for ethical and political progress.

References

- Boynton, Robert. 1991. "Philosophy in the Woods," *The Village Voice*, September 17.
- Dewey, John. 1963. *Philosophy and Civilization*. New York: Capricorn.
- Dewey, John. 1985. *Ethics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1988. *Freedom and Culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- James, William. 1884. "What is an Emotion," *Mind*, 9, 194.
- James, William. 1983. *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- James, William. 1985. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Penguin.
- Klepp, Larry. 1990. "Everyman a philosopher king," *New York Times Magazine*, December 2, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/02/magazine/every-man-a-philosopherking.html>.
- Kremer, Alexander. 2016. "Philosophy as Cultural Politics in Rorty, Shusterman, and Pragmatism," *Pragmatism Today*, 7, 79-86.
- Kremer, Alexander, Malecki, Wojciech, Krzysztof Skowronski and Emil Visnovsky. 2018. "Eastern European Context." In *Handbuch Pragmatismus* edited by Michael Festl, 318-326. Berlin: Springer.
- Malecki, Wojciech. "Pragmatism in Poland Today: A Report," on the website of Krakow's John Dewey Research Center. http://www.deweycenter.uj.edu.pl/tekst_malecki.html#7.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. "Freud and Moral Reflection," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Rorty, Richard. 1991a. "De Man and the American Cultural Left," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Rorty, Richard. 1991b. "Intellectuals in Politics: Too Far In? Too Far Out?" *Dissent*. 488,489.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th-Century America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. "Response to Richard Shusterman." 2001. In *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, edited by Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, 156. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 2007. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, volume 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010a. "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality, in *The Rorty Reader*, edited by C. Voparil and R. Bernstein 351-365. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010b. "Is 'Cultural Recognition' a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?" *Critical Horizons*, 1 (2000), 1-7, reprinted in C. Voparil and R. Bernstein, *The Rorty Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shusterman, Richard. 1992. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shusterman, Richard. 1997. *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2000. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2002. *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2008. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2012a. *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2012b. "Thought in the Strenuous Mood: Pragmatism as a Philosophy of Feeling." *New Literary History*, 43(3): 433-454.

'THE LAW OF THE LAND HAS GOD'S ANOINTING'—

RORTY ON RELIGION, LANGUAGE, AND POLITICS

Tracy Llanera

University of Connecticut

tracy.llanera@uconn.edu

ABSTRACT: In his writings on religion and American politics, Richard Rorty emphasizes how religious language functions as a conversation-stopper. I approach religious language from a different angle in this paper. While acknowledging Rorty's claim that the language of religion and the practice of democratic politics are often in tension with one another, I draw attention to the fact that the politics of religious language is more complicated than Rorty's conversation-stopper model suggests it is. To develop this argument, I examine recent sociological work on the pernicious use of religious language by militant Christian groups to support the Philippine Drug War. My analysis of pernicious harm bolsters Rorty's case against the irresponsible employment of religious language in the public sphere. It also offers insights on the fraught relationship between religion and politics today.

Keywords: Religion, Philosophy of Language, Philippines, Emotive Words, Pragmatism

The Philippines and the United States share a rich, intertwined history. Filipinos are known as the "Brown Americans of Asia" and have their idiosyncratic versions of the American Dream: conceptual remnants of the imperialist legacy of the United States. An ironic but enduring product of the Philippine-American relationship is a commitment to the ideal of democracy. Today, it is uncanny that the democracies of both nations are trending toward authoritarianism, with President Rodrigo Duterte and President Donald Trump gesturing towards a preference for authoritarian politics. Inspired by Richard Rorty's writings on religion and American politics, my aim in this paper is to show how religious language participates in justifying the preference for authoritarianism and undermining the health of democratic societies. In doing so, I hope to honor Rorty's philosophical work by showing how a timely analysis of the Philippine case can extend and enrich his critique of religion as practiced in the American public sphere.

1. Introduction

In *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue* (2015), William Curtis underscores the trouble behind trying to pin Rorty's view of religion down. Rorty adopts various positions in his writings, with some claims about religion seemingly in tension with others. Among them include:

- (1) a strident secularism that denounces religion as something we need to "get over" if we are to have a truly liberal politics and culture;
- (2) an endorsement of the "Jeffersonian compromise," which accommodates religion as long as it is restricted to the private sphere and rendered irrelevant to liberal democratic politics;
- (3) "anticlericalism," which emphasizes that it is religious *institutions*, rather than false or irrational metaphysical beliefs, that cause religion to be problematic for liberal politics;
- (4) a more accommodating, Jamesian pragmatic position, which gladly acknowledges the value of religion on utilitarian grounds because of the psychological benefits that religious believers ostensibly receive from their faiths; and
- (5) praise for a religious or spiritual conception of American democracy, which has its provenance in Dewey's thought and in the literary and artistic tradition that Wallace Stevens and Harold Bloom dub the 'American Sublime' (215-216).

In this paper, I set aside a discussion of religion as a concept, tradition, and social institution, topics where much ink have been spilled to make sense of the tensions in Rorty's work (Wolterstorff 1997a, 1997b, 2003; Stout 2004; Smith 2005; Frankenberry 2007, 2014; Rosenbaum 2009; Barthold 2012; Curtis 2015; Llanera 2017; Mueller 2017, to name a few). Instead, I focus on an equally controversial topic. I'm interested in what we can get out of re-examining Rorty's treatment of religious language and its fraught relationship with democratic politics today.

Rorty maintains an ambivalent relationship with religious language. On the one hand, he notes that concepts and terms rooted in religious language can have a special and lasting role to play in liberal democracies. He observes how *The New Testament* continues to illuminate a morally edifying vision of the world. Like *The Communist Manifesto*, Rorty describes the Christian text as "the founding document of a movement that has done much for human freedom and human equality" (1999, 203). He notes that many democratic manifestoes are buttressed by religious

language. Walt Whitman's Americans, John Keats's "Grand Democracy of Forest Trees," and Hans Blumenberg's vision of The Glorious Social Future can be read as epiphanies of "utopian social democratic political thought." They rage with a great spiritual power originally tendered by religion (1995, 199; see 1998 for more examples). Rorty also recognizes the importance of casting secular ideals in religious terms. "Human dignity" or "social justice" work best when treated as universal and inviolable (2003, 457). Instead of downplaying its significance, Rorty suggests that religious language is worthy of being invoked if it inspires our commitment to democratic goals. On the other hand, Rorty militates against the use of religious language in public discourse. He is infamous for stating that in politics, religion is a "conversation-stopper" (1994). In response to Nicholas Wolterstorff's and Jeffrey Stout's rejoinders to his statement, Rorty later softened his stance: "I should have simply said that citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible. We should do our best to keep the conversation going without citing unarguable first principles, either philosophical or religious. If we are sometimes driven to such citation, we should see ourselves as having failed, not as having triumphed" (2010, 463). In a nutshell, Rorty's problem with religious language is linked to the conversation-stopping mechanism that accompanies its authoritarianism. The authoritarian claims of religious language short-circuit the ability to reason critically and engage non-religious reasons in public discourse. In this paper, I approach Rorty's critique of religious language from a different angle. I draw attention to the fact that the politics of religious language is much more complicated than Rorty's conversation-stopper model suggests it is. I develop this view by examining how Christian groups use religious language perniciously to support the Philippine government's ongoing Drug War today. I will show how this analysis may have implications for contemporary American politics in the conclusion.

I begin by connecting Rorty's conceptions of language, authoritarianism, and religion. Rorty's pragmatist conception of language makes him critical of authoritarian languages, or languages backed by transcendent and

infallible claims. Using Rorty's work, I explain how authoritarian languages may come to serve a redemptive function, in the sense that they may dominate the epistemic and existential concerns of its users. I then frame religious language as authoritarian and outline Rorty's worries about its militant use in public discourse. He emphasizes the conflict between religion and politics: for him, religious language is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. He cites many cases in the United States to illustrate his model of religion as a conversation-stopper. To extend Rorty's argument, I examine an alternative case where the transcendent claims of religious language are made to work with politics. Recent empirical work in sociology shows that militant Christian leaders have co-opted the Philippine Drug War – warts, dead bodies, and all – into their religious narrative. They employ religious language for different purposes: to support the mandate of President Rodrigo Duterte, to justify the morality of the extrajudicial killings, and to initiate conversion of outsiders into their groups. Based on the Philippine case, I show that when a religious language reconciles itself with politics, it may bring about a more insidious form of public danger. If I am successful in presenting this case, then I can mount another angle to support Rorty's argument against the irresponsible use of religious language in the public sphere. Put differently, my paper shows that religious language is not only problematic when it acts as a conversation-stopper, as Rorty frames his view. It may even be more harmful when it bolsters the conversation.

