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Rorty's Social Theory and the Narrative of U.S. History Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications for creating a U.S. history narrative from a Rortyan perspective. First, we review Rorty's social theory. Second, we discuss implications of his ideas regarding the creation of a U.S. history narrative based upon his ideas. Finally, we examine two concerns that would likely emerge if a Rortyan U.S. history curriculum were taught in our public schools.

Scholars have a history of crossing intellectual borders (Abbott, 2001). In particular, educators draw from a diversity of intellectuals upon which to base our understanding of, for example, schools and society, curriculum content, teaching, and learning. In addition to icons such as Marx, James, Freud, and Dewey, the works of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse), Foucault, Gilligan, Derrida, Gramsci, West, Arendt, and Fraser, just to name a few, have been used to guide our scholarship and practice. However, with the exception of few scholars (e.g., Peters & Ghiraldelli, 2001), one of America's most controversial scholars,[1] Richard Rorty, has been largely ignored. This situation is unfortunate in that Rorty provides several ideas that would benefit our efforts to reconceptualize U.S. history curriculum. As Jenkins (1995) argues, "For history (and history education) to be credible, it must . . . fit into the sort of intellectual debates Rorty exemplifies" (p. 99). He goes on to note that several historians have come to appreciate the potential of Rorty's thinking in relation to the field of history. However, this attention with some exceptions (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004) has been lacking among history educators. In response, the purpose of this paper is to review some of the major themes in Rorty's social theory and then explore its implications regarding the narrative of U.S. history education. For the purpose of this paper, we define narrative as the underlining story that holds a history together and keeps it from becoming a mere presentation of disjointed people, places, and events. In particular, we examine several challenges of creating of a narrative that binds us together as a people, that honors the diverse ancestral heritages from which we came to this land, and perhaps most difficult of all, that finds a way to educate children about our nation that doesn't dwell or avoid the dark side of our history. Finally, we examine some concerns regarding the implementation of a Rortyan U.S. history curriculum. In doing so, we add our voice to recent efforts (e.g., Cohen, Epstein, Mattson, & Turk, 2009; Gerwin & Zevin, 2009; Ragland & Woestman, 2009) to make the teaching of this subject more intellectually engaging and meaningful to our students in public schools.

Rorty's Social Theory

Rorty wrote nine books and dozens of papers on numerous topics, and thus, it is beyond the scope of this one paper to address his entire body of work. As a result, we limit our focus to his social theory as a basis for discussing the potential value (or lack thereof) of his ideas for U.S. history curriculum.

Anti-Foundationalism

Perhaps the central motif of Rorty's social theory is his (1980) comprehensive critique of "truth" as timeless and immutable information. Rorty is especially indebted to Dewey's pragmatic (Dewey, 1920; Rorty, 1982, 1991; Kadlec, 2007) perspective of knowledge as the "by-product" of our symbolic interaction with the environment. As we interact with our surroundings, we interpret the experience and create knowledge for the purpose of enhancing our lives. Ironically, the more complex the organism, the greater are the interactive options it has in relating to its environment, and thus the more uncertainty exists in determining the most fruitful course of action. Historical reflection can help, but there is no certainty in this process. Ideas are best viewed as merely "tools that equip us with beliefs for coping with our environment" rather than accurate representations of "reality" with a capital "R" (Peters & Ghiraldelli, 2001, p. 3).

Rorty's social theory has no fixed, eternal, universal, or essential "Truths." Like Dewey (1920), he suggested we replace our quest for Truth with "warranted assertabilities," that is, ideas that enrich and deepen our existence over time and in light of human experience.[2] However, unlike many post-modernists, Rorty recognized the contingent "truth" (lower-case "t") embedded in the social contract that exists between people at a given time and location. Rorty suggests that truth merely reflects the intellectual solidarity of a particular group's values, knowledge, and ways of acting that are taken for granted as "normal" within it. Some of these ideas are codified into "laws," while others are informal "understandings" such as "proper manners" (Elias, 1982).

Rorty's rejection of Truth extends to his understanding of social morality. His pragmatism encourages us to be highly skeptical of actions based on claims of moral righteousness. "For the pragmatist in morals, the claim that the customs of a given society are 'grounded in human nature' is not one which he knows how to argue about. He is a pragmatist because he cannot see what it would be like for a custom to be so grounded" (Rorty, 1980, p. 178). For Rorty (1989), morals are merely reflections of a given community's solidarity.

