

# GLOBALISING PRAGMATISM

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CSGR Working Paper No. 171/05

August 2004

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## Abstract

The paper outlines a critique and reconstruction of Richard Rorty's version of pragmatism. While sympathetic to many elements in Rorty's philosophy, his recent creation of a dichotomy between state-level (read credible) and global-level (read utopian) politics is criticised. Patterns of governance in the global polity simply do not match. Decision-making prowess within institutional and agent networks transcends exclusively state-centric cartographies and proffers the need to theorise global politics in a non-dichotomised, multi-level fashion. This is not to dispense with pragmatism. Rather, it is to extend it. By drawing on Rorty's concept of sentimental education, a global pragmatic praxis is elaborated via a narrative of the Tobin Tax and its place in a burgeoning global civil society. In this way, Rorty's oft-repeated claim that "*we should start from where we are*" is applied to the plurality of 'we-groups' and their multiple activities within an emerging global polity.

**Key Words:** Global Governance, Pragmatism, Tobin Tax, World Social Forum

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Richard Rorty's philosophy is a well-worn target of critique. His version of pragmatism has riled the political left and right across disciplines, as well as, analytical and continental writers in philosophy. In International Relations, a growing interest in pragmatism has turned away from Rorty's 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism', looking backwards instead to Dewey and/or sideways to Bernstein or Habermas (Cochran, 2002; Neufield, 1995; Linklater, 1998). These philosophers are seen as more amenable to building an international public sphere. In such a context, the focus of this paper – *to criticise Rorty for poorly addressing the political and ethical questions raised by processes of globalisation* – may seem like overkill. But this subject-centred critique is deployed as a backdrop for the paper's more contentious goal: to provide a (rare) defence and reconstruction of Rorty in the form of a global pragmatic praxis.

The argument is divided in three sections. Section 1 provides a sympathetic summary of Rorty's philosophy and his attempts to re-articulate pragmatism. Section 2 critiques a recent theme in Rorty's move to politics, namely: the creation of a dichotomy between state-level (read credible) and global-level (read utopian) theorising. It is argued that such a separation misses the potential for pragmatism to engage the politics of globalisation (Brassett and Higgott, 2003). And section 3 outlines a reconstruction of pragmatism; emphasising political praxis within the context of (nascent) global forums. Contrary to Rorty's comments, leftist agendas are now quite practicable (indeed necessary) in a multi-level fashion that spans local, national, regional, and global institutions and actors.

The argument turns Rorty against himself. The dichotomy established between state and global-level politics is an instance of what he commonly criticises, namely: the reification of contingent temporal artefacts into abstract universals. Instead, the state is one amongst many sites of politics that are 'more or less useful' for pursuing leftist agendas. By employing a logic of "both-and" – *both* campaigns that work within states *and* reform agendas that hail from global constituencies – pragmatism can be adapted. The contours of a global pragmatic praxis are outlined via a discussion of the Tobin Tax campaign and its role in the recent growth of global civil society. Rorty's claim that '*we should start from where we are*' is applied to the plurality of 'we-groups' and their multiple activities within an emerging global polity.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper arises from ongoing doctoral research: 'Cosmopolitanism in Global Finance? a Pragmatic Approach to the Tobin Tax'. Empirical aspects of the paper draw on participant observation of social forum discussions. I thank Dan Bulley for helpful comments on this paper.

## 1. Rorty's Pragmatism: From Philosophy to Politics?

Rorty's pragmatism attempts to rescue philosophy from itself. He suggests that the 'good' elements of western philosophy – a respect for individuality, reason, freedom, judgement and fairness – have been overtaken by the 'bad' elements: rigour, scientific method, and disciplinary arrogance. The argument can be set in two stages. The first attempts to strip philosophy of all the 'bad' parts. The second – by far the largest and most problematic – tries to rescue the 'good' parts by dispensing with epistemology, embracing hermeneutics, and reconstructing liberalism as “an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom” (Rorty, 1989 xvi). This section addresses the critique of philosophy before engaging Rorty's re-description of pragmatism as ethical-political reformism. It is argued that Rorty has suggested, but not sufficiently developed, a pragmatic move from *philosophy* (understood as a Kantian 'tribunal of pure reason') to *politics* (understood as the contingent, fallible and experimental interplay between alternative standards of the good).

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) is a root and branch attack on the epistemological assumptions of modern, Anglo-American philosophy. Rorty's prime target is the idea that there could be firm foundations for philosophical enquiry and he attacks both the 'truth' of this idea and the special place that philosophers have adopted for them-selves on its back.

