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INTRODUCTION

THE PHILOSOPHER AND HIS COUNTRY

W. P. Malecki and Chris Voparil

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) is best known to the wider public as the philosopher who predicted Trump. During the 2016 presidential election, eerily prescient warnings from his 1998 book, *Achieving Our Country*, that existing forces of American politics might set the country on a road to fascism, went viral on social media. With neither the left nor the right showing concern for the growing economic disparities in America, he contended in 1998, a large swath of voters already experiencing the negative impact of globalization would become acutely disillusioned with the political establishment. Suffering from economic inequality and insecurity, these mostly white, working-class citizens would feel that they had nowhere to turn for advocacy on their behalf, since conservatives had neglected their interests and liberals were rejecting their values.

“At that point, something will crack,” he prophesied, and “the nonsuburban electorate would decide that the system had failed.” They would start looking around for a populist “strong-man” who would pay homage to their fears. He would be elected to the Oval Office and ultimately roll back the progressive

achievements of the previous decades. “Jocular contempt for women,” Rorty predicted, would come back into vogue, along with racial and ethnic epithets thought to have been defeated. “Media-created pseudo-events, including the occasional brief and bloody war,” would be manufactured to distract citizens from exploitation by the “super-rich” and “the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates” would be stoked. “This strongman leader, he concluded, “will be a disaster for the country and the world.”¹

The same premises that led Rorty to predict Trump generated other predictions and warnings: predictions about a new civil war in America, a new feudalism in the West, and a new, brutal world order resulting from global overpopulation. These potential outcomes are universally grim and look even more probable now than when Rorty first envisioned them. He may well turn out to be the philosopher who predicted not only the 2016 election but the political upheavals still ahead of us.

This book gathers these and other Rortyan prophecies about the dark and disturbing currents still coursing through the bodies politic in America and around the globe. It also contains essays that show that, if he were alive today, Rorty would be uneasy about the label “the philosopher who predicted Trump.” Not because it diminishes the contributions to perennial philosophical subjects that made him one of the most cited American thinkers of the twentieth century. Quite the contrary, he would be uneasy about the label because, judged from the theoretical perspective he advocated, it makes his philosophical contributions look too important. It suggests that he predicted Trump thanks to some superior philosophical acumen and thereby strengthens the traditional image of philosophers as people whose special expertise allows them to see the world

more clearly than everyone else. Rorty believed that image to be mistaken and argued that taking it seriously was one of the reasons why the American academic left, which he believed to be “overphilosophized,” was failing miserably. These diagnoses and critiques, still of enormous relevance to understanding how the contemporary left, in the United States and elsewhere, has boxed itself into a corner, are included here as well.

What Can We Hope For? also conveys Rorty’s pragmatic philosophy of democratic change. It contains his recommendations for concrete reforms to ameliorate injustice and inequality and his positive vision for what safeguarding our democracy and our highest aspirations requires. He understood that the integrity of democracy depends on stable and secure institutions like a free press, a free judiciary, and free elections. He also grasped that democracy requires a moral community that must be actively cultivated, grounded in our sense of who we and our fellow citizens are and should become. These essays outline Rorty’s strategies—more timely now than ever—for fostering social hope and building an inclusive global community of trust.

Rorty’s Life and Ideas

Richard McKay Rorty was born on October 4, 1931. He was an intellectually precocious child who demonstrated an early facility with language. At the age of six, he composed a historical play, and at seven wrote the Harvard College Observatory to inquire about becoming an astronomer.² A self-described “nerdy recluse and fighter for social justice,” he was a shy and awkward kid who took refuge in books and solo excursions into the northwest New Jersey woods in search of elusive wild orchids.³ His moral compass received its bearing from his parents’ committed leftist activism. At twelve, he lent a hand at the Workers

Defense League in New York City, where his parents worked, by carrying press releases via subway to A. Phillip Randolph's office at the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters, carefully reading them along the way. As Rorty later put it, "I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists."⁴ His father, James Rorty, the son of an Irish immigrant, was an author, poet, and muckraking journalist who was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his service in World War I as an unarmed stretcher-bearer. His mother, Winifred Raushenbush, the daughter of social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, studied sociology at the University of Chicago with George Herbert Mead and Robert Park and was a published writer herself.

