

RORTY AND THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

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Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred. These things destroy the essential condition of the democratic way of living even more effectually than open coercion which...is effective only when it succeeds in breeding hate, suspicion, intolerance in the minds of individual human beings.¹

John Dewey

ABSTRACT: This paper undertakes a philosophical analysis of the fractured, polarized political situation in America today, exacerbated by the presidency of Trump. The focus is on values and principles as I seek to decipher extraordinary foundational shifts in culture, national psychology, philosophy and values that have helped bring about the dangerous malaise America is witnessing. In my aspirational search for plausible, if tentative, steps toward social healing I reflect on some leading ideas of Richard Rorty from his works, *ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY* and *PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL HOPE*. I term my construction a Rorty "wish list" for saving our country.

Keywords: American culture and politics, polarization, Richard Rorty and social hope

Two weeks after our American electoral nightmare of 2016 I published a letter in my local newspaper (THE SMITHTOWN NEWS, Nov. 24, 2016,) in which I argued vigorously that, regardless of winners or losers, "...there is one reality that any citizen with eyes wide open must acknowledge as abundantly clear—the United States of America is no longer a united states." I went on to claim that the collapse of a united country had been developing for a long time and that the electoral process just then concluded was "...a glaring symptom of an underlying crisis and fissure." My somewhat whimsical yet serious point was that "We are de facto two widely separate groups of Americans with no [apparent] signs of reconcili-

ation." I asked polemically whether it was "...time to consider a two state solution?" I further detailed how the two Americas (A and B) might be constituted, which parts of the country might be included in each, and justified the break-up by asserting that we have reached a point in our history where "...neither group (A or B) is doing the other any good, each casting the other into fear, anger, even paralysis." The truth is, "They (A and B) are simply getting in each other's way," with everyone "...feeling the anxiety, the pain, the disillusionment, and finally the hopelessness." Since each group muddies, misrepresents and actively seeks to cancel the other's vision of, and hopes and dreams for, America, it's no surprise to find our electoral politics pitting people angrily against one another. "When long-time friends and neighbors [and family] think and say in earnest 'Your America is not my America' then we as a single country are in deep trouble."

Six months later, in another letter to the same paper (May 11, 2017,) I wrote that in the interim I had seen absolutely nothing that would change my view regarding the two Americas. If anything, the chasm, the hostilities, had "...become ever more entrenched and ugly." I cited as an example Trump's then recent appearance at the Intrepid Air and Space Museum in Manhattan where angry anti-Trump protestors shouted epithets like "We're the real New Yorkers" and "This village does not want its' idiot back." Trump supporters countered by proclaiming that "People on the other side are traitors...they are racist against Trump," and "I want to throw up on the liberals because they don't love our country... they are anti-American, period." (NEWSDAY, May 5, 2017). I then asked, rhetorically, "Does this sound like one country, indivisible with liberty and justice for all?" and pointed out, in concluding, that "...a house divided is destined to fall" and further that democracies, like other forms of government, come and go, most collapsing under their own weight. Writing now, in 2018, I must sadly reiterate that I've seen little if any evidence that refutes my view of the two Americas and the direction in which our country is heading.²

¹ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," LW.14.228

² To illustrate, one could chose, nearly at random, say any three large issues on which Americans today hold radically divergent

In this paper I will not do a deep dive into the weeds—that is, dissect, debate or critique specific policies, investigations, political stunts, psychological disabilities or maddening details of the everyday news cycle in America. All that is about base politics. This hopes to be about philosophy and values. Rather than immersion in particulars, I want to speculate on what to me registers as the bigger picture. I wish to decipher what are the extraordinary foundational shifts in culture, national psychology, philosophy and values that have brought about the dangerous malaise America is witnessing now and I fear for the foreseeable future. David Brooks of the NEW YORK TIMES (Feb. 23, 2018) frames the matter more eloquently when he describes the United States as a nation that is “...emotionally sick,” characterized by “...the decline of social trust, the breakdown of family life, the polarization of the national life, the spread of tribal mentalities, the decline of social capital, the rising alienation from institutions [and norms] or the decline of citizenship and neighborliness.” He concludes that “It is simply impossible to tell any good news story when looking at the data from these moral, social and emotional spheres.”