2. Language, Authoritarianism, and Religion

2.1. Metaphilosophy and Language

As a pragmatist, Rorty rallies against traditional conceptions of World, Reality, Truth, Nature, and the Good, concepts that have served as the bread and butter of Western philosophy. Believing there are final and complete versions of these concepts means subscribing to two claims: first, that an unfalsifiable way of representing these concepts is possible; and second, that a correct way of interpreting their key claims on human

beings exists. Rorty doesn't buy this joint metaphysical and epistemological premise. His pragmatism is in the business of smashing the idea of the mind as our "glassy essence," of demolishing universalist myths, and of "discarding the image of the fierce father figure" or any other God-surrogates in human culture (1998, 152). Inspired by William James's view that "the trail of the human serpent is over all," Rorty argues that while things can be causally independent of us, nothing can be representationally independent (1998, 86). What renders everything representationally dependent on human beings is language.

Rorty is particular about how we define the function of language. Language marks our belonging to a human community. It serves many ends: we use it to describe our surroundings, communicate our desires, cooperate with others, and so on. In Rorty's view, the problem begins when we see language as having an ontologically prior role to its social function; more accurately put, if we treat language as capable of mirroring everything as it *really* is, independent of human representation. For Rorty, this view is mistaken:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of "arbitrary" choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another (1989, 5).

No linguistic relationship exists between us and the world, and consequently for Rorty, we cannot be linguistically accountable to it (or to Reality, Truth, Nature, God, and the Good). We can only be linguistically accountable to other human beings. We recalibrate our relationship with other beings, objects, and concepts in the world based on this human context of accountability.

Rorty adopted this conclusion after radically changing his mind about language. In 1967, he edited

the book *The Linguistic Turn*, describing the turn as a philosophical revolution. This revolution showed that reforming or understanding the language we use can solve or dissolve philosophical problems (1992, 3). But in the essay "Twenty-Five Years After" of the 1992 reprint, Rorty changed his initial position. He explained that the linguistic turn's real impact was not that it could provide a method or procedure to tackle philosophical problems. Rather, its distinctive contribution was to help shift our preoccupation with experience to language as a medium of representation. This shift made it easier for us to set aside the notion of representation altogether, ushering the possibility of a neo-pragmatic view of the world. Rorty puts the radical consequences of this shift in religious terms: "To drop the idea of languages as representations, and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world" (1989, 21). For him, language is best understood "as strings of marks and noises used by human beings in the development and pursuit of social practices – practices which enabled people to achieve their ends" (1992, 373).

That we should treat language as a pragmatic tool for organizing our social practices is interesting, but this is not my main concern. I am interested in what lies behind Rorty's claim that we *ought* to reject the traditional "mirroring" enterprise in our language-use. A productive way of dealing with this problem is by heeding the practical reasoning behind Rorty's imperative. We need to take seriously Rorty's description of himself: "I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other" (2004, 474). Since the language we use may carry the weighty baggage of nature-mirroring, an alternative intellectual world entails changing the way we speak. For our purposes, let's call the languages that we *ought* to stop using as authoritarian languages.

2.2. The Redemptive Function of Authoritarian Languages

Following Colin Koopman's description of Rorty's antifoundationalism, we can describe authoritarian languages as vocabularies that purchase "normative authority (correctness) only at the cost of buying into dogmatic authoritarianism (infallibility)" (2011, 69). Authoritarian languages share three features in Rorty's view, which I go over briefly in this section and go into more detail in the next. First, authoritarian languages rely on transcendent support, a kind of support that is justified by the mirroring enterprise.¹ Transcendent claims are designed to override all other claims. Rorty thinks that religion, philosophy, and science are disciplinary areas that are prone to formulating authoritarian languages; in his view, statements such as the "true religion" and "objective science" usually indicate the mirroring agenda. Second, authoritarian languages dominate interpretation, since users treat their truths as self-evident. Rorty points to common sense and *cant* as vocabularies that reveal inflections of authoritarianism. Philosophical assumptions such as "truth is independent of the human mind" and "humans are compelled to pursue the good" undergird so-called commonsensical views. Those who abide by convenient, commonsensical thinking are resistant to the challenges of contingency and historicism (Rorty 1989). Rorty also criticizes our reliance on *cant*, or sanctimonious and moralizing talk. An example of *cant* is "the unthinking reiteration of quotations from the sacred scripture" (2010, 390), such as "love your neighbor as you love yourself" and "thou shalt not bear false witness." Since religious

statements like these arouse neither interest nor suspicion, they serve as an easy fallback when discourse becomes complex and demanding. Third, authoritarian languages come into conflict with other languages, authoritarian or otherwise. Different rules govern different vocabularies. Fruitful engagement is hard to achieve since they operate on premises and arguments that are not only difficult to square off with each other but are also often irreconcilable. For example, in terms of philosophical anthropology, Rorty counts the vocabularies of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant as authoritarian. He argues that their arguments, such as "moral intuitions are our recollections of the Form of the Good," or that human beings "are the disobedient children of a loving God," or that persons "differ from other kinds of animals by having dignity rather than mere value" make transcendent claims about human nature (1993, 354-355). Notice that playing the language game of Aquinas, which finds its home in the Divine command theory, would not make much sense in the language game of Enlightenment ethics. In Rorty's view, they belong to different paradigms that both depend on transcendent premises for justification.

Authoritarian languages do not sound troublesome when analyzed in terms of religious and philosophical theory. But their dangers come to life when they serve a practical end; or, in Rortyan lingo, when they play a "redemptive" function in human lives. The notion of redemptive truth is helpful in articulating this redemptive function. Rorty defines redemptive truth as a set of essentialist beliefs that fulfil "the need to fit everything — every thing, person, event, idea, and poem, into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique" (2004: 476). Redemptive truths are ultimate and final, offering "maximal clarity" and "maximal coherence" (2001: 391). Using the word "redemptive" is not coincidental since religion plays a big part in Rorty's historical narrative. God served as the first redemptive truth in the West. For a long period, religion governed human life and its spiritual, material, and moral needs. In time, other God-surrogates rose to the level of redemptive truth; Rorty

¹ It is important to note the difference between the religious term "transcendent" and the philosophical term "transcendental": the former indicates a link to spiritual or otherworldly commitments, while the latter refers to, following Kant, the necessary conditions of possibility of knowledge. While transcendent and the transcendental are distinct by definition, Rorty points out that they are indeed connected, since they have both been used as conceptual tools for justifying the existence of the Objective or the Really Real, which Rorty's anti-absolutist, anti-metaphysical stance rejects. In this paper, the religious definition of the transcendent is relevant.

names science, scientism, philosophy as materialist metaphysics, essentialist theories of Marxism and humanism as examples. In their extreme form, these God-surrogates supplied foundations for “our culture, our moral lives, our politics, our religious beliefs, upon ‘philosophical bases’” (1980: 112). These redemptive truths present the opportunity to “end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves” (2004: 475). The redemptive function of an authoritarian language is epistemically and existentially valuable. It aids users in making sense of their way of life. Epistemically, claims do not need to be maximally clear or maximally coherent in order for the redemptive function to work. Not all users of authoritarian languages can articulate every claim about religion or science that they espouse. It is in the existential sense that authoritarian languages are maximally clear and maximally coherent, in the sense that they provide a general, centralizing, and integrating sense of identification with an ideal, infallible authority. In short, an authoritarian language-user is likely to be invested in the redemptive function of her vocabulary. She is likely to frame her practical concerns and articulate her deepest convictions using this authoritarian language. She may also use this language in a militant way. Religious language is a good example of an authoritarian vocabulary that may serve a redemptive function and be used militantly.² Rorty is concerned about the ubiquity

² This analysis outlines how languages can turn militant when appealing to transcendent foundations. However, it does not follow that only having transcendent conditions suffices to turn languages militant. We can imagine many other languages – for instance, versions of fascism, communism or militant atheism – that do not require transcendent conditions to serve a redemptive purpose or generate an unwavering commitment from its users. Rorty would regard these languages as proof that we can manage to live with strong commitments without relying on transcendent conditions; he himself endorses a deep, pragmatic commitment to liberal democracy (see 1999). Since militant but non-transcendent languages require a different philosophical analysis, I concentrate on what we can glean from Rorty’s unique critique of authoritarian languages in this paper.

of religious language-use in American politics. As we shall see, his approach to the problem of religion’s linguistic authoritarianism is political, not metaphysical or epistemological.