> Sellar's thesis is that morality is a matter of what he calls "we-intentions," that the core meaning of "immoral action" is "the sort of thing *we* (quoted italics) don't do." An immoral action is . . . the sort of thing which, if done at all, is done only by animals, or by people of other families, tribes, cultures, or historical epochs. If . . . done repeatedly by one of us, that person ceases to be one of us. She becomes an outcast, someone who doesn't speak our language, even though she may once have appeared to do so. On Sellar's account, as on Hegel's, moral philosophy takes the form of an answer to the question "Who are 'we,' how did we come to be what we are, and what might we become?: rather than an answer to the question "What rules should dictate my actions?" In other words, moral philosophy takes the form of historical narration and utopian speculation rather than a search for general principles. (p. 59)

In response to accusations of nihilistic relativism (e.g., Best & Kellner, 2001; Case, 1995; Haack, 1995; Machan, 1996), Rorty (1999) states,

> Critics of moral relativism think that unless there is something absolute, something which shares God's implacable refusal to yield to human weakness, we have no reason to go on resisting evil. If evil is merely a lesser good, if all moral choice is a compromise between conflicting goods, then, they say, there is no point in moral struggle. The lives of those who have died resisting injustice become pointless. But to us pragmatists moral struggle is continuous with the struggle for existence, and no sharp break divides the unjust from the imprudent, the evil from the inexpedient. What matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness. This goal is not written in the stars, and is no more an expression of what Kant called "pure practical reason" than it is the Will of God. It is a goal worth dying for, but it does not require backup from supernatural forces. The pragmatist view of what opponents of pragmatism call "firm moral principles" is that such principles are abbreviations of past practices - ways of summing up the habits of the ancestors we most admire. (p. xxix)

Rorty's pragmatism challenges us to work for meaningful reform, guided by values, without the intellectual security that our efforts or values will ultimately result in the resolution of a given ill, be it racism, poverty, war, or poor education.

Rorty (1989) suggests we develop a strong sense of irony to keep us from viewing our "final vocabulary" as foundational rather than contingent. He (1989) calls people "ironists" who realize

> that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between

> final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre call "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. (pp. 73-74)

Ironically, Rorty's "foundation" (as a lower-case "truth") is that there is no foundational knowledge or morality. It is not that ironists don't have a set of ideas that they assume are correct; rather, it's just that they understand that their "cannon" is temporal, transient, and self created. As Forster (1992) suggests, we would be wise to adopt Rorty's call for "better and worse descriptions" rather than truth or falsity.

Leftist Patriotism

Perhaps Rorty's most contentious project was his effort to reclaim a sense of national identity and patriotism from a progressive/leftist perspective. Rorty's patriotism is not connected to our government, a particular political party or leader, or the boundaries of our nation. For Rorty, patriotism represents a commitment to the "American experiment," a nation that rejects cruelty and works towards establishing a more liberal, critical, and social democracy (Goodman, 2006). Rorty's patriotism is particularly difficult to accept given the "conservative restoration" that has taken place in our country (e.g., Gabbard, 2008; Goodman, 2006) for much of the last three decades, and in particular, the foreign and domestic policies of George W. Bush's administration, which was arguably the most conservative, arrogant, and dangerously inept in our nation's history. Nevertheless, Rorty (1998) challenges those of us with progressive values to follow the example of Dewey, Jefferson, and Whitman, who found pride in our nation's experiment, despite its past and present failures, acts of cruelty, and shameful policies.

Like many western philosophers (going back to Kant), Rorty views nations as collective subjects, and as such, they are similar to individuals. "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement" (1998, p. 3). He goes on to argue that like individuals, nation-states have histories that foster shame or pride, and unless the latter "outweighs shame" (p. 3), it is extremely difficult for a nation to improve. Rorty wants to create a new, national narrative that will redescribe America in ways that the left can embrace and be used to forge a new progressive notion of who "we" are.

