



Rorty, Richard. Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America [review]

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Bauerlein, Mark. "Rorty, Richard. Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 16 (Fall 1998), 104-108. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1613>

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theory of language on the body, locates the foundation of referentiality in the body, the destructive capacities of modern war can sever any links between the body and language, and make the latter appear quite non-referential. The use of euphemisms contributes significantly to this undermining of language" (178). Comer convincingly concludes that Owen exposes the hypocrisy of euphemism, while Whitman deploys euphemism on occasion, in "what becomes a prevailing linguistic practice, especially with regard to warfare and weapons" (181), namely falsity in the guise of nationalist patriotism.

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LUKE MANCUSO

RICHARD RORTY. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization. Harvard University Press, 1997.

It is hard not to sympathize with the main contention of these lectures, namely, that Leftist thought in America has adopted a "spirit of detached spectatorship" (11) and devoted itself to theorizing society rather than reforming it. The Old Left of Eugene V. Debs, Upton Sinclair, and Herbert Croly operated on "the conviction that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy—that a cooperative commonwealth could be created by electing the right politicians and passing the right laws" (54-55). But New, Cultural Leftists like Fredric Jameson eschew that activism and instead ponder indefinite politico-cultural conditions like "late capitalism" and ruminate upon hazy abstractions like "objectivity." Old Leftists sought to effect a just redistribution of wealth and opportunity. New Leftists "specialize in what they call the 'politics of difference' or 'of identity' or 'of recognition'" (76-77). Old Leftists worry about minimum wages, adequate housing, and universal health care. New Leftists worry about how to "teach Americans to recognize otherness" (79).

For Rorty, what separates the activist Old Left from the spectatorial New Left is a historical event—Vietnam. Once the dirty facts of U.S. intervention emerged and complicity seemed ubiquitous, Leftist thought lost faith in the viability of changing American policy by constitutional means. The goal was no longer "achieving our country"—that is, bringing American politics in line with democratic ideals such as those Whitman and Dewey espouse—but exposing the System. Old-style reformist strategies (mobilizing voting blocs, appealing to unions, muckraking) were too easily coopted by the Establishment, absorbed into the hegemony and muffled. Once that skepticism set in, Rorty says, the Political Left was eclipsed by a Cultural Left, a largely academic crowd cynical about America, disengaged from practice, and producing ever-more-abstract, jargon-ridden interpretations of cultural phenomena.

Again, it is not difficult to appreciate Rorty's profile of today's Leftist cultural critic. The self-styled tenured radical delivering a lecture on, say, the Yale graduate student strike before catching a plane for the next stop on the conference tour is an all-too-familiar sight. The second-year grad student itching to get into the composition classroom and impart Foucauldian insights about power and institutions, but who has little interest in diction and syntax, exemplifies a

widespread confusion over the aims of English education. Set alongside Rorty's model intellectual Eugene Debs, such intramural Leftists appear downright flatulent. Debs mounted an exciting presidential campaign in 1912, and later served time in the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta for violating Wilson's 1917 Espionage Act (later the statutory basis for the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy Hearings). He fomented labor reforms and protested imperialist foreign policy, and suffered for it. But what constitutes academic Leftist activity? Not countering the propaganda and politicking of the Religious Right. Not investigating corporate lobbying tactics. Not going door-to-door with petitions. Rather, it entails revising syllabi to include more diversity, writing articles deconstructing the bourgeois subject in the Victorian novel, or serving on affirmative action committees—and profiting by it. Those actions all have merit, and may indeed have a seepage effect, as they alter students' thinking, revise the canon, and support Leftist social agendas. But the effect is politically radical only in a weak sense and should not be equated with the activities of Debs or of Capitol Hill lobbyists.