At fifteen, Rorty enrolled in the University of Chicago's "Hutchins College," where he rubbed shoulders with students who would become important figures in American intellectual life, including Allan Bloom. His goal, at that point in life, was to find a way, in Yeats's phrase, "to hold reality and justice in a single vision," that is, to encounter a convincing intellectual rationale that would justify his high-minded intellectual interests as integral to the quest for social justice, which he understood as "the liberation of the weak from the strong."⁵ Though he soon gave up the project of reconciliation—he was unable to convince himself to follow Plato in holding that knowledge was virtue—he remained at Chicago to complete a master's degree in philosophy and write a thesis on Alfred North Whitehead. Rorty continued his studies at Yale University, where he received his PhD in philosophy in 1956. After a brief stint in the US army, Rorty taught for twenty years at Princeton University before moving in 1982 to the University of Virginia and then to Stanford in 1998, where he remained until retirement in 2005. He succumbed to pancreatic cancer on June 8, 2007.

Rorty's philosophy is most closely associated with the tradition of American pragmatism. This constellation of ideas emphasizing the unity of thought and action and the primacy of practice emerges in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in writings of Charles Sanders Peirce that were popularized by William James and developed with different variations by John Dewey, Josiah Royce, Jane Addams, Alain Locke, and others during the first half of the twentieth century. In recent years, pragmatism has been advanced by Cornel West and Robert Brandom, both former students of Rorty's, and also enjoys a place in many disciplines outside philosophy. Rorty wasn't always linked to pragmatism. For the first two decades of his career, his professional standing was owed to a series of essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s on technical topics within mainstream analytic philosophy, the dominant mode of the discipline, then as now, which largely rejected pragmatism for being too quaint and muddled to meet the demands of logically rigorous philosophical inquiry.

One of Rorty's insights in his groundbreaking book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), was to discern a gradual pragmaticization of analytic philosophy. Mid-twentieth-century thinkers like W. V. O Quine and Wilfrid Sellars had initiated critiques that Rorty developed into a major challenge to the fundamental assumptions of the Cartesian-Kantian tradition's conceptions of mind, philosophy, and knowledge. Rejecting the idea that these views are intrinsic to the nature of reality or our essential human nature, Rorty contended that they are no more than contingent, historically rooted metaphors that we can alter when they outlive their usefulness. Over the years that followed, he relentlessly critiqued commitments that philosophers held dear: the idea that true beliefs mirror reality in itself, the notion of Philosophy, with a capital "p," as a privileged

discipline with special access to *The Way Things Are*, and the idea that our culture and democracy are in need of philosophical foundations or “backup” to sustain them. Rorty advanced a program of “therapeutic” rather than “constructive” philosophy that aimed to be “edifying” rather than “systematic” by freeing us from reliance on outdated metaphors and on nonhuman sources of authority to validate our beliefs. The goal was to foster human moral progress to accompany the historical transition from religion to philosophy to literature as the center of Western culture.⁶

Alongside this critical project, Rorty developed an alternative positive vision based on a radical shift: “putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit.”⁷ If leading philosophical vocabularies obstruct rather than advance our democratic aims, we should drop them for more useful ones. Hope replaces transcendental knowledge, a possible future takes the place of appeals to an eternal reality, stories supplant philosophical arguments, and abstract notions of humanity and rights are abandoned for felt, emotional identifications with particular communities. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), he outlined the implications of his pragmatism for how we understand language, selfhood, and community, and he experimented with a form of cultural criticism that embodied “a general turn against theory and toward narrative,” inviting “genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” into the conversation.⁸ “If we take care of freedom,” he famously asserted, “truth can take care of itself.”⁹ The only grounding liberal democracy needs is a shared commitment to reduce cruelty and suffering.

