

## ***Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.***

**By Richard Rorty. Harvard University Press, 1998. 159 pp.**

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Ought the Northern Hemisphere to share its wealth with the Southern, or ought each nation to take whatever steps are necessary to aid its own least advantaged citizens?[88]<sup>1</sup> These responses to the problem of globalization are mutually exclusive: "...the first response suggests that the old democracies should open their borders, whereas the second suggests that they should close them." [88] In *Achieving Our Country* Rorty argues that the Post 1960's or New Left is unable to establish a compromise between these positions, and thus is incapable of replying effectively to globalization, which for Rorty exemplifies the problems faced by the Left at the end of the Twentieth Century. Only by reconciling the New Left with the Pre 1960's or Reformist Left to form the Political Left can the Left make itself effective.

The New Left faces several difficulties in replying effectively to late Twentieth-Century problems. First, confronted with the atrocity of the Vietnam War, the members of the New Left determined that it was no longer possible to have national pride, and thus no point in "formulat[ing] a legislative program, join[ing] a political movement, or shar[ing] in national hope." [8] The New Left, by abandoning national pride, gave up, he contends, what "...is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive." [3]; only imaginative and productive political deliberation will allow an effective response to problems such as globalization. At the same time the New Left abandoned national pride its members determined that political change was only possible outside the established political system. The difficulty with this determination "...is that the government of our nation-state will be, for the foreseeable future, the only agent capable of making any real difference in the amount of selfishness and sadism inflicted on Americans." [98]; choosing to work outside the established political system, the New Left abandoned the one organization with the political power necessary to resolve the problems faced by the Left. Moreover, the New Left took as its focus sadism, which has made it ill-prepared to handle problems such as globalization where it "...will have to talk much more about money, even at the cost of talking less about stigma." [91] In addition, the New Left has sought to retain

ideological purity, but to resolve the problems it faces it will have to "...transform itself by opening relations with the residue of the Reformist Left, and in particular with the labor unions." [91] Next, the New Left's stance on multiculturalism, the protection and sustenance of difference, has promoted divisiveness rather than the unity needed to gain and wield political power; the power without which the Left is not in a position to respond to problems such as globalization. [10] Finally, the New Left must cease being an academic, theoretical enterprise: it must "...forget about Baudrillard's account of America as Disneyland—as a country of simulacra—and to start proposing changes in the laws of a real country, inhabited by real people who are enduring unnecessary suffering, much of which can be cured by government action. Nothing would do more to resurrect the American Left than agreement on a concrete political platform, a people's charter, a list of specific reforms." [99] The way for the New Left to overcome these difficulties is to learn from the success of the Reformist Left.

Unlike the New Left, the Reformist Left did not, when confronted with the atrocity of the Vietnam War, abandon pride in the United States. Instead its members believed that national pride was compatible with, among other atrocities, "...the death of a million Vietnamese out of sheer macho arrogance." [32] The Reformist Left also retained faith in the established political system; seeking to change the United States in line with its vision of social justice, which became for its members a civic religion. [18,38,101] The Reformist Left further differed from the New Left in that it selected as its focus economic inequality; believing that reducing economic inequality would decrease prejudice. [76] And, the Reformist Left was willing to engage in practical politics—it was not bound by ideological purity. Next, the Reformist Left embraced a Hegelian view of unity, one in which the different groups of society melded themselves to form a unity. [25] Finally, the Reformist Left was a practical, not a theoretical movement.

The success of the Reformist Left, Rorty argues, suggests that the New Left should reconcile itself with the Reformist Left by embracing national pride, working within the established political system, adopting a civic religion, focusing on economic inequality, showing a willingness to compromise, embracing unity, and practicing practical politics. All that will be retained of the New Left is its legacy in ending the Vietnam War [67] and its success in reducing sadism [76]. By reconciling itself with the Reformist Left to form the Political Left, the New Left will gain the ability to reply effectively to the problems confronting the Left at the end of the Twentieth-Century.

While *Achieving Our Country* raises important questions about the nature and future of the Left, particularly the way in which the New Left has become a theoretical rather than practical movement, and is therefore a valuable work Rorty's discussion of national pride is problematic.

National pride is the key to the ineffectiveness of the New Left and the effectiveness of the Reformist Left, and thence the Political Left: it is national pride that promotes effective political deliberation and action; it is national pride that leads one to work within the established political system; it is national pride that leads one to reform the United States in light of a vision of social justice, and thereby end economic inequality and sadism; it is for the sake of national pride that one is willing to compromise in politics; and it is national pride that contributes to social unity. The importance of national pride also suggests why the New Left might want to reconcile itself with the Reformist Left: to embrace national pride is to give a movement the key to achieving political power and thereby effecting change and resolving problems. Moreover, national pride has played a key role in Rorty's own life. In the autobiographical section of *Achieving Our Country* [58ff] Rorty describes himself as a member of the Left who supported the Cold War, or put another way, as a member of the Anti-Communist Left. He was thus able, for lack of a better term, to assimilate the numerous atrocities committed by the United States during this contest. But, Rorty has not yet explained how it was possible for himself and the members of the Reformist Left to retain national pride in the face of atrocities. Was it that the members of the Reformist Left did not believe the atrocities were sufficient to abandon national pride; in which case, what atrocities would be sufficient? Is national pride something that can be regained? Did the members of the Reformist Left simply edit history to remove the atrocities as was done by some opponents of the proposed Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian?<sup>2</sup> Did the members of the Reformist Left, as Ambrose does in his discussion of the fire-bombing of Dresden,<sup>3</sup> re-describe the atrocity to make it a nonatrocity or justify the atrocity by appealing to the atrocities committed by the other side? All of these approaches, apart from being simplistic, avoid the problem at hand: how is it possible to admit that the United States has committed atrocities and still retain national pride? It is this important question that Rorty has left unanswered. Moreover, Rorty has undermined his argument that the New Left needs to transform itself into the Political Left for he allows that the New Left was successful in ending the Vietnam War and in reducing sadism; both of which were accomplished without national pride and working outside the established political system.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All page references, unless otherwise notes, are to Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See *Hiroshima's Shadow*, edited by Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, the Pamphleteer's Press 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, Touchstone Books 1997, pp. 306-309.