

WHY WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT “HOME”:

THINKING ABOUT RORTY’S COSMOPOLITANISM

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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.

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