These pioneering efforts were greeted with dismissive criticism and charges of relativism, irrationalism, even irresponsibility, for allegedly severing us from the independent standards

and external checks needed to keep our beliefs from falling into error. Only with time did a fuller understanding emerge that Rorty's philosophico-political project constitutes nothing less than a large-scale program for self-criticism and reform of Western societies by modifying their "self-image" to make them more responsive to suffering and injustice, both at home and abroad. Rorty's politics remained largely static over the course of his lifetime and philosophical trajectory. Biographer Neil Gross concluded that Rorty's "intellectual self-concept of leftist American patriot," acquired in large part from his parents, was reinspired in the wake of their deaths in the 1970s and the rise of the New Left.¹⁰ While Rorty consistently insisted that there is no necessary link from his or anyone's philosophical critiques of truth, rationality, and objectivity to liberal democracy, he did believe that "there is a plausible inference from democratic convictions" to such philosophical views.¹¹ The affinity stems from a moral commitment to "antiauthoritarianism," his name for the pragmatist objection to any form of fundamentalism, whether philosophical or religious, that attempts "to circumvent the process of achieving democratic consensus" by appealing to "the authority of something 'not ourselves.'"¹² In Rorty's antiauthoritarian vision, "Both monotheism and the kind of metaphysics or science that purports to tell you what the world *really* is like are replaced with democratic politics."¹³

These commitments illuminate two registers of politics that exist in Rorty's writings. The first, which he once dubbed "real politics," involves organized efforts to reduce economic inequality, provide basic needs, and improve people's lives in banal ways through things like labor unions, coalitions, policy reforms, and changing laws. The second register is alluded to in the last volume of essays completed in his lifetime, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007), which makes the case that intervening

in “cultural politics” should be philosophers’ “principal assignment.”¹⁴ This apparent embrace of “cultural politics” was surprising to readers of *Achieving Our Country* familiar with Rorty’s scathing indictment of the “academic, cultural Left” for its dismissal of “real” politics and “mock[ing] the very idea that democratic institutions might once again be made to serve social justice.”¹⁵ However, his later return to “cultural politics” invokes instead the register of politics oriented to the broad, generational cultural change highlighted in Rorty’s work of the 1980s of “liberating the culture from obsolete vocabularies” and “reweaving of the community’s fabric of belief” so that we get to “the point where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance.”¹⁶ For philosophers to intervene in cultural politics, in this sense, is to join poets and novelists and other social critics in offering new vocabularies and imagining new ways of looking at the world: “social hopes, programs of action, and prophecies of a better future.”¹⁷

If Rorty’s major philosophical contributions revived the ideas of classical pragmatism, his major political contributions rejuvenated the priorities of the “reformist Left,” his label for US figures from the Progressive Era to the Vietnam War who worked for democratic change within the system, like Eugene Debs, Irving Howe, and A. Phillip Randolph Jr., among many others. This political orientation was not only quite rare at the time when Rorty wrote, but put him at odds with both the left and the right of his day.

For instance, if the right thought capitalism a perfectly just economic arrangement needing only to be freed from externally imposed limitations and the left thought it the worst of all possible systems that must be abolished right now, Rorty believed that while capitalism definitely generates all sorts of

injustices, no viable economic alternatives currently exist. As a result, the only option is to make capitalism more humane by tinkering with its details—for example, by introducing on a global scale the economic mechanisms that make countries like Norway or Sweden economically successful welfare states. To take another example, if the right believed that one should love America unconditionally because of its greatness and the left believed that it is impossible to love America at all because of its injustices, Rorty opted for a difficult love instead. That is, he argued that one should both remember the country's political sins and appreciate its great achievements. Without the former one will not know what needs to be changed, and without the latter one will lack the necessary motivation for the task. As to what needs to be changed, while the left believed that political attention should be turned to the rights of the oppressed and the right thought those could be left out of politics altogether, Rorty believed that such rights mattered a great deal, but not in the way the left thought they did. While the left focused on the politics of recognition, where each and every cultural difference should be celebrated, Rorty emphasized the politics of anti-discrimination, or making sure that nobody has to suffer just because they are different.