In my identification of foundational problems and aspirational search for plausible, if tentative, steps toward solution, I will invoke philosopher Richard Rorty and a few of his leading ideas about America, its past and its future. I will be referring to this, again rather whimsically, as a Rorty “wish list” on how we might proceed. While no doubt he would be profoundly distressed at what’s happening with and in America today, could he offer even a glimmer of hope for a potentially brighter future? If so, what needs to happen and would any of his ideas be realistic or simply idle pipe dreams?

and seemingly irreconcilable positions. For instance, gun violence and its remedy, Russian election meddling and what to do about it, and immigration, both legal and illegal. On each, the two Americas are hysterically passionate and angry, prepared to fully engage in tribal warfare to see “their side” win. I hear succumb only slightly to hyperbole.

II

The problem is that we are becoming a nation of cowards and voluptuaries, either egging on or sitting passively as abuse and contempt take over our political discourse.

Arthur C. Brooks, American Enterprise Institute

As both David and Arthur Brooks rightly claim, America’s problems are deeper, more pervasive, more corrosive, and potentially long-lasting than the daily spats between Republicans and Democrats or arguments over who one should vote for. The problems reflect, and exacerbate, ruptures between Americans that are cultural, economic, moral, even philosophic in character. We can and should invoke particular themes like lost jobs and unequal wages, elites vs. working class, urban vs. rural, etc.—all important in an immediate sense and the subject of tons of recent studies, articles and books. However, such issues are but evolving symptoms of an underlying disorder that confronts American society. Even Trump is simply a culminating symptom, rather than original cause, of America’s diseased state. To be sure, he is a shockingly powerful symptom who aggravates and multiplies the chaos and national heartache in manifold ways every single moment of his presidency.

My mind drifts to an analogy I find instructive though some may consider weak. When teaching introductory philosophy, and the class arrived at the problem of ontology and identity, I would frequently introduce the proverbial “When is a chair no longer a chair?” question. If one leg is removed or all, if the back or seat is cut away, when is a point reached where there is no longer a chair but perhaps firewood or tinker toys? Can we draw an illuminating analogy between a chair and a country?

For arguments sake, let’s assume a country (USA) that’s a constitutional democracy with guaranteed basic rights, privileges and responsibilities for all. A republic (federation) of independent states rooted in equal representation where every state and every vote is meant to count. Such a country ought to have no voter suppression, no buying of public office by the rich and powerful, no gerrymandering that stacks the electoral deck in favor

of one party over others. Such a country operates on the rule of law wherein no one, including high officers, is above the law. The judicial system that enforces the law has as its highest objective the achievement of justice, the common denominator and highest ideal for everyone—rich and poor, minority and majority, male and female, native born and immigrant. This, then, is a country of grand, even grandiose, ideas and ideals—forever an imperfect work in progress—wherein every person is supposed to get a shot at pursuing life, liberty and happiness. In this country the individual and community enjoy not an either/or relation but instead a both/and. And this country is historically a welcoming country that joyfully acknowledges it was built out of the talents, hard work and patriotism of immigrants. This country has more times than not throughout its history displayed compassion for the oppressed, the persecuted, the infirm, extending opportunity rather than building walls. Much of what I describe about America is, of course, aspirational and never fully realized. However, the point is not about arriving at some final achievement, but rather the tacit presumption of an historical process and what might be called “regulative ideals” that direct our association with one another, our national conduct and our outreach to the world. In short, what America could and should be. Further, it’s fair to say that this characterization largely, though hardly exclusively, defines America (the aspiration) and represents its calling card and attraction to so many from around the world.

