

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

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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.

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