In particular, Rorty wants to embrace a national "we" as a more effective response to the marginalization and otherization that still exists in our society rather than an emphasis on critical arguments or scientific information. In addition to having an individual identity, we also have any number of collective identities rooted in our families, ancestral heritages, gender, sexual orientation, age, skin color, and occupation, among other things. Typically, an individual will feel a greater connection to and care about people who share one or more of their collective identities than to those who do not. Rorty (1998) has advocated for the development of a collective identity based upon our nation state, to the degree that this collective identity acknowledges our diversity as a people and is committed to the politics of inclusion and social justice. Rorty calls for the left to justify its advocacy for equality, opportunity, inclusion, respect, and care-giving not upon a particular economic class, system, or "humanity," but upon our national identity. If this identity took hold firmly among the electorate, then as Americans, "we" simply would not allow 20% of our children to live in poverty or to attend grossly inadequate schools, for a significant number of our society to go without basic medical care, or for citizens be marginalized or otherized based upon their skin color, ethnicity, body type, gender, or sexual orientation (because these differences pale compared to our bonds of nationhood).

Although most people on the left have followed in Kant's, Hegel's, and Marx's footsteps and identified "humanity" as the ultimate "we," Rorty disagrees.[3] While not ruling out the possibility that people will one day embrace all of humanity as "us," Rorty (1989) thinks at this time, it's better to use our national identity as a catalyst for facing our societal problems.

> Consider . . . the unending hopelessness and misery of the lives of the young Blacks in American cities. Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow *Americans*—to insist that it is outrageous that an *American* should live without hope. (p. 191)

This national "we" would create conditions for members of different collective identities to have conflicts, but yet to embrace one another as "us," rather than "them." In this way, people can engage in struggle over public interests, but this antagonism is modified by our union, which is based upon geography and the imperfect social contract under which we agree to live.

To achieve this vision of leftist patriotism, Rorty (1989, 1998, 1999) wants to place progressive campaigns such as the women's suffrage and liberation movements (Kessler-Harris, 2001; Rosen, 2001), the public education movement (Katz, 1968), the labor and anti-trust movements (Himmelberg, 1994; Lichtenstein, 2002), the civil rights movement (Olson, 2001), the ecology movement (Fox, 1986), the health and consumer safety movement (Storrs, 2000), and the antiwar movement (Garfinkle, 1995) at the core of what the United States has been and will strive to become.

Rorty emphasizes that these and other struggles are representative of efforts to improve upon, rather than destroy, our society. Rorty wants to reclaim leftist reformism instead of the more romantic vision of a revolutionary left seeking to destroy and then transform society. Unfortunately, from Rorty's perspective, the new left of the 1960s did not embrace this reformist tradition, turning instead to Marxist-Leninist revolution (e.g., Elbaum, 2002; Hook, 1975; Gitlin, 1993; Isserman & Kazin, 2000; Kurlansky, 2004) which, unintentionally, contributed the previously mentioned conservative restoration.

Marxism, Revolution, & Reform

Although Rorty grew up in a house of Trotskyites (Gross, 2008), as he matured, he came to a similar conclusion as Dewey (Moreno & Frey, 1985; Rodrigues, 2001) regarding Marxism. Rather than wanting to destroy capitalist society, he embraced the twentieth-century liberal package of government regulated capitalism, progressive taxation, a social welfare system, a commitment to private spaces and activities, and a reciprocal foreign policy (Rorty, 1998, 1999). For many Marxists, however, (e.g., Allman, 2001; Brosio, 1994; McLaren, Farahmandpur, & Suoranta, 2001), statements such as the one below still elicit cries of heresy.

> It is impossible to discuss leftist politics in the twentieth century, in any country, without saying something about Marxism. For Marxism was not only a catastrophe for all the countries in which Marxists took power, but a disaster for the reformist Left in all the countries in which they did not. . . . For us Americans, it is important not to let Marxism influence the story we tell about our own Left. We should repudiate the Marxist insinuation that only those who are convinced capitalism must be overthrown can count as leftists, and that everybody else is a wimpy liberal, a self-deceiving bourgeois reformer. (Rorty, 1998, pp. 41-42)

Although he recognized the important role the new left played in ending the Vietnam War and fighting racism, Rorty became disturbed by its rejection of the American experiment.