Now to the identity question, which has been anxiously raised numerous times over the past 2-3 years by leading experts and pundits. Similar to cutting off the legs, seat and back of the chair—resulting in the eventual elimination of the chair—what happens when a society, a culture, a country like America is confronted with any or all of the following subtractions?

—The abandonment of a shared sense of reality, when as Brooke Gladstone writes, “...the nation seems to

be waging civil war over reality itself.”³ Distinctions between fake and actual, optics and substance, principles and crass politics collapse resulting in everything blending pathetically into chaotic quicksand.

—The abandonment of any agreed upon sense of truth or facts. When truth is transformed into “alternative truth”, facts into “alternative facts,” how does anyone know what to believe or when to believe? How can there be any effective sort of orientation? When lies, distortions, willful deceptions enjoy the same currency as established truth, fact and consensus, what are we left with? Could it be anything other than confusion and chaos that keeps people’s minds off important matters?

—The abandonment of justice, the desire for fairness and equal treatment, and the unrelenting challenge to the rule of law itself—could all this lead to the possibility of a quasi- authoritarian state in which justice and law are decided by the strong-man or party in power rather than legislatures and the will of the people?

—Giving up on, in fact deriding, any sense of shared morality and values, and any viable sense of the “common good,” the focus of a recent book by Robert Reich and many earlier studies. It is commonly understood that American programs and services such as Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid, unemployment benefits, and sound, accessible public education for all rest on a sense of the common good. But when Republican and Democrat values and priorities are crippling antagonistic to one another, what becomes of any shared moral character for the nation? What if any collective values shape the behavior of the nation?

Considering these subtractions, when even the prospect of a shared sense of reality, truth, justice and morality is subjected to relentless and withering attack, and appears to be increasingly impossible, even undesirable politically

³ Brooke Gladstone, *THE TROUBLE WITH REALITY: A RUMINATION ON MORAL PANIC IN OUR TIME* (New York: Workman Press, 2017), p. 60.

and culturally, we may legitimately ask--is America heading in the direction of the dismantled chair, thus running a serious risk of becoming non-America? Is the country left to be a viable reality in anything other than a nominal or formal sense? Could it be as Richard Rorty, "concerned citizen of a country in decline" asserts, that America may be "...in danger of losing its soul?"⁴ While Trump repeatedly clamors that without borders (walls) we have no country, could it be that in the absence of a viable, shared sense of reality, truth, justice and morality we are left with no country to wall in? Perhaps Maureen Dowd is on point when she writes, "We have crossed into a surreal dimension where we are limited only by our imaginations. The American identity and American values are fungible at the moment. The guardrails are off. Our brains are so scrambled that it's starting to make sense that none of it makes any sense." (NEW YORK TIMES, May 13, 2018).

III

Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation."⁵

Martin Luther King, Jr.

This section offers an overview, chiefly in my own words and absent numerous citations, of some of what I, in practical terms, take away from the essays that comprise two of Rorty's major works that relate to America's present crisis and some ways the crisis might be addressed (ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY and PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL HOPE). Earlier I referred to what I termed a Rorty "wish list" for possibly recovering and achieving our country. To that end, I now address five basic themes drawn from the two books. While each (and all) has

political and cultural significance, each has philosophical import as well, though hardly philosophical in a typical academic sense. Surely, from Rorty's perspective the present American dilemma is not about abstract philosophical theory. It's not a "professional, disciplinary" squabble in the acceptable academic meaning most people readily embrace. Rather, Rorty encourages, actually insists, that it's basically all about our stories, our lived experiences, our aspirations, actions and interactions. He is far more interested in the narratives of history, literature and communal experience than any exposition of general theory, dogma or abstraction. So, what, if anything, can we worried Americans (and world citizens) learn from him, and can it make any difference? Assuming, along with Rorty, that an (ideally) tolerant, pluralistic, constitutional democracy requires, at a minimum, trust, cooperation, empathy, compromise and consensus building, what concrete steps does Rorty put on offer?