Stated this way, Rorty's political orientation may look quite clear, but it has been very often dramatically misunderstood. His attacking both sides in many a contemporary political debate was easily mistaken as supporting one side or the other. For instance, while he attacked the right for its lack of concern for social justice, he often was seen as a representative of the radical cultural left he in fact opposed. While he attacked the left for its revolutionist yearnings and lack of patriotism, his stance often was taken to be rightist and dubbed "altogether appropriate for the age of Reagan."¹⁸ Rorty was troubled by

both kinds of misinterpretation, but it was the latter that really hurt him. His gripe with the left, after all, was not about principles and ideals, but merely about how best to realize them in practice. He shared its unconditional commitment to social justice just as he shared its vision of a classless society where nobody has to suffer economic hardship and discrimination is gone forever. He just thought the left's ideas about how to get there were mostly wrong—ineffective at best and dangerous at worst. His famed Trump prediction was precisely an attempt to point out one such danger. Indeed, all his political essays were written in this pragmatic mode. Their underlying intention, seen clearly throughout this volume, was to point out concrete problems and possibilities, and to propose concrete solutions.

Overview of Contents

The essays of part I explain why Rorty adopted this pragmatic approach even though one might expect something quite different from a philosopher. Philosophers, after all, traditionally have busied themselves with providing theoretical foundations for politics rather than with practical details of how politics should be done. Many even have believed that without first answering the primordial philosophical question “What are we?” about the true nature of human beings, it is simply impossible to answer the primordial political question “*Who* are we?” about what kind of community humanity should ideally become. In chapter 1, Rorty argues that this approach has things exactly backward. Instead of the philosophical question “What are we?” coming first and the political question “Who are we?” second, he holds that all responses to “What are we?” are concealed answers to the question “Who are we?” The question of what sort of community we should ideally be is therefore not

only the primordial political question but the primordial philosophical one as well. Rorty then proceeds to argue that forming a political community necessarily entails providing an ideal that spurs its members to accept certain moral obligations toward one another, such as the obligation to help those in need. But to actually belong to a political community, it is not enough simply to accept one's moral obligations toward certain people. One must also be convinced that one can fulfill them. The question whether we can help others, he concludes, is therefore not merely a question of what we can do, but of who we really are. To answer it, philosophy should turn away from its traditional subject, the eternal, and look toward the future, asking itself another pragmatic question: "What may we hope?"

If the first chapter stresses that politics is of fundamental importance to philosophy, the ones that follow suggest that, contrary to what many philosophers believe, philosophy is of little importance to politics. Such belief, he explains in "Democracy and Philosophy," is a relic of the eighteenth century, when the importance of philosophy for politics was indeed enormous. Those who wanted to substitute secular democracy for the ancien régime were unable to appeal to factual evidence, since no egalitarian democracies existed. Instead, they relied on abstract philosophical arguments that used materialist premises to attack the theological foundations of the old regime. Today, however, there is no real need to resort to such measures in debating politics. There is enough factual data available on the merits and demerits of the major positions involved for that to seem necessary or even helpful.

"Dewey and Posner on Pragmatism and Moral Progress" offers a cogent statement of how Rorty understands philosophy's relation to politics via his hero John Dewey's conception of philosophy as "a social hope reduced to a working program of

action, a prophecy of the future.”¹⁹ On this view, what sustains democracy is not a grounding in truth or metaphysics or other form of specialized knowledge from which we can deduce philosophical justifications that validate our beliefs as correct. Here Rorty agrees with legal philosopher Richard Posner, who has held that such epistemological defenses miss the point that “consensus makes ‘truth’ rather than truth forcing consensus.”²⁰ In other words, the mere existence of truth or facts, as recent political discourse attests, does not automatically generate consensus. On the contrary, agreement with our fellow citizens is an ongoing task that must be actively pursued. Rational arguments and appeals to first principles get no traction when participants lack a background of shared premises. In these moments, we must look to “nonrational” methods, Rorty says, like those practiced by Martin Luther King Jr., Betty Friedan, and the leaders of the gay rights movement. They brought about change by expanding our moral imaginations and asking us to care about those who were suffering. In short, “They incited social hope by proposing programs of action, and by prophesying a better future.”²¹