2.3. The Conversation-Stopper Model of Religious Language

Religious language demonstrates the three features of authoritarianism stated in the previous section. First, religious language uses transcendent claims – claims issued by an infallible God and/or the authority and coherence of a religious framework – to back up its beliefs and practices. These transcendent claims are clear and reasonable within the language game of religion. If a claim fails to be seen as self-evident or reasonable - i.e., when a claim is introduced within a non-religious framework, or the claim extends beyond the realm of human reason (requiring the notion of faith) - the user *trusts*, *defers*, and *falls back* on the authority of religion for defense. In public discourse, transcendent claims are often congealed in well-known biblical passages that are used to campaign against controversial policies, ranging from abortion to same-sex marriage. For example, Rorty sees the debates on gay equality as a deadlock between those who think “gays and lesbians as contemptible and despicable” versus those “who quote Leviticus 18:22 as contemptible and despicable.” As Rorty points out, “religious reasons are pretty much the *only* reasons brought forward in favor of treating [gays and lesbians] with contempt” (2010, 458). Second, religious language may dominate the moral conceptions of its users, crippling the ability to think beyond religious considerations. By virtue of its redemptive function, a user may elevate religious language as the most important vocabulary to consider in all spheres of life. Religious concerns can override the claims of competing languages in the moral, legal, and political domains in this case. Take for instance the slogan “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” which became popular following the

Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court's case ruling in *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health* (2003). Stuart Rosenbaum rightly argues that people who opposed gay marriage deferred to this religious slogan as their final decision-making authority (2004, 395). Moreover, religious language-use is morally and socially enforced. Rorty states that "Catholic bishops, the Mormon General Authorities, the televangelists, and all the other religious professionals who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout" are responsible for this enforcement (2010, 456). He points out how the clerical hierarchy authorizes "godly" courses of action and that failure to follow these injunctions may lead to negative consequences for members of a religious group. Believers may be intimidated to compliance in their fear of being ostracized by their community; e.g., members of Christian evangelical groups in the United States today have experienced backlash for supporting same-sex marriage or criticizing Donald Trump (See Green 2017; Dias 2018).³ Third, religious language often conflicts with the language of inclusive politics. Rorty laments that the "belief in post-mortem rewards and punishments meted out by a non-human person" plays a substantial role in the political deliberation of believers, and that most of the time the transcendent serves as the most significant "basis of conduct in this mortal life" (Auxier and Hahn 2010, 547). Religious reasoning makes considering the rights and desires whom religious people see as deviant (such as homosexuals, ex-offenders, or atheists) harder to do. The quality of non-conformist lives in liberal democratic societies is sacrificed in favour of heeding the moral demands of a deity. Pessimistic about the use

of religious language in the public sphere, Rorty proposes that the language of religion should be privatized (see 1989, 1999, 2010). If the goal is to make better decisions for everyone, then the transcendent conditions set by religion need "to opt out of this game" (2005, 37).

In sum, Rorty argues that religious language is incompatible with democratic practice, in the sense that its users prioritize their accountability to a divine being over the everyday concerns of their fellow citizens. Put in simplistic terms, there is something worrying when a person ultimately acts or fails to act because of the injunction "God said so, and so it is." Note that the project of fostering a healthy liberal democracy takes priority over all other considerations for Rorty. He thinks that liberalism stands for Western social thought's "last conceptual revolution" (1989, 63). In promoting happiness and social cohesion, Rorty thinks that "just ordinary liberal democracy is all the ideology anybody needs" (Mendieta 2005, 60). For Rorty, our challenge in the modern world is to sustain and advance our democratic achievements of freedom, security, human rights, and civil liberties. But it is one thing to say that Rorty is against the use of religious language in democratic politics; it is another to imagine that this even at all is possible. Against Rorty's faith in the secularization thesis, Stout points out that public religiosity is alive in regions as diverse as Africa, Lebanon, and Poland, and that religions wield great political force in India and the United States, the world's biggest democracies. Nancy Frankenberry adds that the USA is "the most glaring example of the easy compatibility of modernity and religiosity" (2007, 282). She notes that in 2004, *The Gallup Poll* revealed that 84% of adults call themselves Christian in the United States; 82% regard Jesus as the Son of God, and 79% believe in the Virgin Birth. Around 50% maintain the belief that human life was created about ten thousand years ago, 1/3 are biblical literalists, and 81% think that God exists (2007, 282). As a rejoinder to these criticisms, Rorty admits that a secularist political agenda remains infeasible, given the

³ Green summarizes: "Donald Trump has divided conservative Christian communities. Most white Christians support Trump, or at least voted for him. Some who have spoken out against his presidency or his policies, though, have encountered backlash. For a small group of people working in Christian ministry, music, and non-profit advocacy, the consequences have been tangible: They've faced pressure from their employers, seen funds withdrawn from their mission work, or lost performing gigs because of their political beliefs" (2017).

religious culture of the United States. However, he regards this only as a short-term compromise “for the next couple of centuries, at least,” since there is something to be won in pursuing “a long-term, militantly secularist, *philosophical agenda*” (Auxier and Hahn 2010, 549). Overall, Rorty stands by his argument that politics works better when we take metaphysical propositions of religion (or philosophy) for granted in the process of deliberating law and social policy.

Notice that in his analysis, Rorty gets the most riled up when religious language meddles with democratic politics. Religious language hinders public discourse by issuing transcendent claims that terminate the exchange of reasons for its users. But let's examine this problem differently: what about cases where religious language acts as a political ally and works to bolster public discourse? Counterintuitively, I argue that when religion and politics are on friendly terms, we *ought* to become more suspicious. When the authoritarianism of a religious language reconciles itself with political power, it may signal that a subtle and more pernicious danger is at hand. The religious language-use of militant Christian leaders in the Philippines exemplifies one such case. I expand and complicate Rorty's conversation-stopper model using this alternative case in the next section.

3. Religious Language and the Philippine Drug War

3.1. Language and Philippine Politics

I want to begin by justifying my interest in examining religious language-use in the current Philippine context. Broadly put, changes in language-use accompany shifts in political climates. At times, they communicate a country's national optimism. We can take Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as one such example; Mark Ferrara describes Obama's rhetoric of hope as “a form of political discourse characterized by a forward-looking vision of social progress brought about by collective effort and adherence to shared values (including discipline, temperance, a strong work ethic,

self-reliance and service to the community)” (2013). At other times, shifts in language-use signal impending social threats and elucidate the reasons behind a country's sinister political turns. Viktor Klemperer (1957/2013) and Lynne Tirrell (2012) have shown that changes in the German and Kinyarwanda language preceded and even engendered the rise of National Socialism and the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis. The Philippines today is undergoing a political shift, prompting us to be attentive to the changes in its linguistic landscape. As Nicole Curato puts it, its democracy seems to be flirting with fantasies of authoritarian populism (2017a). Philippine studies scholars note that Rodrigo Duterte's brutal and violent presidency marks this populist transition (see essays in Curato 2017b). What has happened so far is unprecedented in the history of Philippine democracy. Since Duterte assumed office in 2016, at least 33 people have been killed daily; the body count today is approximately 27, 800, inclusive of vigilante-style executions and police operation killings (Talabong 2018). This 2-year casualty count is over seven times the amount of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances in the 22-year period of Martial Law under the late President Ferdinand Marcos. Despite the violence, Duterte remains popular. His administration has recently set a new record: a whopping +72 net satisfaction score for general performance in March 2019, the highest rating for any administration in the Philippines since 1989 (SWS).⁴

Emerging research reflects shifts in language-use under Duterte's rule. Central to these changes is the president's employment of strong and provocative “gutter” language, touted as an effective “masa” (common people) communication strategy. The unique vocabulary of *Dutertismo*, as Randolph David puts it, “is

⁴ The 1st Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey (March 28-31, 2019) found 81% of adult Filipinos satisfied, 10% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 9% dissatisfied with the general performance of the current National Administration, for a new record-high net satisfaction rating of +72 (% *satisfied* minus % *dissatisfied*), classified by SWS as *excellent*.

pure theatre—a sensual experience rather than a rational application of ideas to society's problems" (2016; see also Curato 2017b). Sharmila Parmanand's work examines the dangers behind Duterte's flagrant use of sexist language. Not only does his "macho" language reinforce misogyny, but it also "builds support for authoritarian projects and stigmatises criticism against his administration" (2018, 13). In this section of the paper, I focus on the use of religious language in contemporary Philippine democracy. It must be clear from the start that the Philippines is no stranger to co-opting religious language to justify its politics in overt and ingenious ways. For instance, bible verses regularly pepper the political speeches of World-boxing-champion-cum-Senator Manny Pacquiao, with topics ranging from his opposition to homosexuality to his support of Duterte's regime (Yap 2018). Duterte has used messianic discourse effectively to frame his political relevance; before the 2016 elections, he proclaimed that "if only to save this country, I can run for president" (Curato 2017a, 149). Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano said in the recent UN General Assembly that the Philippine government is "on track in salvaging our deteriorating country from becoming a narco-state" (Cepeda 2018). That Cayetano used the religiously laden word "salvaging" is significant. The word "salvage" has a chilling resonance to the post-Martial Law Filipino consciousness. Ordinarily, to salvage means to rescue; in the Philippines, it means to kill. Jose Lacaba, a Filipino journalist, explains: "To salvage is to save things from a wreckage, but the visual similarity of the word to the Tagalog *salbahe* (naughty, abusive), which is itself derived from the Spanish *salvaje* (savage), inevitably led to the present denotation of *salvaging* as extrajudicial or summary execution of both criminal and subversive elements" (1995).