“Philosophy as a discipline [...] sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, of the “mental processes” or the “activity of representation” which make knowledge possible.” (Rorty, 1979:3)

For Rorty, this view of philosophy runs through Locke who developed an understanding of “mental processes”, Descartes who worked with a notion of “the mind” as a separate entity, and finally to Kant to whom, “We owe the notion of philosophy as a tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture...” ( Rorty, 1979:3-4). When mixed with the scientific rigour of writers like Russell and Husserl “Philosophy” (with a capital 'P') “became for the intellectuals, a substitute for religion” (Rorty,1979:2). But, Rorty argues, in the twentieth century this self-image has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The more scientific and rigorous that philosophy became “the less it had to do with the rest of culture and the more absurd its traditional pretensions became.” (Rorty, 1979:5)

Rorty draws on the work of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey who he describes as the “three most important philosophers of our century” (Rorty, 1979:5). Each of these philosophers began by trying to continue the “foundational” version of philosophy; each ended by discarding the Kantian conception of philosophy and warning others against it.

“Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systemic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program.” (Rorty, 1979:5-6)

These philosophers are argued to give us “new maps of the terrain” which ignore the concerns of previous thinkers. On the one hand, the thesis goes to the heart of all that is ‘sacred’ in modern philosophy; taking down the idols because they fail on their own terms. On the other, Rorty points towards a new way of ‘doing philosophy’. At the end of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he exhorts us to retain what is best in the “conversation of mankind”:

“If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification, and from there to the actual changes in those standards which make up intellectual history.” (Rorty, 1979:389-90)

Like many aspects of pragmatism, the emphasis comes full circle to human practices. If we drop the relation between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ in favour of the relation between ‘reasoning human beings’ as the basis of knowledge and ethics, then we can start to view justice as a quality that is constructed by us and *for us*.

The practical implications of such a view are twofold. Firstly we should judge moral frameworks in terms of their outcomes as much as on their internal consistency or ‘universal veracity’ i.e. what does thinking in a Rawlsian fashion mean in practice? And secondly, more interestingly, any divide between ethics and politics is broken. Ethics is political – negotiated as a relational human construct – and politics is ethical: a process of contest that has direct ethical outcomes (Parker and Brassett, 2005; Hutchings, 2006). Rorty argues that such an attitudinal switch prompts us to see philosophy as a ‘voice’ in the conversation of mankind – *not a subject*. This voice is open to chance, instability, discontinuity and change. There is no foundation - outside of space and time - that can serve as a privileged vantage from which to judge human affairs. Ethics/politics is always-already relational. But dropping foundations does not mean dropping values, or the notion of progress altogether. As he concludes:

“The only point of which I would insist is that philosophers’ moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation.”  
(Rorty, 1979:394)

This passage represents an intensely problematic resolution to the gamut of critical arguments made. Rorty argues that the Western voice in the conversation of mankind is (self-evidently) the best thing we have achieved and we should continue to develop it, even in light of growing doubt over its central foundations. And this is the crux of the problem. If justice is relational then how can a sense of right and wrong be retained? If there are so many problems with the discourse of modern philosophy then how can we continue to support its Western home? What of the suspicion of many cultural and post-structural theorists that it is Western imperialism – *underpinning philosophical foundations* – at the root of many global problems? And practically speaking: if we drop the ‘traditional problems’ of modern philosophy, what replaces them? If it is hope – as Rorty has variously implied – then how is such hope created?

We should not understate the precariousness of Rorty’s position. At the same time as he lambastes the canon assumptions of western philosophy, he celebrates the Western ‘voice’ in the conversation of mankind as *the* likely saviour. At the same time as he draws on writers like Heidegger, Gadamer, Nietzsche, and Foucault, he turns away from their sometimes anarchistic implications to assert the worth of liberal values like individualism, liberty, and justice. The position draws attack from both sides: analytical liberal theorists charge him with relativism and disgruntled post-structuralists chide him for not following the implications of his argument. On any reckoning, Rorty’s resolution of such opposite tendencies must be either the cleverest piece of philosophical argument in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, or, as many believe a piece of sophistry. I make a qualified argument in favour of the former. Qualified in that, Rorty’s philosophical position should be valued – *as he values others* - on how it translates to politics.