Rorty suggests that the radicalization of the 1960s new left came at a heavy price, namely, the alienation of a large majority of citizens who might have been sympathetic to progressive ideals, but who were deeply disaffected by the rantings of the 1960s youth politics (e.g., Garfinkle, 1995; Gitlin, 1993; Isserman & Kazin, 2000). Rorty would likely share Ambrose's (1995) lament that 1960s' progressives

> had a chance to create a genuine party of the left in America, but instead it took its opportunity . . . to riot, to scandalize, to do drugs and group sex, to talk and dress dirty, to call for revolution and burn flags, to condemn parents and indeed anyone over 30 years of age, in an excess of free will and childish misjudgment seldom matched and never exceeded. To the participants, it provided intensity of feeling and was great fun. To the potential antiwar members of the middle class, it was a turn-off. (p. vii)

By calling for the overthrow of the system, the new left created a politics long on generalized and reductionist criticisms, but hopelessly short on viable alternatives.[4] In addition, radical leftists almost never want to recognize the ways in which the United States (as a result of coalition politics) has become more democratic, provided higher living standards for even the poorest among us, broadened our civil rights, become more inclusive, reduced bigotry and stereotyping, and provided more educational and occupational options for its citizens. Although the United States continues to struggle with destroying the environment, racism, sexism, unjustified income disparity, imperialist adventures, along with many other social problems and ills, Rorty (1998) challenged us to view the United States as "illimitable," and noted that despite its numerous (and at times villainous) shortcomings, it is "a good example of the best kind of society so far invented" (qtd. in Peters & Ghiraldelli, 2001, p. 4).

To summarize, Rorty wanted to liberate the American left from "revolutionary Marxism." He (1998) wanted to reclaim the presixties, "reformist left," that is, individuals who "struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong" (p. 43).

> We . . . did not need Marx to show us the need for (income) redistribution, or to tell us that the state was often little more than the executive committee of the rich and powerful. . . . It would be a good thing if the next generation of American leftists found . . . little resonance in the names of Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. . . . It would be even better . . . if the names of Ely and Croly, Dreiser and Debs, A. Philip Randolph and John L. Lewis were more familiar to these leftists. . . . For it would be a big help to American efforts for social justice if each new generation were able to think of itself as participating in a movement which has lasted for more than a century, and has served human liberty well. . . . Each new generation of students ought to think of American leftism as having a long and glorious history. They should be able to see, as Whitman and Dewey did, the struggle for social justice as central to their country's moral identity. (Rorty,1998, pp. 48, 51)

For Rorty, the romantic desire for the revolution lost its appeal long ago. In its place, he called for a reinvigorated, progressive reformism to tackle the many problems we face as a nation.

Rorty and the Narrative of U.S. History Curriculum

Perhaps the most important implication from Rorty's work concerns the narrative in most U.S. history classes. The vast majority of U.S. history textbooks and courses present students with an ethnically narrow, linear, and celebratory story of our nation's growing power and development. Drawing upon Wertsch's (2005) and O'Connor's (Wertsch & O'Connor, 1991) work, VanSledright (2008) nicely summarizes what Barton and Levstik (2004) call the "master narrative."

> Persecuted Anglos fled Europe and their oppressive overlords and traveled to the New World in search of freedom. The birth of the United States . . . was the culmination of a struggle to overthrow European-imposed tyrannies and establish a new nation founded on individual liberty and unfettered pursuits of happiness. Following this birth, a period of two centuries ensued in which the people further distanced themselves from the Old World, hunting limitless progress as they expanded and settled the vast expanse that was western North America. With copious amounts of hard work and the goal of individual liberty beckoning them from every horizon,

> patriots and pioneers threw off their Old World trappings and were born anew. The nation they built stood for liberty, democracy, and the right to live and produce all their minds and hearts could desire, unobstructed by a government that tampered with their yearnings. . . . The result was a nation populated by freedom seekers, who created the best and most powerful . . . nation . . . the world had yet to see. (p. 123)

The main actors of this narrative are Anglo men, and it emphasizes the celebratory myths and legends of our nation such as victorious wars, territorial exploration and expansion, political rights, economic development, scientific breakthroughs, literary accomplishments, and artistic achievements (Loewen, 1995). This narrative also suggests that the children of European immigrants who later came to this country were able to blend relatively easily into this narrative (the melting pot) and a thus become Americans. Although during the last thirty years there has been an effort to be more inclusive by mentioning (often in text sidebars) the contributions of women and people of color who have come (voluntarily or not) to this country, U.S. history courses generally ignore the trials, oppression, exclusion, and travails that most immigrants experienced in our past, the ethno-racial, gender, and other class conflicts that are deeply woven in our nation's history, as well as most controversies that have surrounded significant historical events (e.g., Foster, 2006; Friedman & Kenney, 2005; Gabaccia, 1997; Gerstle, 1997; Loewen, 1995; Spickard, 2007). Some (e.g., Kammen, 1989; Lowenthal, 1998) suggest that what is taught in most history classes is more nostalgic heritage than comprehensive history. As such, these courses gloss over many of the darker aspects of our nation's history (e.g., racial oppression, un-justified wars, dispossession of pre-Columbian immigrants' and Mexicans' lands, support for dictators in other countries). As VanSledright (2008) states, "An American *history* . . . reveals the blemishes, leaves rough edges intact, and eschews cosmetics. American *heritage* selects out and papers over those elements of the past not conducive to a story line of celebratory successes" (p. 121). As several scholars (e.g., Barton, 2001; Bodnar, 1992; Epstein, 2000; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007) have noted, this nostalgic narrative has been powerfully reinforced by our popular culture and mass media.