“Rethinking Democracy” responds to challenges to democratic politics that allegedly flow from postmodern philosophy on the one hand and current global crises on the other. The former challenges lie in postmodernism’s critique of the universality of norms, including any norms underlying democracy, and the latter challenges reside in the fact that the measures thought to be necessary to address current global crises are unlikely to gain assent through democratic procedures. Taken together, these considerations seemingly force us to rethink democracy. Rorty thinks there is no need to do any such thing. Instead, we should abandon the outdated assumption that democracy needs universal moral norms as its foundation.

Existing evidence for the practical superiority of democracy to any other imaginable system is foundation enough, as well as reason enough, to keep democracy in place despite current crises. Instead of rethinking democracy, then, we need to rethink the solutions to our current problems so that they could be realized through democratic measures. The final essay of part I, “First Projects, Then Principles,” argues that this can be done without reconciling conflicting beliefs if we can find projects capable of garnering wide participation.

The remaining chapters of the book develop this credo in response to leading political matters of Rorty’s day. His analyses and calls for change continue to resonate. Part II is devoted to the US context, beginning with “Does Being an American Give One a Moral Identity?” a previously unpublished essay that offers Rorty’s most in-depth account of how moral identity and group membership structure our positions on political questions. He counsels his fellow Americans “to incorporate our . . . citizenship into our moral identities” as the prerequisite for successful collective self-reform.²²

The three essays that follow offer the most sustained expression of Rorty’s views on the historical achievements of universities, and the contemporary problems and excesses that must be overcome for them to realize their promise for vouchsafing democracy’s future. “Demonizing the Academy” predicts that the years ahead are likely to see “more and more attempts to discredit the colleges and universities, for the right is well aware that the American academy is now (after the breakdown of the labor movement) the last remaining defender of the poor against the rich and of the weak against the strong.” Rorty pierces the right’s false narrative of leftist academics run amok, recognizing that while they might manage “to get control of a primary school system here and a university English department

there, the well-organized, well-financed, and very energetic religious right is a hundred times more threatening to free speech and diversity of opinion than all the [academic leftists] put together.” For all the right’s doomsaying about universities teeming with leftists, the latter’s members are far fewer than the right imagines. Always managing to rile both left and right, he also chafes against “facile exercises in ‘sensitivity’” that fail to promote “genuine discussion about the divisions in American society [that] would concentrate on disparities of power rather than differences in culture.”²³ For Rorty, racism, rather than a failure to recognize cultural diversity, is the deeper injustice in need of redress.

In “American Universities and the Hope for Social Justice” and “The Intellectuals and the Poor,” both of which appear here in print for the first time, Rorty addresses the nature and limits of what universities and intellectuals can contribute to the cause of social justice, taking up still timely topics like attitudes toward populism and the growing anti-intellectual backlash generated by the sneering attitude of self-appointed political correctness police. Learning from William James’s insights into the “ethos” of certain academic departments’ growing remove from the broader US culture, Rorty grasps that the university’s claim to being the moral conscience of the nation only holds when it resists disdain. He calls for a sober recognition of the United States’ historical injustices, without allowing shame over the past to morph into either an anti-Americanism that encourages its victims “to turn their backs on the country than to claim a share in its history and future,” or receptivity to the right’s narrative of white grievance that aims only to divide Americans from each other.²⁴