Based on these examples, my hunch is that unique linguistic inflections and shifts, especially those with religious undertones to them, signal something unusual or interesting in Philippine politics. We can map these changes by examining forms of communication, from

public speeches to everyday conversations between Filipinos. My paper in particular concentrates on how militant Christian leaders are using religious language to justify Duterte's politics. I rely on Jayeel Cornelio's and Erron Medina's commendable sociological research on the religious responses to the Philippine drug war (2019). The empirical work reveals that militant Christian leaders are using the transcendent claims of religious language to justify the violence and brutality of Duterte's politics. As I will show later on, this reconciliatory use of religious language creates pernicious harm in public discourse – a harm that is more insidious and complex than the overt, conversation-stopping kind that Rorty describes in his analysis.

3.2. Militant Christian Groups

Christian groups in the Philippines are militant and global (Cornelio).⁵ They are militant in four senses. Militant in an intellectual sense, these groups share a literalist view of the Bible. Using scripture as their primary basis of justification, they adopt a fundamentalist outlook towards controversial social issues such as divorce, same-sex marriage, and abortion. These groups are also militant a spiritual sense: *Iglesia ni Cristo*, *Ang Dating Daan*, and the *Kingdom of Jesus Christ* follow a Restorationist theology, a kind of theology that frames their movements as the authentic form of Christianity. Third, these groups are militant politically: *Jesus is Lord* has fielded political candidates and members of *Iglesia ni Cristo* vote as an entire block. Scoring an easy one million votes is a big deal, and many politicians court the leaders of Christian groups to secure their electoral support. Finally, these Christian groups are militant in an

⁵ In terms of religion, Catholics constitute 80% of the Philippine population. 10% are Evangelicals and Protestants of different denominations and 5% are Muslims. Indigenous churches like *Iglesia ni Cristo* and the Philippine Independent Church constitute 3%. The rest belong to Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, and Buddhism. Ethnic groups also practice indigenous spirituality, collectively referred to as the *lumad* (Cornelio and Medina 2019; Cornelio).

institutional sense. They follow a top-down hierarchy in general, i.e., whatever leaders declare as the moral course of action, their followers are expected to follow to the letter. Christian groups are also global in their scope and ambition (Cornelio). They are aggressive in converting members into their flock from within and outside the Philippines (note that there were 2.3 million overseas Filipino workers in 2018). David thinks that the missionizing zeal of Evangelical churches is the greatest challenge to the Philippine Catholic Church (2013).

In comparison to the younger and smaller Christian groups, the Catholic Church is a giant civil society player in the democratic life of the Philippines. It played an important role in galvanizing Filipinos to join the 1986 EDSA Revolution, which toppled the Marcos dictatorship. Today, it has significant influence and eight times more members than all other Christian groups combined. But it would be a mistake to think that the mandate of the Catholic Church over its 74 million followers is as overarching compared to the social power that militant Christian groups have over its most devout members. David Buckley points out that the Catholic Church has been struggling to turn its social capital into a unified voice in politics (2014). It has come under fire today for three reasons: first, it is facing credibility issues due to corruption, sexual misconduct, and political collusion; second, Duterte has been attacking the Catholic Church in response to its ongoing critique of his regime; and third, many Filipinos are unhappy with the Church's involvement in politics, calling for the separation between Church and State (Dionisio 2014; Buckley 2014; Cornelio). The weakened authority of the Catholic Church has opened the doors for various Christian groups to stake their evangelizing claim, as the research by Cornelio shows. His team recently conducted interviews in Payatas, a poor urban community in Metro Manila, where 65 individuals were killed during the anti-drug operations in 2017. They interviewed religious leaders from different groups and denominations in Payatas and nearby areas, which includes Catholic priests, Evangelical pastors, a

Charismatic leader, a Baptist preacher, and lay leaders from an Evangelical church and a Basic Ecclesial Community.

Cornelio's work shows that religious language is employed at the urban grassroots of Philippine society. The observations yielded by their ethnographic research are interesting in light of our discussion about the authoritarian power of religious language. I briefly outline three interconnected cases of religious language-use, quoted verbatim from "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines" (Cornelio). First, some militant Christian leaders interpret Duterte's government as part of God's divine judgment. According to Julius, a Baptist Pastor, "God needed to appoint Duterte in order to get Filipinos to repent." Ross, a pastor of a prominent mega-church with community outreaches to Payatas, says something similar: "God gave us government... to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. They have swords and guns for a reason." Second, militant Christian leaders frame the war on drugs as a spiritual problem. Nick, an Evangelical Pastor, thinks that his primary task is to remind people to return to "how God has designed them." When drug users realize what God's plans are for them, he believes that they will "flee from their vices like substance abuse." The individual's obligation is to realize an authentic purpose, a task that involves the spiritual guidance of the (right kind of) Church. Third, militant Christian leaders describe drug users as anomalies in an already just society. As Pastor Nick says: "it is God's design that there is law and order in society. For example, we prohibit jaywalking because we don't want anyone to die because of accidents. If you are law-abiding, you will be safe from any of these accidents. And you have to realize that the law of the land has God's anointing. There is no law on earth meant to harm people. You look for one that hurts people. You will not find any. Never."

What is interesting in the Philippine-Payatas case is that transcendent claims are not used to combat a controversial social policy or defend a religious view from more secular interests, the problems that Rorty's religion as a conversation-stopper model militates against. Rather, transcendent claims are used to justify and empower state-

sponsored violence and murder. If we go by the totalizing picture that leaders of militant Christian groups paint of the Drug War, then Duterte's regime is effectively addressing the social, political, moral and spiritual needs of society by weeding out its undesirables. So what kind of pernicious harm is generated by this unholy alliance of politics and religious language? To highlight the insidious power of religious language, I propose framing the word "sinner" - a regular trope in religious language - as an emotive term in the Philippine Drug War. I argue that its emotive power can influence and take the need for other kinds of reasoning out of the equation, at least for the militant religious leaders and the followers that hang by their every word.

3.3. Victim or Sinner? Emotive Terms

Emotive terms are conceptually loaded and emotionally charged words. They come pre-coded with cognitively forceful and emotionally salient content. According to Fabrizio Macagno, emotively powerful words can "modify our judgment, arouse our emotions, and influence our decisions" (2014, 103). He credits Charles Leslie Stevenson for giving us a clear philosophical account of ethical or emotive language:

He [Stevenson] noticed there are words that do not simply describe a possible fragment of reality. For example, "terrorist" is not used simply to refer to a person who commits specific actions with a specific intent. Words such as "torture" or "freedom" carry with them something more than a simple description of a state of affairs or mere conceptual content (Stevenson, 1944, p. 210). These words have a "magnetic" effect (Stevenson, 1937, p. 16), an imperative force, a tendency to influence the interlocutor's decisions (Stevenson, 1937, p. 18-19; see also Weaver, 1985). They are strictly bound to moral values leading to value judgments and potentially triggering specific emotions. For this reason, they have an emotive dimension (2014, 103-104).

Put in a more insidious manner, emotive terms work by suggestion. They can operate by sleight of hand in a speech act by triggering particular reasoning mechanisms and moral responses ("a terrorist is a bad person"; "we don't

torture around here"; "freedom of speech is my right"). As Macagno puts it, they can supply the hearer with "a pre-packaged suggested evaluation of an entity or event" (2014, 104). When they are used effectively, emotive terms can act as an instrument of control and persuasion. They can shut down criticism and distract listeners from the real sources of a particular problem. Macagno suggests that emotive words are heavily used in political rhetoric to influence and sway public opinion. He points out that some of the best examples of emotive words "can be found in the public debates, speeches, and declarations of the 2013 Italian general elections" (2014, 105). Despite appearing neutral, trivial, or harmless, emotive terms can function as a covert mechanism of manipulation in public discourse.

How can we apply an emotive interpretation on the word "sinner" in the Philippine Drug War? It helps to go back on how "sin" is used in traditional religion. Rorty gives a description of what having a conception of sin is like, independent of its social function:

To have a sense of Sin, it is not enough to be appalled by the way human beings treat each other, and by your own capacity for malice. You have to believe that there is a Being before whom we humans should humble ourselves. This Being issues commands which, even if they seem arbitrary and unlikely to increase human happiness, must be obeyed. When trying to acquire a sense of Sin, it helps a lot if you can manage to think of a specific sexual or dietary practice as forbidden, even though it does not seem to be doing anybody any harm. It also helps to anguish about whether you are calling this Being by the name He or She prefers (1996, 7-8).