Although this narrative attempts to unify our country, its Anglo-heritage emphasis has for many students had the opposite impact (Loewen, 1995; Lowenthal, 1998, VanSledright, 2008). Epstein (2000) has noted that U.S. history classes are alienating to many students with non-European ancestries and lead them to the dubious conclusion that there must be a conspiracy to keep people of color in a perpetual state of second-class citizenship. This reaction seems especially poignant when we look at the condition of schools in impoverished neighborhoods. On the one hand, students in these schools are taught that our nation is unified and one based on freedom and equality, but on the other hand, the condition of their schooling tells the opposite story (Kantor & Lowe, 2007).

In addition, by focusing on great national events and heroes, many students come to believe that common people have little to do with the making of history, and thus pay little serious attention to it. Given the ancestral pluralism of our people, the resistance to our previous melting-pot ideal, and the freedom to express widely divergent ideologies it is not unreasonable to ask if we are able to have a national narrative. Should we teach U.S. history as a compilation of tribal or partisan histories? Should our history emphasize the diversity of our population or our unity? Should it explore the dark side of our cultural, governmental, international, and military events or continue to focus primarily on celebratory accounts of past events and people?

As previously mentioned, Rorty's work reflects an effort to work through some of these challenges. Clearly, Rorty would like to alter the conventional master narrative that is taught in our schools. U.S. history does provide an opportunity to develop a national identity that Rorty feels is extremely important. Rorty also would likely want the history to be celebratory. However, his cast of heroes and important events would deviate greatly from what is currently taught.

First, a Rortyan history would be a narrative of us, that is, the people who came here, what experiences they and their descendants have had, and how these experiences have shaped the nation we are becoming. Like Spickard (2007), Rorty would decenter the Anglo experience from our history.[5] Rather than view Anglos as Americans and everyone else who migrated to this land as immigrants, people (and their descendants) from this particular heritage would be treated as just one of the many ethno-racial groups that immigrated and participated in the construction of this nation starting with those who first colonized this continent around 10,000 BCE. Rorty would challenge educators to generate an immigrant U.S. history curriculum that isn't a story of assimilation into the Anglo heritage, but rather a story of ethno-racial-gendered-class conflict and amalgamation. It would be an account of this struggle and blending, resulting in the creation and recreation of the many "collective identities" (Goodman, 2006) that make up who we are as Americans.

A Rortyan history would not be a curriculum made up of tribal narratives in which each ethno-racial group (and gender) or region only tells its story. In this sense, he would join critics of extreme versions of multiculturalism, such as Schlesinger (1998), fearing it might pit one ethno-racial group, gender, class, or region against others. Rorty did not take our nation's unity for granted. He recognized that the creation of this type of polity is a relatively recent event in human history. Although Rorty knew it was far from perfect, he believed a national narrative to be better than either tribal or transnational narratives, whether the latter came from multinational corporations or Marxist internationalists. He would have agreed with VanSledright's (2008) observation that "[b]uilding and maintaining a nation state has long been a precarious undertaking. . . . As a nation of immigrants— some voluntary, others forced— it has been difficult to construct and maintain a sense of national community" (p. 111). Although arduous, a Rortyan narrative would attempt to address both our diversity and unity. His narrative would emphasize our efforts to create (especially since the end of WWII) a more inclusive society. For Rorty (1991), the United States

> is a culture which prides itself on constantly enlarging its sympathies. . . . Its sense of . . . moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity. The heroes it apotheosizes include [although from Rorty's perspective not nearly enough] those who have enlarged its capacity for sympathy and tolerance. Among the enemies it diabolizes are the people who attempt to diminish this capacity. (p. 204)

Rorty argues that we are now in a position to teach the inclusive history that has previously been impossible due to the lack of the public acceptance of our diversity. However, given the orientation of most current U.S. history textbooks (Loewen, 1995) and other aspects of our society (e.g., Cruickshank, 2000), Rorty's assessment is hopeful but debatable.