1) In ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY Rorty calls for a return to an "activist, reformist left" and a move away from a "spectatorial cultural left" that has come to dominate our attention. For him the "cultural left" is rooted in identity politics, individual or group grievances and separate partisan ideologies. While advances have assuredly been made by the "cultural left" (e.g., respect for ethnic, racial or religious differences), we must now re-prioritize and shift the focus in favor of the common, shared interests and concerns of all Americans. This shift zeros in principally on economic issues—jobs, decent education, earnings that afford a viable standard of living for all and not just the wealthy and powerful. Associated considerations include the prospects for adequate health care and secure retirements that reward a lifetime of hard work and contributions to the well-being of society. Consideration of our responsible stewardship over nature is, also, crucial. Substantive moves in this direction would undercut much of the conservative critics' anger over "political correctness" and its al-

⁴ Richard Rorty, PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL HOPE (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 234.

⁵ Martin Luther King, "I See The Promised Land," WRITINGS AND SPEECHES THAT CHANGED THE WORLD, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper One, 1992), p. 201.

leged elitist divisiveness. As we know, much of Trump's appeal to disenchanted voters involved relentless bashing of a nebulous "political correctness" that neither he nor his followers understood the least bit about, but was, nonetheless, effective. If a "reformist left" yielded genuine, verifiable improvement in the economic conditions of working people much of the thunder could be stripped from the inflammatory Trumpian rhetoric while its hollowness and hypocrisy would be made clear.

- 2) A "reformist left" would, also, bring an energetic, resurgent focus on what Rorty calls "campaigns" rather than "movements." Movements, like socialism or religious orthodoxies, involve proselytizing and forced adherence. They presume a grand, sweeping overview and require the long haul, what Rorty regards as various forms of transcendence. Specific campaigns, to the contrary, involve a focused struggle for improved social conditions in the here and now. Efforts to minimize suppression and thus secure voting rights for all, to realize adequate health care services (preventive, maternity, psychological and drug treatment, care for special needs), to secure a minimum wage that leads to a survivable standard of living—all are examples of waging campaigns of concerted effort rather than attaching oneself, in many cases blindly, to big and rather amorphous movements that may never deliver results.
- 3) Integral to realization of themes 1 and 2 for Rorty is the restoration of effective labor unions in America. In recent decades unions have been decimated and workers left unprotected and exploited while income inequality has risen to record heights. Rorty accepts the flaws and excesses (at times) in the labor union movement, but, also, understands correctly that the wealthy and powerful owners and managers of capital, as well as leaders of government, have never, and will never, give in to legitimate worker concerns and requests unless the workers collectively exercise

power. Federal and state governments in America have for the most part given up on protecting the rights of the working class in favor of rewarding the rich and the party in power. This disenfranchisement, in effect, led much of the working class to succumb to the hollow promises of an unscrupulous real estate mogul and billionaire who assured that he was always and only about the "little guy." In both *ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY* and *PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL HOPE* Rorty makes a recurring plea for academics, intellectuals generally, professionals of all sorts, and artists to get back together with, get on the same page with, labor leaders and every day working people who have built and nurtured America.

- 4) The essay, "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096" (PSH) was written in 1996, but entices us to consider its relevance for 2018. While Rorty talks a lot about inequality and wage slavery, class divisions and the perils of cultural fixations, his basic appeal is largely to bring our country back together by "...bringing back its old pride in fraternal ideals." Rorty contends we must recover a viable sense of fraternity and care for one another, for as John Steinbeck pointed out in *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, "As long as people in trouble can sacrifice to help people who are in still worse shape...there is fraternity and therefore social hope" (cited in PSH, 248). Rorty concludes the essay by warning ominously "...that everything depends on keeping our fragile sense of American fraternity intact" (251).