Now let's think of sin as both a social and religious act. A sin is a transgression committed simultaneously against a person (or persons, or a community of persons) as well as the divine law. Committing a sin indicates accountability not only to the person wronged but also to a higher being that governs and maintains the moral and spiritual order. Sinning requires choice and moral agency; in the Christian tradition, man's original sin is his disobedience. A sinner is bound to the guilt and responsibility that accompanies the act forbidden by God, the final and ultimate authority. Since sinners are inherently at fault, they are bound to the

consequences of their actions. They also deserve punishment. Absolution from sin involves both repentance from the sinner as well as forgiveness from the being or beings wronged. Forgiveness often requires divine intervention or the invocation of grace. If unrepented for and unforgiven, a deadly sin has grave costs in the afterlife; in Christian doctrine, the torment of hell enforces divine justice in its final form. Salvation is ultimately God's call. This short description is not in any way exhaustive, but it gives us a pretty good idea of how the concept of sin works in a socio-religious framework. I will show how some descriptive elements of the term "sinner" are salient in the reasoning of militant Christian leaders, which may help explain their complicity and even active support for the Philippine Drug War.

Religious leaders respond differently depending on how they conceptualize the drug user:

Our argument is that the way a religious community responds to the War on Drugs is heavily informed by how it understands the nature of the drug addict. If the person is seen as *a victim of larger social forces* such as poverty, the intervention of the church is more political and legal. But if the drug addict is primarily characterized as *a sinful being*, the response of the church is largely concerned with the person's spiritual salvation. Many churches resort to this latter discourse, which, in our view, hints at an implicit religious underpinning for the popular support for the War on Drugs (Cornelio and Medina 2019; emphasis mine).

The moral elements of fault and responsibility are crucial analytical tools here. If drug users are framed as victims, then the view that they are not entirely to blame for their addiction remains salient in public discourse. The structural and material conditions of extreme poverty, unemployment, social inequality, and corruption in the Philippines are recognized as partially responsible for creating and sustaining a widespread culture of drug use. Note that being portrayed as a victim does not let a drug user off the hook; in Philippine criminal law, drug use is illegal and involvement in the drug trade carries heavy penalties even prior to Duterte's War on Drugs. What is important is that criminals could *simultaneously* be seen as victims in this

conceptual framework, deserving of both reprimand as well as help. The real and pressing danger is that drug peddlers and users reside in a complex social environment where drugs and crime are thriving, requiring a multilevel response from the government and civil society actors. Thus, combating narco-politics is not about targeting particular individuals but about addressing the social condition from multiple angles. A better strategy involves prosecuting criminals and at the same time providing the rehabilitation and legal assistance for those in need of them. It also involves keeping the door open for implementing harm reduction strategies and social reintegration models for drug users in the system. Members of the Catholic clergy who do not fall under the militant Christianity schema adopt this more comprehensive position.

The narco-politics story becomes brutally narrow when the drug user is conceptualized as a "sinner." Condensing the character of drug users as sinners can have what Stevenson calls an "imperative force" (1937, 18-19; cf. Macagno 2014, 104) on the reasoning mechanisms of militant Christians. Recall our discussion of the redemptive function of an authoritarian language in Rorty's work. An authoritarian language can have epistemic and existential power. It works to help its user understand and navigate her environment and her practical concerns. A militant Christian would naturally regard her religious language as her redemptive framework. If the concept of sin – centrally informed by its co-concepts of blame, retribution, and spiritual intervention – dominates her conception of the Drug War, then important ramifications enter the picture. As we have seen previously, militant Christian leaders are conditioning the response to the Philippine Drug War. They present it as a logical weapon of God's justice and Duterte's government as an institution mandated to execute it. According to the Baptist pastor Julius, Duterte was ordained by God to "teach the country a lesson." For these militant Christians, policies and institutions are already just and ethical, so that culpability rests *entirely* on persons who transgress religious and social law. Because the authority of the Philippine government is valid, punitive action is thus justified. The pernicious use of the emotive term "sinner"

fits coherently in this narrative. It provides transcendental justification (conceptual) and affective valence (emotional) to declare these deaths as called for by God. It suggests that there is nothing deeply wrong or horrific in killing these drug users, from a militant Christian perspective, because they deserve it. Since the concept of sin is “strictly bound to moral values leading to value judgments” (Macagno 2014, 104), its use in analyzing fault can also mobilize powerful reactions – e.g., self-righteous anger, blame, resentment, and condescension – against drug users, whom they regard as having repetitively rejected God in favor of their worldly addiction. This conceptual framing can also have, as Stevenson suggests, “a tendency to influence the interlocutor’s decisions” (1937, 18-19; cf. Macagno 2014, 104). In terms of practical consequences, some religious leaders have even taken steps to support the Drug War. For instance, the Evangelical pastor Nick actively works with the police and local community officials to identify and locate drug users. It is important to note that house visits from the Philippine National Police are often fatal in the drug war context, resulting in thousands of arrests and deaths without due process (Talabong 2018; Curato 2017b). While redemption remains available for the drug user according to militant Christian leaders, theological reasoning also informs the next steps: if a drug user manages not to get killed in the drug war, he needs to radically and unequivocally change his life. This process involves abandoning drug use, returning to God, listening to the Gospel, and converting into the Church (ideally where the militant religious leader preaches). The “sinner” discourse is the predominant approach taken by militant Christian leaders.

It is easy to see what is going on here. Applied in the Philippine context, the effect of the emotive term “sinner” is pernicious: in public discourse, its use deflects the issue away from all its social and material dimensions, such as extreme poverty, unemployment, and corruption. The distinction between the tropes of “victims” and “sinners” makes this point clear: seeing drug addicts as victims accommodates the reality of wider social injustices and requires moral, social, and legal perspectives for painting a more comprehensive approach to the culture of drug use.

By contrast, when drug users are primarily characterized as sinful, then a person’s culpability and the need for spiritual intervention become more prominent features in the reasoning process, debilitating the capacity to frame the problem differently. Convinced that drug users are solely responsible for their crime, the “sinner” trope licenses the view that they deserve the brutality of extrajudicial retribution.⁶ Of course, the word “victim” can also be used as an emotive term, but two things must be emphasized from the perspective of the Philippine Drug War. First, victimization is not an exclusively religious trope. A person can be a victim within a religious or secular framework. Victimization does not depend on transcendent conditions to exert its conceptual power and there is no accountability to divine law involved. Second, the word “victim” does not have the narrowing, enfeebling effect on the response to the Drug War. The harm that the emotive trope “sinner” brings is more insidious, as we have discussed in this paper. Note also that the idea of sin needs to operate within the schema of religious language for social uptake. Duterte himself seems to recognize its power; he admitted recently that the only sin he has ever committed in his life is the extrajudicial killings. Given the legal and political context of Duterte’s admission of state-sponsored violence, the word “crime” is more appropriate to describe his offence. But Duterte is deliberate in using the word; the term “sin” suggests that he is accountable to God, that God alone can judge him, that he deserves to be cross-examined in a religious tribunal, not a political one. We can interpret Duterte’s use of sin as a curious but unsurprising move, in light of his attempts to evade the clutches of the International Criminal Court (see Emasquel II 2018).⁷

⁶ I don’t think that this interpretation is exclusive to militant Christians. If many Filipino users of religious language frame their approach using the “sinner” trope, then it might help explain why 78% of Filipinos – many of whom profess to be deeply religious and morally conscientious people – support the drug war and the extrajudicial killings. I have been trying to make sense of this paradox since the beginning of Duterte’s regime (see Llanera 2016a, 2016b).

⁷ Note that the uptake of the word “sin”, i.e., Duterte sinned by killing evil-doers to save the country, differs

Without working too hard, Duterte's regime finds an easy and cooperative ally in the transcendent claims of militant Christian language.

4. *Can't We All Just Get Along? American Politics*

My analysis augments Rorty's case against the irresponsible employment of religious language in public discourse. In his writings, Rorty accentuates the conflict between religion and politics, framing religious language as a conversation-stopper. However, this model is too simple. It is insufficient for describing the messy and complex politics of religious language. As I argue in my analysis of the Philippine case, when religion and politics become happy bedfellows, we ought to be more alert about the pernicious harms their alliance brings into the conversation. I see no reason why Rorty would disagree with this conclusion since it adds another layer of justification as to why religious language ought to be distrusted in democratic politics. In closing, I remark on several key points.