Rorty nevertheless refuses to voice mere jeremiads. He connects his diagnoses to concrete reform efforts that offer potential

common ground, like the “justice for janitors” movement on college campuses in “American Universities and the Hope for Social Justice” and policy proposals for the Social Security Administration in “Making the Rich Richer.” “Can American Egalitarianism Survive a Globalized Economy?” and “Back to Class Politics” speak directly to the plight of the US working class and the widening gap between rich and poor that only has worsened since Rorty wrote. The latter essay brings the issue of racial injustice into the conversation about globalization in ways that many accounts, including others of Rorty’s own, fail to do. The section closes with Rorty’s dystopian narrative “Looking Backwards from the Year 2096,” which dramatizes the perils of failing to think of each other as fellow citizens, a danger more severe now than ever that, according to the essay, may lead America on a downward spiral from social unrest through a new civil war all the way to “the dark years” of military dictatorship.

Rorty’s orthodoxy-bashing and divide-bridging continue in part III’s turn to global issues. “The Unpredictable American Empire” charts a course between those who would condemn America irredeemably for its imperialism and those who uncritically exalt its exceptionalism. “Post-Democracy” worries about authoritarian regimes exploiting the threat of terrorism to curtail democratic freedoms and portends a rise of neofeudalism in Western democracies, before offering practical remedies. Both essays sound the refrain of “Rethinking Democracy” that what is needed is a renewal of our democratic faith and not a questioning of democracy. In “Humiliation or Solidarity?” Rorty joins European intellectuals Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in addressing the role and importance of a unified Europe, a topic given new urgency by Brexit. His call for an international police force in “Half a Million Blue Helmets?” capable of being deployed to quell local armed gangs whose

violence can escalate into ethnic cleansing responds to an on-the-ground need conveyed to him on a visit to Serbia, a stance unlikely to earn him allies on the left. “A Queasy Agnosticism” is a timely reflection, spurred by Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday*, on the declining hegemony of the West and the possibility that, as hope is increasingly replaced by fear, the West may betray its own ideals. The resulting inability “to sketch a credible agenda for large-scale change” constitutes a profound problem insofar as our growing queasiness about the level of injustice we currently tolerate makes it “hard to find inspiration in a vision of a just, free, global community.”²⁵

The volume concludes with “Intellectuals and the Millennium,” Rorty’s forward-looking take on the prospects for moral and political progress globally that expresses his view that further progress should lie not in philosophy or religion, but rather in “a breed of leaders with sufficient imagination to propose bold yet concrete solutions.”²⁶

For all his sound proposals, not all of Rorty’s interventions hit their mark. His worry that the left’s focus on culture caused it to neglect economic class triggered an overreaction where he downplayed the importance of culture. His displeasure with the left’s inability to see America’s greatness amid its vices made him overcorrect by downplaying the political faults of political figures he admired. For someone who spent so much time critiquing the Cultural Left for not paying enough attention to the economy, Rorty shows almost no awareness in his writings of contemporary debates on alternatives to capitalism, which makes his trademark stance that all-other-economic-systems-have-failed-so-the-best-we-can-hope-for-is-capitalism-with-a-human-face seem surprisingly lazy and dogmatic.

There are other examples of erroneous judgment, tone-deafness, or short-sightedness in his political writings that are likely to be striking for today's reader. However, his insistence upon the need for intellectuals to intervene in the problems of the day with concrete strategies for change, rather than issue, from secure vantages within the ivory tower, detached critiques or self-serving rationalizations of the status quo, is resoundingly relevant. His pragmatic proposals for moral and political reform of our culture and communities speak directly to the most urgent crises of our time. His prophecies about the rise of populism, strongman leaders, a period of Dark Years, and global injustice reach us today as warnings more chilling now than when he wrote. Whether a form of patriotic attachment to America that stops short of nationalism, or an egalitarian, classless, and casteless society, or a "global community of trust" is achievable remain unknowns on which Rorty offers no certainty or even assurances.²⁷ But he never gave up on the idea that the democratic vista is limited only by our willingness to learn and change.

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