In this sense, Rorty wants a U.S. history curriculum that draws upon the field of Ethnic Studies and is rooted in our immigrant experiences. However, it is not only a story of Anglo-masculine oppression of the immigrants who came to this country after (or before in the case of Native Americans and Spanish speakers who lived in what was northern Mexico) the founding fathers and their ancestors. Unlike Loewen (1995) and others (e.g, Gerstle, 1997; Zinn, 2003) who seem to prefer a U.S. history that emphasizes the many ignominious policies and actions of our nation and its leaders, Rorty recognized that no country's history curriculum would accentuate its shameful events, atrocities, and shortcomings to its young people. As several scholars (e.g., Foster & Crawford, 2006; Friedman & Kenney, 2005; Hein & Selden, 2000; Seixas, 2004; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000), have noted, no country stresses the dark side of its history in its schools. To expect that K-12 U.S. history courses would do so would be, from Rorty's perspective, unrealistic and counter-productive.

A Rortyan U.S. history, however, would not ignore our dark side, but would discuss it in ways that foster a national identity. Using a celebratory narrative, Rorty would shift the emphasis of U.S. history courses towards teaching about those individuals and groups of people who have struggled with each other over controversial events. Rorty (1999) wanted a narrative that would help students acquire

> an image of themselves as heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope. . . . We can think of . . . wanting children . . . to think of themselves as proud and loyal citizens of a country that slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 percent of its population could enroll . . . Dewey wanted the inculcation of this narrative of freedom and hope to be the core of the socializing (K-12 education) process. (pp. 121-122)

U.S. history courses would celebrate the times when struggles for social justice, more freedom, and greater democracy were successful. However, they would be explored as tentative, imperfect, and in need of more effort to keep the American experiment alive. For Rorty (1990) U.S. history should, "get across to the students that the emancipation of the slaves, the enfranchisement of women, the rise of the trade unions, the development of the welfare state, the woman's movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the like are episodes in an uncompleted saga" (pp. 42-43).

Rorty wanted a history curriculum that connects patriotism in the minds of young people with social reform and democratic struggle. A Rortyan history would be taught with a relatively neutral rather than an overly moralistic tone, similar to what Spickard (2007) outlines:

> Some readers [of *Almost All Aliens*] may make the mistake of thinking that there is a political agenda behind the writing of this book. That is not true. . . . It is not a book about what we *should do*. It is about what we *have done*. Our past is our past; there is no point in hiding from it or making up a different past in order to make us feel better about ourselves. (p. xx)

A Rortyan U.S. history curriculum would discuss the United States as a collective subject (not just its leaders) that has committed terrible as well as inspiring deeds. Rorty would have his heroes and heroines and even its unsung champions (e.g., Olson, 2001), but would avoid casting people or the nation as a whole in simple categories of good and evil. For example, even the darkest episode (along with slavery) of U.S. history, the genocide of American Indians and their removal onto reservations, would be taught without turning it into a moral drama. Instead of viewing the European settlers as villains and all Native Americans as virtuous, he would likely present the movement of European settlers as one of thousands of cultural conflicts that have taken place in human history. Neither ethno-racial group would be presented as superior to the other. The victory of European settlers over the first immigrants to this continent would not be ascribed to intelligence, moral supremacy, or the will of God, but the mismatch of power between hunting-gathering- and agricultural-metal-literary-based societies as well as contingent events such as the unintentional introduction of European germs that wiped out over 90% of eastern Native Americans between 1500 and 1600 (Diamond, 1999). Of course, there would be accounts of greedy and vicious Europeans, but also stories of individuals who, along with Native Americans, fought for Native American rights (and at times using questionable tactics). A Rortyan narrative would emphasize the events and people that have struggled to make the United States more inclusive, equitable, socially just, and democratic as well as less racist and imperialistic.