The first point concerns the use of religious language. Should we treat all kinds of religious language as undesirable in the public sphere? Do they always hinder the work of critical thought in democratic practice, serving both as conversation-stoppers and purveyors of transcendently justified emotive terms? I do not think so, and even Rorty wobbles on this point. In "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration", Rorty admits that he was convinced by Wolterstorff's argument, i.e., that Wolterstorff should be free to declare that "his endorsement of redistributionist

from how it is considered in the victim vs. sinner framework of the drug war. Duterte's sin has a messianic and self-sacrificial angle that is absent in its other use in the same context. This example indicates that there are many ways to use emotive words and that the uptake will depend on many factors, such as the relationship between the descriptive content and the emotive dimension of the term, the local language, the speaker, the hearer, the intended and non-intended audience, as well as the dynamics of the social environment. This fascinating topic deserves a separate analysis. I plan to address emotive terms and the various and conflicting emotive uses of "sin" in the Philippine context more carefully in future work.

social legislation is a result of his belief that God, in such passages as Psalm 72, has commanded that the cause of the poor should be defended." Rorty explains why he changed his mind: "I can think of no law or custom that would hinder him from doing so that would not hinder me from citing passages in John Stuart Mill in justification of the same legislation" (2003, 142-143). In my reading, Rorty finds Wolterstorff's position acceptable since it is morally uncontroversial and it fits his vision of a good and healthy liberal democracy. But there's a philosophical distinction to be made here: the use of J.S. Mill in defending redistributionist social legislation does not depend on transcendent conditions. The persuasiveness of Mill's view is based on the strength of his utilitarian argument and not on the authority of a divine tradition. However, what is important for Rorty is that they work to support the same cause. In short, it seems that there is no problem when religious language complements non-transcendent arguments from a different language game and supports policies that are morally good and desirable in democratic societies. This position takes us back to Rorty's ambivalence about religious language, as I pointed out in the introduction.

Another worry I have is that silencing religious language means we stand to lose the good that comes from its positive practice, i.e., in terms of combating injustices, inspiring compassion, building solidarity, and the like. Democracies need the elevated podiums for the likes of Martin Luther King, Pope Francis, and Desmond Tutu to enrich and enlarge the self-awareness of the people who follow and admire them. Without their influence, religious people would be disempowered from mobilizing the spiritual inspiration from their religious faith to promote love, freedom, and community-building. This loss of motivation, notwithstanding that religion fuels it, is not a favourable outcome in a democracy buttressed by shared values. But Rorty stakes his claim that banning religion in politics is the right way to go, based on his interpretation of history:

So we secularists have come to think that the best society would be one in which political action conducted in the name of religious belief is treated as a ladder up which our ancestors climbed, but one

that now should be thrown away. We grant that ecclesiastical organizations have sometimes been on the right side, but we think that the occasional Gustavo Gutiérrez or Martin Luther King does not compensate for the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells. History suggests to us that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good (2003).

But is it so easy to weigh the good and the bad in these examples? I do not think so. Doing so is a disservice to Gutiérrez and King, whose legacies in liberation theology and the American Civil Rights movement are monumental and remain relevant today. Rorty's contentious view of history and religion naturally remains up for debate.

Finally, I'd like to mention the implication of my analysis on contemporary American politics. Rorty's conversation-stopper model does not accurately capture the fraught relationship between religion and politics in the United States, a country where religious language-use is copious in government and the law.⁸ But more than that, it is important to underscore that the insidious co-mingling of militant Christianity and American politics is being set up by current administration. President Trump is getting support from right-wing Evangelical Christians, with Jerry Falwell, Jr., having served as Trump's former "spiritual adviser." Trump hosted a dinner at the White House for his Evangelical supporters from the South (Martin 2018). He was also the first president to speak at the Values Voter Summit, an event hosted every year by the Family Research Council. Southern Poverty Law Center lists the Family Research Council as a right-wing hate group, known for supporting conversion-therapy for LGBT people (Bort 2018). If we take these groups as militant in the way that Christian groups in the Philippines are, then we ought to be concerned about what a stronger voice for them in American politics will bring to the table. The clearest indication of Trump's support is his executive order that aims to ease the restrictions of the Johnson Amendment, signed May 4, 2017. The Johnson amendment is a tax code provision that

prohibits non-profit organizations, which includes churches, universities, and charitable foundations, from participating in political campaigns. Trump argues that in order to defend the freedom of religion and speech, more religious language should be heard in the public domain. If this comes to pass, then Americans should be more cautious and sensitive to the pernicious harms that accompany the greater proliferation of religious language-use and its emotive terms.⁹

References

- Auxier, Randall and Lewis Edwin Hahn, eds. 2010. *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*. Chicago, Ill.: Open Court.
- Barthold, Lauren Swayne. 2012. "Rorty, Religion and the Public-Private Distinction." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38, no. 8 (2012), 861-878.
- Bloomfield, Paul. 2017. "Why are Zygotes People?" (March 27, 2017). *3 Quarks Daily*. <https://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2017/03/why-are-zygotes-people.html>
- Bort, Ryan. 2018. "Why Trump Will Never Lose Evangelical Support" (August 29, 2018). *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-evangelicals-716947/>
- Buckley, David. 2014. "Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma: Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines." *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62, nos. 3-4, 313-339.
- Cepeda, Mara. 2018. "PH 'salvaging' self through drug war, Cayetano tells U.N." (September 30 2018). *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/213170-cayetano-speech-united-nations-general-assembly-2018-philippines-drug-war>
- Cornelio, Jayeel and Medina, Erron. 2019. "Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines." *Politics, Religion & Ideology*.

⁸ For instance, the "right to life" in the 2007 anti-abortion bill called the "Right to Life Act" can arguably function as an emotive religious phrase in legislation (for more on this, see Bloomfield 2017).

⁹ This paper was presented at the University of Connecticut Brown Bag (October 2018) and at the UConn Humanities Institute - Social Epistemology Workshop (November 2018). I thank the fabulous UConn crew on both occasions for helping me develop and refine my hunches. In particular, I am grateful to Teresa Allen, Heather Battaly, Don Baxter, Paul Bloomfield, Tom Bontly, Charlie Crerar, Kathy Fazekas, Mitch Green, Robin Jenkins, Drew Johnson, Nathan Kellen, Junyeol Kim, Yuhan Liang, Mandy Long, Michael Lynch, Steve Nuñez, Jordan Ochs, Lionel Shapiro, Sandra Sirota, Nick Smith, Taylor Tate, and Lynne Tirrell for their questions, recommendations, and comments.

- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21567689.2019.1617135>
- Cornelio, Jayeel. Forthcoming. The Philippines. *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity: Christianity in East and South-East Asia*, ed. K. Ross, T. Johnson, & F. Alvarez. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Curato, Nicole. 2017. "Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1, 142-153. 2017a.
- Curato, Nicole, ed. 2017b. *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*. Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Curtis, William M. 2015. *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue*. Cambridge University Press.
- David, Randolph. 2013. "Is the Catholic Church in Crisis?" (April 13, 2013). Public Lives, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. <http://opinion.inquirer.net/50645/is-the-catholic-church-in-crisis>
- David, Randolph. 2016. "Dutertismo" (May 1 2016). Public Lives, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/94530/dutertismo>
- Dias, Elizabeth. 2018. "'God Is Going to Have to Forgive Me': Young Evangelicals Speak Out" (Nov 1). *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/us/young-evangelicals-politics-midterms.html>
- Dionisio, Eleanor. 2014. "Catholic Partisanship in the 2013 Elections: 'Churchifying' Democracy or Democratizing the Church?" *Philippine Sociological Review* 62, 11-40.
- Emasquel II, Paterno. 2018. "Repent, bishop says after Duterte admits to EJKs" (September 28 2018). *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/213012-bishop-david-says-duterte-should-repent-extrajudicial-killings>
- Ferrara, Mark. 2013. *Barack Obama and the Rhetoric of Hope*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland.
- Frankenberry, Nancy. 2017. "Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental." In *Weakening philosophy: essays in honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala, 273-296. Montréal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Frankenberry, Nancy. 2014. "The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 35, no. 3, 195-210.
- Green, Emma. 2017. "These Conservative Christians Are Opposed to Trump—and Suffering the Consequences" (February 11, 2017). *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/conservative-christians-disagreement-trump/516132/>
- Klemperer, Victor. 2013. *Language of the Third Reich: LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii ; a Philologist's Notebook*. Edited by Martin Brady. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lacaba, Jose. 1995. "The FM Disease" (August 3 1995). Carabeef Lengua, *Manila Times*.
- Llanera, Tracy. 2016a. "Echoes of Trump: A Terrifying Father Figure in the Philippines" (October 21, 2016). *The Independent*. <https://independent.org/2016/10/echoes-of-trump-a-terrifying-father-figure-in-the-philippines/>
- Llanera, Tracy. 2016b. "Unholy War on Drugs Brings Cardboard Justice to the Philippines" (October 4, 2016). *The Independent*. <https://independent.org/2016/10/unholy-war-on-drugs-brings-cardboard-justice-to-the-philippines/>
- Llanera, Tracy. 2017. "Richard Rorty and the Concept of Redemption." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 82, no. 2, 103-118.
- Macagno, Fabrizio. 2014. "Manipulating Emotions: Value-Based Reasoning and Emotive Language." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 51, no. 2, 103-122.
- Martin, Rachel. 2018. "Trump Hosts White House Dinner for Evangelical Supporters" (August 29, 2018). *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/29/642871570/trump-hosts-white-house-dinner-for-evangelical-supporters>
- Mendieta, Eduardo, ed. 2005. *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mueller, Martin. 2017. "From Irony to Robust Serenity – Pragmatic Politics of Religion after Rorty." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14, no. 3, 334-349.
- Parmanand, Sharmila. 2018. "When Populism Meets Sexism: Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines' new "strong" man." *Gates Cambridge, The Scholar* 15, 13.
- Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1992. *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. "Religion as Conversation-stopper" (1994). In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168-174. New York: Penguin.
- Rorty, Richard. 1995. "Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 1, 197-201.
- Rorty, Richard. 1996. "Something to Steer by." Review of Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 1995. *London Review of Books* 18, no. 12, 7-8.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin.
- Rorty, Richard. 2005. *The Future of Religion* with Gianni Vattimo. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Rorty, Richard. 2010. "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises." In *The Rorty Reader*, edited by Richard Bernstein and Christopher Voparil, 389-406. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010. "Religion in the Public Square." In *The Rorty Reader*, edited by Richard Bernstein and Christopher Voparil, 456-562. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010. "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre." In *The Rorty Reader*, edited by Richard Bernstein and Christopher Voparil, 473-488. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010. "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality." In *The Rorty Reader*, edited by Richard Bernstein and Christopher Voparil, 351-365. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rorty, Richard. 2010. *The Rorty Reader*, eds. Christopher Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rosenbaum, Stuart. 2009. "Must Religion be a Conversation-Stopper?" *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4, 393-409.
- Smith, Nicholas. 2005. "Rorty on Religion and Hope." *Inquiry* 48, no. 1, 76-98.
- Social Weather Stations (SWS). 201. "1st Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey" (March 28-31, 2019). <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20190503210103>
- Stout, Jeffrey. 2004. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stevenson, Charles. 1937. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms." *Mind* 46, 14-31.
- Stevenson, Charles. 1944. *Ethics and Language*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Talabong, Rambo. 2018. "At least 33 killed daily in the Philippines since Duterte assumed office" (Jun 15 2018). *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/204949-pnp-number-deaths-daily-duterte-administration>
- Tirrell, Lynne. 2012. "Genocidal Language Games." In *Speech and Harm: Controversies over Free Speech*, ed. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, 174-221. Oxford University Press.
- Weaver, Richard. 1985. *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1997a. "The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues." In *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, ed. Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 67-120. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1997b. "Why We should reject what Liberalism tells us about speaking and acting in Public for Religious Reasons." In *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman, 162-181. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2003. "An Engagement with Rorty." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003), 129-139.
- Yap, DJ. 2018. "Pacquiao cites Bible: Gov't can kill criminals" (August 8, 2018). *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1018827/pacquiao-cites-bible-govt-can-kill-criminals>