Keeping this sense intact requires overcoming the presumption of American exceptionalism that has characterized the last two centuries. We no longer have the luxury of thinking of ourselves as singled out and blessed and beyond all others. Rather, we are an evolving and vulnerable constitutional democracy with "...a sense of fragility, of susceptibility to the vicissitudes of time and chance, which Walt Whitman and John Dewey may never have

known" (250). In addition, our forward movement as a country, for Rorty, requires a new understanding of morality that moves away from instruction, abstract principles and salvation. Today morality must be "...thought of neither as a matter of applying moral law nor as the acquisition of virtues but as fellow feeling, the ability to sympathize with the plight of others" (249). In line with such a view, I now offer a couple of practical Rorty inspired suggestions that may facilitate a return to fraternity. First, collective actions must begin at the local level. People of different backgrounds, education and vocations need to pool their talents and labor, pulling together around matters that concern their local communities before elevating issues to a higher level as necessary. As a glimmer of hope, actual examples abound throughout American communities. For example, my own town (Smithtown, New York) has an Anti-bias Task-force that advocates for diversity, tolerance, unity, education and community harmony. Local groups throughout the U.S. coalesce around concerns for a healthy and beautiful natural environment, around crime, the scourge of drug abuse or corruption and waste of tax payer monies. Every group, large or small, reflects common experiences and concerns for the well-being of the community, of others, and not just select individuals. To this extent, a sense of fellow-feeling and fraternity is created and encouraged to grow. As some have claimed, all politics is local, all change takes root in immediate everyday experiences, struggles and victories.

Second, Rorty believes that a sense of fraternity—a feeling for the other's suffering and pain—may well result from reading what he calls inspirational literature. The stories of people's hardships, sufferings and human achievements—of their common plights—assist in cultivating a sense of fraternity leading to moral growth and progress. As Rorty says, "...only those who still read for inspiration...are likely to be of much use in building a cooperative com-

monwealth" (AOC, 140). On this point, his essay, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature", I believe should be required reading for every American worried over America's present and future.

- 5) My final item on the Rorty "wish list" concerns a restoration of national pride and patriotism. This is an aspiration maligned and misunderstood I believe by some critics of Rorty. The first line of the essay, "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey" announces that "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement" (AOC, 3). Absent self-respect an individual can never understand herself or move forward. Absent a sense of national pride a country can never correct its ways, reform or advance itself. For Rorty national pride is not the hollow pride of one-upmanship or callously regarding ourselves the most powerful, the most advanced economically and technologically. Pride in one's nation grows out of the common struggles and achievements of the people and their history, our honest recognition of the nation's flaws and mistakes while, also, appreciating the progress made in terms of opportunities and rights, legal reforms and cultural achievement. Likewise, patriotism, for Rorty, is not blind love of country, militaristic in nature or demanding simple obedience to the call. Patriotism grows naturally from the pride a people have for their country's history, its big ideas, ideals and aspirations. Pride and patriotism, in this sense, signal that improvement in social conditions and people's lives can happen and will happen if people bind together in collective prideful, yet realistic, pursuit of the country's professed values and ideals. On this theme, Rorty's essay, "The Unpatriotic Academy," strikes me as a remarkably succinct and clear-headed reflection on American pluralism, pride, national identity and patriotism. In it he points out that, despite the outrage some may feel, most Americans still identify with their country. "We take pride in being citizens of a

self-invented, self-reforming, enduring constitutional democracy. We think of the United States as having glorious—if tarnished—national traditions” (PSH, 252). In effect, he argues that pride in a shared national identity need not be an evil. Some on the left who promote the politics of difference tend to belittle the very notions of national identity and pride, but as Rorty says, “There is no incompatibility between respect for cultural differences and American patriotism” (253).

In reality, no nation can ever hope to reform itself and live up to its ideals without taking some measure of pride and rejoicing thoughtfully, and critically, in what the country has been and can still be. Such were (and are) the dreams of Emerson, Whitman and Dewey, of Martin Luther King and Cornel West. And such demonstrates how pride and patriotism in a Rortyan sense can help to engender some hope for a better tomorrow.