Concerns

Although a Rorty-inspired history curriculum is appealing, it also presents some significant challenges. First is the obvious resistance that this curriculum would receive from the conservative citizens and organizations in our society. Most educators (e.g., Leming, Ellington, & Porter, 2003) who, like Rorty, want to increase the place of U.S. history in the K-12 curriculum, also advocate for a more traditional narrative rooted in and glorifying the country's European leaders and presenting the U.S. as a nation of few, if any, shortcomings. This resistance became clear during the debates over the *National Standards for U.S. History* produced during the 1980s and 1990s. This curriculum guide written by educators and historians emphasized the roles that all voluntary and involuntary immigrants have played in the making of our country. It also did not shy away from the darker events and moments of our nation's past. The reaction from conservative news people, politicians, and activists demonstrated how difficult it would be to create a Rortyan U.S. history in our K-12 schools (e.g., Evans, 2004; Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Symcox, 2002). The struggle over what historical narrative we teach our children has been extremely contentious throughout history (Moreau, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002). This conflict should be expected as it is in the nature of liberal democracies to argue over which memories should be passed onto the next generation (VanSledright, 2008). Rorty's U.S. history curriculum would certainly be a catalyst for a significant culture war, which is perhaps why he (1998) called upon progressive thinking scholars to engage in "real" rather than merely intellectual politics.

This struggle would be daunting, but worth the effort, given that the history taught to our children greatly influences our concept of who we are as a people. If children are taught that we have a shameful past, then conservatives will continue to dominate the content of this subject as Rorty (1999) noted in *Education as Socialization and as Individualization*. Given the conservative history and current political climate of the United States (although with a new administration this climate might change), an effort to write U.S. history textbooks and develop courses from a Rortyan perspective might fail. Nevertheless, courageous teachers have developed courses (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004; Grant, 2003; Yeager & Davis, 2005) that reflect, to some degree, Rorty's vision of our history with the help of curriculum materials generated by groups such as *Rethinking Schools*, *Facing History and Ourselves, Teaching Tolerance* and younger children's history magazines such as *Cobblestone* and *Footsteps*.

A second concern regarding a Rortyan U.S. history curriculum would likely come from the left. Specifically, some individuals suggest Rorty's view of history prevents him from recognizing contemporary injustices. For example, in response to the pride Rorty (1999) takes in the slow, painful, incomplete, but progressive reforms that have occurred in the United States (see p. 24), McLaren (2001) and his colleagues state:

> He (Rorty) appears to have forgotten that the robber barons of yesterday have now been replaced by the global carpetbaggers of today; that white supremacy is alive and well throughout the United States, that violence against women, gays, and lesbians remains widespread. (pp. 150-151)

Of course, these and others (e.g., Allman, 2001; Brosio, 1994) interpret history from a Marxist perspective and argue social problems can't be resolved as long as capitalism exists. They do, however, raise an important question. Does Rorty's focus on a progressive narrative of the United States, undermine or prevent young people from wanting to confront serious social, political, and economic inequities found in contemporary society? Can our society substantively address these and other social problems without a history that clearly portrays the nation as wicked? Unless one is a Marxist, this argument simply is not convincing. To the contrary, a focus on the ways in which people have struggled to make this country a more inclusively democratic and socially just society would likely sensitize young people to these very issues. Although, a Rortyan U.S history would not portray the United States as an architectonic, evil power as envisioned by some Marxists, it would likely encourage young people of our country to embrace the values of social justice, inclusivity, anti-imperialism, and democracy far more than a Marxist history that would paint the United States as beyond redemption due to its capitalist economy. A Rortyan history would not induce the outrage among young people that a Marxist inspired, U.S. history curriculum would likely promote, but it would likely encourage young people to address the complex and difficult social ills such as racism, sexism, and war within a liberal democratic, social welfare, capitalist state that we and other nations are becoming.

In summary, Rorty's narrative would emphasize a social history that focuses on the struggles in which we have engaged to make our society live up to its idealism as an expression of our patriotism. While not ignoring the dark side of our histories, it would do so without the excessive condemnation that some of our more radical colleagues would like to see, but would have little public support. Rather than view the government and other powerful spheres of society as evil or hypocritical (which at times they are), they would be portrayed as sites of contestation where, as citizens of unequal power, we form coalitions and engage one another. It would be a narrative that embraces those who have directly participated in these struggles, the ideals that motivated them to do so, and the tentative outcomes. Like many conservatives, Rorty wants a U.S. history that is patriotic, not because the government and its policies represent the best in humanity, but due to our willingness to never give up on the American experiment.