WHY WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT “HOME”:

THINKING ABOUT RORTY’S COSMOPOLITANISM

Marianne Janack

Hamilton College

mjanack@hamilton.edu

ABSTRACT: This paper weighs the complex associations surrounding the concept of “home,” a site of both nostalgia for what is no longer and a desire for rootedness in the present. Where once an Enlightenment ideal of “extending the embrace of ‘us’” undergirded Western liberalism, such an ideal, according to the perspective presented in the paper, has come to be challenged by “the homeland” or a nation state. The paper argues that Rorty’s particular views on the notion of home are contradictory in that he embraces both an ethnocentrism that understands that we cannot truly escape our national or regional values and a cosmopolitanism that demands a rootless interest in expansive community free from geographical borders. The paper goes on to suggest that Rorty would embrace the migrant and refugee populations central to discussion of national borders today, yet makes the point that fully embracing those populations requires us to move beyond an interest in welcoming others toward a greater understanding regarding the motivations behind leaving homes and homelands for security in foreign lands.

Keywords: liberalism, refugees, cosmopolitanism, homeland, identity

The name ‘Homeland Security’ makes my skin crawl. It was established as a US government agency in November 2002 by then-President George W. Bush, mostly in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001. The website for the agency says that its mission is “to secure the nation from the many threats *we face*” (with my emphasis); under the banner, there is a picture of a man dressed in a large puffy orange coat, holding a gun, with what one can see is an American flag fluttering behind him. Next to his picture, and under the title MISSION, the website has this: “With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, *our* homeland, and *our* values” (Department of Homeland Security 2017 emphasis added). The way that connection is presumed and enacted in this mission statement—the use of “us” and “we” to refer to those for whom the homeland is a homeland—may seem benign. But this sense of a

homeland that must be protected from outsiders and from contamination has a troubling history.

I think of movies I saw in the 1980s, including the series “Heimat”, which followed a German family from 1919 to 1982, through World Wars, economic booms, and the legacy of German guilt and memory. “Heimat”—the idea of a native place and a cultural identity—like “homeland” rings with the sounds of marching jackboots, guns, and artillery to me.

And, as we know, it has, more often than not, been accompanied by purges, pogroms, and genocides—by racialized stories of “real” Germans, Americans, Turks. The invocation of a threat that must be fended off to save the Homeland, to preserve the nation, has a troubling connection to forced expulsions and to militaristic poses.

The idea of a ‘homeland’ is troublesome; is the idea of a home just as troublesome? The idea of ‘home’ is an idea of a place where one belongs, a special place, and it has often been thought to be in tension with the cosmopolitan aspirations of liberal theory. In Rorty’s work,¹ we find conflicting opinions about the idea of a home—he recognizes the importance of ethnocentrism (or, at least, anti-anti-ethnocentrism), but he also extols cosmopolitanism; his liberalism implies that nationalism is objectionable, so the idea of a homeland would seem to be suspect too. The ideals of the Enlightenment, which he clearly embraces, seem to require that we abandon the parochial ideas of home and homeland, if those go together.

Susan Matt, in her book *Homesickness: An American History* (2011), argues that the idea of home was both romanticized and reviled in stories of American restlessness. Some groups were thought to be more prone to homesickness because they were thought to be more attached to their home and native land. But this

¹ See, for instance, Rorty’s claim in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) that the loss of faith in universalism and Enlightenment ideals is primarily due to an inability to imagine that things could get much better. See especially p. 229-42. This seems to me to be the diagnosis of a relatively trivial challenge, where we, in fact, need a more robust analysis of the situation, as I suggest in this article.

was not generally seen as a virtue, but rather as something to be overcome—the process of becoming an adult, moving on, taking jobs in new, unfamiliar places, and fighting for one's country all required a willingness to leave home behind. Dominant ideas of identity and the pursuit of a worthwhile life, tied to Enlightenment ideals of rationality, happiness, and the subject, encouraged a sense of homelessness, or at least a willingness to leave one's home or homeland without too much fuss.

'Homesickness' or 'nostalgia' was identified as a form of illness in the late seventeenth century, and was initially thought to disproportionately afflict the Swiss—it was, in fact, sometimes referred to as "the Swiss disease" as late as the nineteenth century. The British were thought to be less susceptible to it because of their travelling and empire building (Matt, 26). During the American civil war, New Englanders were thought to be more susceptible to it than (white) soldiers from other parts of the country. Doctors and army commanders of the time claimed that soldiers who came from the Eastern states accounted for a large number of cases of "nostalgia" (Matt, 96); their "love of home and kindred was a characteristic trait," according to a report in the *New York Journal of Medicine* (Matt, 96). Interestingly, African Americans were also thought to be more strongly attached to home and "the localities to which [they were] accustomed" which, it was thought, sometimes undermined their willingness to leave the parts of the country where they had been enslaved (Matt, 96).

During the American Revolutionary War homesickness kept many soldiers from re-enlisting in the Continental army, and was thought to be the source of the high desertion rates among the revolutionaries. Those who were homesick were "horribly hissed, groaned at, and pelted" (Matt, 32), and George Washington told his soldiers that acting on homesickness was dishonorable and ignoble (Matt, 33). Commanders of the Continental army thought of homesickness as an emotion that issued from "a failure of will, character, and civic commitment" (Matt, 33). However, as Matt

argues, during this war "[h]ome was not yet the new [American] nation; it was the local neighborhood or, at best, the colony" (Matt, 32). In the early years of the American republic—and perhaps into the twentieth century—the senses of 'home' were ambiguous: did it refer to the neighborhood? The colony? The nation? Or perhaps a set of political allegiances, an idea? Whatever it was, it seemed to be in tension with the ideals of universalism and an attachment to home was a handicap in the modern world. It was a mark of provincialism. "The lover of home is provincial, plodding, and timid," Linus Kline wrote in 1898 in an essay about the migratory impulse and the love of home. "The migrant", though, "is cosmopolitan, he has manifold interests and finds profitable objects and kindred spirits in a variety of situations. He may be found in the commercial, speculative, daring, progressive, macroscopic interests of the world" (Kline, quoted in Matt, 123).

