Rorty and American Politics Today: Introduction

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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.
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> 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 sales-men, 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.
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> 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

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[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 somaesethic 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.

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