Of course, Rorty's portrait of the academic Left and its pseudopolitics rests upon a definition of politics that few academic Leftists would accept. For the latter, politics refers to the sum of human relations, period. Any interaction is political—a predication flexible and vague enough to allow academics to consider themselves agents of political change whenever they attend a conference or grade a student paper. But for Rorty (and most politicians and political scientists), politics signifies more specifically “the allocation and distribution of resources by governing bodies.” Only those things that directly influence groups' access to resources counts as political. A law, a housing policy, a tax loophole, admissions standards—all affect the price and availability of certain goods and services, so any action or discourse influencing them is political. And, Rorty adds, for those actions and discourses to qualify as genuinely political, they must have a “real” bearing upon practical affairs. For example, Baudrillard's theoretical survey of America as Disneyland writ large may be curious and stimulating, but it is not political. For a nation-interpretation to be political, it must “start by 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 governmental action” (99). But such concrete revisions have little appeal to the Cultural Left, whose members prefer to act as cultural inquisitors, not political agitators. “The Foucauldian academic Left” is “a Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create a better future” (139).

Rorty's call for a return to Old Left activism is a satisfying antidote to the pretensions of the Cultural Left and its self-justifying expansion of the meaning of politics. But while Rorty's general point entices scholars weary of the radical claims of their colleagues, as soon as Rorty begins to detail his theme, the satisfaction quickly departs. To back his contentions about the academic Left, Rorty provides various observations on the contemporary scene, including personal anecdotes (56-64), confessions of ignorance (128), and neopragmatic epigrams (27). But the observations amount less to a series of informal pieces of argument than they do to an odd list of misrepresentations, overstatements, and speculations. And added to their incorrectness is Rorty's

annoying habit of tossing off these summary judgments with dispatch and surety, as if they were palpably indisputable.

How true, measured, and informed are the following statements:

(1) "But if [Vietnam protesters'] patience had not run out at *some* point, if they had *never* taken to the streets, if civil disobedience had *never* replaced an insistence on working within the system, America might no longer be a constitutional democracy" (69).

(2) "The principal motive behind the new directions taken in scholarship in the United States since the Sixties has been the urge to do something for people who have been humiliated . . ." (80).

(3) "All universities worthy of the name have always been centers of social protest" (82).

(4) "One reason the cultural Left will have a hard time transforming itself into a political Left is that, like the Sixties Left, it still dreams of being rescued by an angelic power called 'the people'" (102).

(5) "When literature replaces the Bible, polytheism and its problems return . . ." (117).

(6) "By 'Platonism' I mean the idea that great works of literature all, in the end, say the same thing—and are great precisely because they do so" (135).

(7) "Whitman would have been delighted by rock-and-roll, drugs, and the kind of casual, friendly copulation that is insouciant about the homosexual-heterosexual distinction" (26).

The first sentence is a bizarre piece of alarmist historiography. Rorty says that without the protest movement the American system of government might have collapsed. But how did protesters save "constitutional democracy"? They objected to a vile foreign policy, not un-constitutional forces. When was constitutional democracy endangered?

The second statement, pinpointing an aid-the-humiliated motive behind all innovative post-Sixties scholarship, is obviously overstated. While the motive may lie behind feminist scholarship, African-American studies, and the like, it does not belong to deconstruction, psychoanalysis, or Rorty's own neo-pragmatism. Why make such sweeping summations? Why attach all "new directions" in scholarship to a single motive?

The third statement, I presume, does not require comment.

The fourth statement asserts that a populist dream underlies the Cultural Left's vision. But few Leftist critics in the Humanities believe in the people's capacity to recognize their own salvation. Much Cultural Leftist thought (derived from Foucault, Althusser, or Baudrillard) automatically assumes the false consciousness, ideological blindness, and willing subjection of the people to disciplinary practices, discursive formations, and capitalism. Besides, anybody attending the MLA convention or reading the impenetrable prose of cultural studies theorists knows that the academic Left harbors just as many elitist attitudes as the academic Right.

One cannot evaluate the fifth statement because its meaning is so obscure. (Polytheism?!)

The sixth statement is a typical Rorty broadside. A complex, loaded term—"Platonism"—receives a new definition, a pithy, useful, and wholly reductive reference designed only to convert opponents into straw men. Its spuriousness

becomes clear as soon as one asks whether anybody would accept this statement as a characterization of him- or herself. Does anybody working in the academy today believe that all great literature says the same thing, and that this is the basis of its greatness?