Groups that were attached to home were usually thought to be more "primitive"; the ideals of the Enlightenment encouraged subjects not to think of themselves as belonging to a particular place, but rather to no place, or every place—as citizens of the world. If one was able to let go of one's home—whether that was the place where one was born, or lived, or the nation or culture from which one came—one was more modern, more advanced, and more fit for the pursuit of empire and the industrial jobs that required leaving home, moving on. Rootlessness was thought to be an American virtue, not a moral hazard. And in the late nineteenth century, it was seen as a form of masculinity: "Those promoting American imperialism embraced a new model of masculinity which required men to distance themselves from home. ... by the end of the nineteenth century, many national leaders suggested that home life was instead emasculating" (Matt, 120).

Rorty's valorization of the Enlightenment ideals that underwrite liberalism, and his emphasis on the (ironically) ethnocentric commitment, characteristic of Western liberal democracies, to expanding the embrace of 'us' would seem to imply that a love of home is, in fact,

something to overcome. But this sits oddly next to the fact that that Enlightenment urge is grounded in a form of "love of home" in the form of a commitment to an ideal we inherit as part of the Western intellectual tradition. The atavistic urges captured in American (and European) discourses of "protecting the homeland" would seem to be a form of the return of the repressed, or at least a rejection of Enlightenment and liberal cosmopolitanism. If that is the right diagnosis, then what we need now is more Rorty—we need to be reminded that part of our inheritance as Western intellectuals is a willingness to not attach too much importance to our homes, to our homelands—that the march of universalism can only continue if we accept the assumption that such partiality is to be overcome, not embraced.

But part of what we see in Matt's book is that the distrust of an attachment to home—the pathologization of such attachment as an ailment, a mark of primitiveness, and, eventually, as a form of nostalgia—arises in concert with particular ideas of masculinity and in response to the demands of imperialism and capitalist industrialism. We should be suspicious, Matt implies, of the celebration of such rootlessness and restlessness.

The centrality of 'home' in the human imagination is a central element in Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics of Space* as well, and in that book Bachelard emphasizes the extent to which a feeling of safety, of being nurtured and cared for is connected to an imaginative poetics of the space of home. Logic can only take us so far, Bachelard implies; the understanding of how we inhabit space cannot be reduced to our relationship to geometry, or our relationship to objects. As a result, *The Poetics of Space* includes more references to poets and novelists than it does to philosophers, references that are reinforced by the imagistic and psychoanalytic prose that Bachelard uses. Because we are embodied beings, home is not merely a Cartesian space for us, but is rather a place we inhabit, and that we invest with significance.

John Allen, in his book *Home: How Habitat Made Us Human* (2015) connects human homes to our primate relatives. Like Bachelard, he sees the connection between nests and human homes, but says that primates are not natural builders. No primate other than humans builds houses for shelter. However, he argues that "the origin of home as a feeling or mental space likely emerges from some aspects of our primate ancestry"(60). The urge to find a safe space to sleep, and that can serve as a nursery, is, Allen argues, part of our inheritance as primates whose children have relatively long periods of dependence. Homes are essential to what we are.

This might all be well and good, we might think, but part of what it is to be human is to not be tied to our animalistic origins—we can decide to transcend these, and in fact we do all the time, as we pick up and move to new houses, or new cities, or even half way across the globe. Even if it is true that we have some primitive instincts that make homes important to us, we don't need to succumb to that. In fact, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir remarks on how women's attachment to home-making—to making a home or nest for her family—keeps women from spending time and energy in other ways, and often makes of them house-proud shrews. The comforts of home are the comforts of immanence, of staying put, of staying still. Transcendence is where the action is. Literally.

But as one thinks about the refugee crisis that is playing out on borders all over the world, the significance and pull of the idea of home seems to be an overlooked factor that could change our sense of what is at stake, and why this issue is getting the kind of political attention that it is. When we look at the idea of 'home' and a 'homeland,' we see the ways in which outsiders are not just created as such but also the ways in which their migrations are treated as invasions—migrants are seen as invading our home, which has been extended now from the house and neighborhood to the nation state. And yet, this extension seems strained. As the experience of the Revolutionary War showed, it is one

thing to be attached to a particular place where one may have grown up, or spent much of one's time. It's quite another for a Minnesotan to think of Texas as home, and migrants seeking to move there as invading his home—especially (as is often the case) when the Minnesotan has never set foot anywhere near the Mexico-Texas border. I, for one, am always amazed when I travel to Florida from my home in upstate New York. I realize, once I get there, that this is part of the United States of America, and the people who live there are Americans, as I am. And yet the place is so foreign to me: the grass is different; the plants seem to threaten death; many of the trees are trees that I've never seen growing in the Northeast US. And yet, this foreign land is Florida, and it is American Homeland. And so by extension, it is my home too.

But this is so odd, if one thinks about it for a while. And it's difficult to see the operations of the concept of "home" behind this "homeland" phenomenon. But the ways in which the USA has become the proper referent of 'home' in the early twenty-first century is an important but relatively untold story, and it drives much of the discussion of migration and security that have dominated migration policy in the US and in Europe. It is possible that we have come to think of the operations of the idea of 'home' in these discourses as reflections primarily of the function of a form of ethnocentrism—a form of home love that Rorty would seem to think is both acceptable and, possibly, desirable. It does, in fact, allow me to see my lot as connected to Floridians and Minnesotans, though I may find those territories foreign.

And yet the Enlightenment ideal of "extending the embrace of 'us'" would seem to be dead in this historical moment. This ideal has come to be replaced by "the homeland" or a nation state, which has itself taken the place of the local patch of space we think of as home. Localities become merged into one great nation state, distinguished from other nation states even if the particular geography and topography differs little from that which is found in a nearby nation state—I think, for instance, of how much my home here in upstate New

York looks like southern Ontario, which is just a short drive from here, and looks much more like my home than does Florida. From this perspective, the idea of home might seem to be as pernicious as Enlightenment rationality thought it was, as it allows for the fetishizing of a Homeland That We Must Secure.

And yet, the plight of refugees can really only be appropriately registered if one thinks about the pull of home, and the ways in which leaving home is so difficult. If it is the attachment to a safe place to nurture one's children that marks our primate interest in creating homes, then the abandonment of a loved home—a house, perhaps, or a village or a countryside—must take place against a background of overwhelming threat and extreme loss. We fail to appreciate the dire aspects of refugee existence if we fail to appreciate the difficulty of leaving home—not a country, but a house, a village, a beloved—or at least familiar—place.

Newspaper reports say that refugees are fleeing poverty and "gang violence" and sometimes cite, in passing, the fact that Honduras has the highest homicide rate in the Western hemisphere. Refugees say that sometimes one must make sacrifices for one's children, and from a distance it seems that this is just another instance of people moving on for new opportunities, to countries where economic opportunities are better. But such a story—told not just by supporters of immigration but also by opponents—is a retelling of the old refugee stories, in which the Irish came to American shores in search of better lives; or Germans or Chinese came to look for economic opportunity. What those stories gloss over is the real loss, and the ways in which many of those immigrants suffered an illness called 'homesickness'—an illness that was not just a form of sadness to be overcome, but, in some cases actually proved lethal, according to Matt's accounts². That immigrants came to American shores looking for opportunity is no doubt true—but what is missing from these stories are the great sacrifices that immigrants made to come to a

² See, for instance, Matt p. 3-4

foreign country, a place that was unfamiliar, and what kinds of desperation must have driven those movements.

Were Rorty alive to comment on these developments, I can imagine him urging his fellow Americans to see these migrants as sharing much with us, and would encourage us to abandon our primitive attachment to the idea of our homeland, to include them in our circle of concern and political community. And this is all well and good. But it seems that the pull of ‘home’ and its manifestations in nationalism and fears about security and identity is not simply a phenomenon that we should dismiss as a form of primitivism or something to be overcome. Rather, the phenomenological situation is more complicated—if we recognize that the appeal of ‘home’ is an important element, not just in how we think about including refugees, but also in understanding what it is that motivates those who leave their homes to seek

safety and new lives in foreign lands, we complicate the Enlightenment story of cosmopolitanism—a complication that may help us see better what is so important about thinking about refugees, what they seek, and the complicated nature of cosmopolitanism.

References

- “About DHS.” Department of Homeland Security, September 27, 2017.
<https://www.dhs.gov/about-dhs>.
- Allen, John. 2015. *Home: How Habitat Made Us Human*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Spaces*. Translated by Maria Jolas; foreword by John Stilgoe. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Matt, Susan. 2011. *Homesickness: An American History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin.



DESIGN BY *Thomas Kremer*

COVER AND TYPESETTING BY *Dóra Szauter*

COVER IMAGE: *John Giordano Seat of Power, 2007 Digital Photograph*