Conclusion

We have explored the implications of Rorty's social theory for the teaching of U.S. history. We then considered, in an admittedly speculative manner, one way in which his ideas may guide our work in and thinking about this curriculum. Rorty's work calls upon educators to embrace the ambiguity inherent in knowledge, and recognize and emphasize to our students its connection to given sources. Most importantly, Rorty wants us to develop a history that speaks to all of our citizens, unites us in our struggles with and against each other, and fosters a patriotic commitment to Dewey's American experiment.

Rorty would likely advise us as educators to view our work as providing opportunities to progressively reform rather than "revolutionize" or "transform" the schooling of children. These latter catch phrases (North, 2006) often make us feel good, but unnecessarily alienate us from the public at large. Although critique is central to the work of academics, Rorty would challenge us to explore ways of doing so without demeaning our nation or people.

We conclude our discussion of Rorty's U.S history curriculum by placing his work in its historical context. Rorty represents a classic case of social reproduction (Gross, 2008). His parents were deeply interested in leftist social theory and the humanities. Rorty grew up during a time when many intellectuals were hopeful that some variation of Marx's social and economic theories could be put into practice without resulting in totalitarianism. Eventually, his parents and their compatriots such as Sidney Hook (1975) recognized this could not be accomplished. Rorty rejected the new left's radicalism, and he came to share his parents' ideas through his reading of Dewey's social pragmatism.

It seems as if Rorty's work was an attempt to communicate with the young adults of our society. The subtext of his work seems to be saying, "Don't make the same mistakes our generation did. Don't get caught up in utopian or revolutionary rhetoric like so many of us did during the late 1960s. Avoid analyses of schools and society that result in making progressive schooling seem scary to the public at large. Most importantly, find ways to bring leftist education and scholarship into the core narrative of the United States. As long as progressive ideas remain outside this narrative, its influence on our people and society will be limited."

Notes

1. As Bernstein (1990) noted, "By now Rorty has offended and antagonized just about everyone—the political left and right, traditional liberals, feminists, and both analytic and Continental philosophers. His 'strong' readings of key figures strike many as idiosyncratic creations of his own fantasies. He has been accused of being 'smug,' 'shallow,' 'elitist,' 'priggish,' 'voyeuristic,' 'insensitive,' and 'irresponsible.' 'Rorty-bashing' is rapidly becoming a new culture industry" (p. 34).
2. Dewey's notion of "warranted assertability" works well for not only the humanities and social sciences, but also the natural sciences. Scientists often preface their "truths" by saying, "Based upon what we know (cumulated information) at this time. . . ." Even in the natural sciences there is no need to posit "truths" as if they are timeless, immutable, and universal. Perhaps for this reason, many (e.g., Bontekoe, 1990; Prodo, 1988; Taylor, 1990) reject the correspondence theory of truth, but believe "truth," is still worth pursuing. Others reject Rorty's views and believe the quest for "truth" demands great respect (e.g., Diamond, 1994; Gutting, 1999; Kane, 1993; Manning, 1992).
3. Many (e.g., Kohak, 1993; Viroli, 1995) disagree with Rorty and feel that "in the name of humanity" is a powerful catalyst for social and political justice. For example, Geras (1995) notes that many rescuers of Holocaust victims risked their lives not out of a sense of nationalism, but because they couldn't tolerate the inhumanity of the German Reich.
4. As the authors (2006) have discussed, both scientific and critical Marxism is deeply flawed (e.g., Gouldner, 1979, 1980; Lovell, 1988). Reform leftists do agree with Marx that inequities are built into the economics of capitalism. However, simply stating that there are inequalities built into capitalism does not help us as a polity unless one has a viable and demonstratively better alternative vision of society. Unfortunately, as a theory upon which to build alternative societies, Marxism has shown itself, as illustrated by the numerous twentieth-century experiments, to be a dismal failure (e.g., Burgler, 1990; Courtois, et al., 1999;

Dolot, 1985; Hosking, 1985; Kornai, 1992; Lazzerini, 1999; Meredith, 2002; Soltys, 1997; Tang, Toai, & Chanoff, 2000).

5. Unlike Spickard (2007), Rorty would likely not group all "Whites" into one category. Instead, he would note the struggles that the Irish, Jews, Italians and others have had as well as their desires to assimilate into the Anglo experience. He would, of course, also note that this success has been significantly more difficult for immigrants of color.

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