IV

From the perspective of many millions of Americans, myself at times included, the United States appears to be coming apart at the seams. Maureen Dowd was right in saying that all the guardrails are off. We are, indeed, in many respects off the rails, seemingly rudderless and searching frantically for direction and hope as a country. I submit that even those millions who presently think they are content and pleased with the “outsider” disruption that grips our great nation, will eventually be forced to wake up and realize that a disease has overtaken us and needs to be purged. Our present situation has been decades in the making, but its pace and severity is being savagely hastened by our current government and political parties. As I see it, the ruptures and seething wounds are almost entirely self-inflicted. As examples, we are witnessing on a daily basis growing intolerance for anyone other than white, Christian males of European descent, a denigration of constitutional rights and norms such as free and fair electoral and judicial systems, along

with a free press, selectively self-serving attacks on the rule of law and law enforcement, a giving up on human and civil rights at home and abroad, and a near total reversal of our responsibilities for the natural environment that sustains us. The only thing that now seems to matter is money, winning and pursuit of power at any cost. Any reasonable sense of the common good is withering on the vine of indifference. Elective office now goes largely to the highest bidder, while hateful speech, personal attacks and uncivil behavior is publically applauded. Sadly for me, much of the gains (political, legal, moral) America has made during my lifetime (roughly seven decades) are now being systematically threatened while our parties and leaders care only about catering to their so-called base. On the presumption that the onslaught cannot and will not last forever (this, too, shall pass) it is my firm conviction that it will, nevertheless, likely take decades, if not a generation or more, to repair the damage already done. And perhaps the greatest damage results from the loss of the soul, the indifference to morality and basic decency. These, along with trust and national confidence, will be the hardest to recover.

Improvement is difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to envision. Philosophers concerned with social and political issues, with ethics and morality, have always in their particular time and place sought to offer diagnoses of the problems and prescriptions for hoped-for amelioration. In that spirit I have here set forth some of what I consider Rorty’s most important ideas and suggestions for possibly making our crisis situation a bit better. At the least, perhaps he can help us get our bearings as we struggle to make sense out of the largely senseless. Perhaps he can help us set a course and direction, though I admit to being less than sanguine. No one in America, or in the world at large, should hold their breath in anticipation that we will one morning wake up and realize that this was all just a bad dream. In my final note below⁶ I offer what I call “Hart’s top ten wish list,” a

⁶ HART’S TOP TEN NON-PARTISAN WISH LIST FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

collection of concrete proposals in the spirit of Rorty which, though they will likely never all come to pass, I am thoroughly convinced would help restore American democracy to greater health and vitality. While our

country may see, to be approaching life-support, miracles in medicine and history have been known to occasionally happen. Along with Rorty, let us hope.

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- 1) Make third party politics viable—two party rule is simply not working.
 - 2) Get big money out of politics—reverse “Citizen’s United”—the most damaging Supreme Court decision in decades.
 - 3) Set strict time limits on campaign seasons (no more than a few months)
 - 4) Seriously curtail all instances of electoral gerrymandering
 - 5) Reform the Electoral College—make state electors awarded in a fashion proportional to actual popular vote.
 - 6) All candidates for ANY elective office of public trust must
 - divulge tax returns
 - demonstrate no conflicts of interest
 - pass a security clearance test and possibly a mental health exam
 - 7) Build from the local to the national, e.g. support the Parkland, FLA survivor kids and MeToo victims
 - 8) Set strict term limits for all elected officials
 - 9) No lobbying activities allowed (ever) by anyone following government service.
 - 10) Figure out a way, as a society, to transform virtue and goodness (compassion, tolerance, cooperation), neighborliness and civic participation from sentimental platitudes to “cool” values reflected in persons deserving of respect and admiration, indeed, as things necessary for national survival.