Finally, the last sentence on Whitman's speculated delight in sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll—this is an embarrassing misunderstanding of Whitman's attitudes. First of all, on rock-and-roll: Whitman might have tolerated rock music as a libidinal expression, but Whitman's favorite music was Italian opera. Given Whitman's emphasis on the spiritual power of great voices like Elias Hicks's, Whitman likely would have considered rock music an inferior form of "vocalization." On drugs: Whitman endorsed visionary states of consciousness, but he also embraced a purist philosophy of the body. He prefers the inebriation of the open air, not of alcohol and opium. His portraits of drunkards are sympathetic, but not celebratory. (We won't mention his temperance novel.) On casual, friendly, hetero- and homosexual copulation: Whitman never advocated casual sex. His puritanism prevented that. Whitman did advocate a polymorphous perversity and sexual pleasure, but he delighted in coupling only when it led to a heightened, *non-casual* experience.

This is not a one-time misconstrual of Whitman. Rorty is so intent on pushing his vision of a secular liberal democracy that he represents Whitman as his own precursor, as a nineteenth-century neopragmatist determined to remove God, sin, and elitism from American society. Whitman says, "And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God," which to Rorty means: "Whitman thought there was no need to be curious about God because there is no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured" (16). That is, people should avoid curiosity not because it hinders their receptivity to God's inspiration (as careful readers of Whitman would conclude), but because there is nothing to be curious about, no standard to explore beyond the projections of a "free people."

A few pages later, Rorty amplifies Whitman's supposed secularism by interpreting Whitman's "America is the greatest poem" sentiment as: "We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God" (22). But where in Whitman's entire corpus does the poet say that Americans stand *in the place of God*? Rorty's inference sounds more like Milton's Satan than Whitman's Americans, which prominently include pietistic figures like Quaker women and his own mother. True, Whitman often claims divinity for himself and others, but the claim implies direct participation with and in God, not displacement of God.

Other misrepresentations of Whitman include the overblown treatment of Whitman as a "reader of Hegel" (19-22) and the false assertion that Whitman denied the "eternal and nonhuman" (17) a place in human affairs. I suspect that the same questions of misrepresentation apply to Rorty's characterization of Dewey, and of the Old and New Left. But perhaps accusations of inaccuracy do not pertain to this text, written by a philosopher who has consistently denounced a correspondence theory of truth. At the end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argued for a fundamental alteration in philosophical inquiry, namely, a substitution of edification for epistemology. With its concerns with truth, epistemic justification, and evidence, Rorty says, epistemol-

ogy remains committed to the search for eternal, nonhuman grounds for knowledge. With that metaphysical hope exploded by Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger (Rorty's antimetaphysical triumvirate), knowledge has become an outgrowth of persuasion and convention, in open societies a conversational process of edification. Truth, then, is not the correspondence of statement and state of affairs, but rather those opinions that survive all conversational objections. Hence Rorty's breezy style, provocative locutions, expeditious judgments, his general carelessness of getting things right.

So, one might say, we should assess *Achieving Our Country* as polemic, not description. Rorty's explanation of nation-stories—"Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity" (13)—rightly apply to his own assertions. But this rationale will not do. Rorty bases his critique of the New Left on profiles of Old and New Leftists and on a mini-history of the transition from Old to New. The corrective he prescribes derives from Whitman's vision of an American future. The method begs the question of whether the profiles, the history, and the corrective are faithful to their original. And here, appraisals of fidelity need not be metaphysically founded, but only logically founded, that is, on a basic incompatibility of Rorty's descriptions and the objects of those descriptions.

In Whitman's case, Rorty's statements are obviously incompatible with Whitman's own statements. A deliberate reading of Whitman's corpus quickly shows that Rorty's interpretation (particularly of Whitman's secularism) has little warrant. In sympathy with Rorty's general point about the pretensions and pseudopolitics of academic Leftists, one wishes to grant Rorty leeway in using Whitman et al. to advance his polemic. But when the characterizations stray too far from readers' understanding of the originals, sympathy dwindles and the polemic collapses.

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