The adoption of an agnostic attitude towards Truth (capital – T) implies a sense of self-doubt about ultimate ends. But rather than dispensing with all political projects, Rorty heralds that such self-doubt – such *Irony* - is itself a valuable spur to realise liberal goals to reduce suffering and increase welfare. For Rorty, ‘liberal irony’ mediates the extremes of Platonism and post-structuralism by refusing to accept that the public and private should be fused in theory. Rorty posits,

“Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable than it is. Yet such sceptics typically have their own theories of human nature. They, too, claim that there is something common to all human beings – for example, the will to power, or libidinal impulses. Their point is that at the “deepest” level of the self there is *no* sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a “mere” artefact of human socialization. So such

skeptics become antisocial. They turn their backs on the very idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates.” (Rorty, 1989: viii)

For Rorty, the opposition between these two strands of thinkers is unnecessary. One type seeks to explore what private perfection might be like. The other – people like Rawls and Habermas - is engaged in a shared social effort: “the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel.” (Rorty, 1989: xiv) Of course, along the way the two types of writer have ruffled each others feathers. Each side has done a good job of setting their project in terms of an opposition towards the other. But Rorty argues that to conclude from these frictions that we must choose between camps would be to make a theoretical problem out of a dispute between personalities. Instead he argues, “We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.” ( Rorty, 1989: xiv).

For Rorty “[t]he vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange.” (Rorty, 1989: xiv) If we accept Rorty’s position – that nothing will synthesize the public and private at the level of theory – then we could start to use writers like Marx or Heidegger, Habermas or Foucault rather like “tools” – “as little in need of synthesis as paintbrushes and crowbars” (Rorty, 1989: xiv). To illustrate, Rorty sketches a figure of the liberal ironist for whom “cruelty is the worst thing we do” and seeks to show how they can face up to the contingency of their own beliefs and desires. The *desires* of the liberal ironist are “ungroundable” in the same ways as philosophy has no firm foundations for making claims to knowledge. All they can do is distinguish between “less useful and more useful ways of talking” (Rorty, 1998: 1).

Rorty concedes that such an argument – that knowledge and justice are relative to contingent experiences in time and space – is often viewed as “intrinsically hostile not only to democracy but to human solidarity” (Rorty, 1989: xv). But he argues, “Hostility to a particular historically conditioned and possibly transient form of solidarity is not hostility to solidarity as such.” (Rorty, 1989: xv) There is nothing to suggest that post-metaphysical forms of solidarity could not exist. There is nothing to suggest that solidarity cannot be “imagined” in different and alternative ways. For liberal ironists, justice is understood as an (infinitely) ongoing project of contest and deliberation: *not a final destination*.

As he suggests,

“Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.” (Rorty, 1989:73)

This act of playing the old off against the new infers a (plural) process of re-description. It therefore retains the experimentalism of Dewey but allows the space for ways of thinking the political which do not subsume ‘every’ individual into the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> If other vocabularies come along that match up, or improve on current ones – as environmentalism did in the 60’s - then liberals can re-describe their own vocabulary. Such a view recognises the “priority of democracy to philosophy” (Rorty, 1991) and outlines a space for an imaginative approach to politics. On this view, re-description is a reform minded, experimental approach to achieving solidarity; a solidarity that

“...is to be achieved not by inquiry, but imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection, but created. ... [It] is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.” (Rorty, 1989:XVI)

## **2. Rorty and the Global Polity**

By stripping philosophy of its foundations Rorty suggests an imaginative and engaged approach to political reform that focuses on the alleviation of cruelty/suffering. This is to be pursued via the creation of post-metaphysical forms of solidarity, the construction of ‘we-feeling’ and the sentimental education that the differences between people are not morally relevant. But what Rorty’s philosophy suggests, is undermined in his move to politics. Nowhere is this more evident than in his consideration of globalisation. This section first critiques Rorty’s understanding of globalisation before moving on to emphasise certain themes in his thought that are entirely relevant for global politics. Specifically, it is argued that his creation of a dichotomy between state-level (read credible) and global-level (read utopian) theorising misses the potential for pragmatism to engage the politics of globalisation.

Rorty has an ambiguous attitude towards globalisation and talk of a ‘global polity’. On the one hand, he finds it hard to contemplate how the political can be thought in global context; seeing it as too large a question to make sense of when there are “real” state-level issues to be addressed. As he argues in *Achieving Our Country* (1998: p. 98),

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<sup>2</sup>Molly Cochran (1999) is unconvinced that Rorty can sustain this happy alliance of Deweyan experimentalism with postmodern irony. I accept the utility of the public/private split insofar as it can foster a conversation between analytical and continental philosophy (See Parker and Brassett, 2005).

“The current leftist habit of taking the long view and looking beyond nationhood to a global polity is as useless as was faith in Marx’s philosophy of history, for which it has become a substitute. Both are equally irrelevant to the question of how to prevent the re-emergence of hereditary castes, or how to prevent right-wing populists from taking advantage of resentment at that re-emergence.”

On the other hand, Rorty’s interest in “real politics” – the politics of economic destitution, social marginalisation, and top end greed and corruption – mean that he can’t ignore the importance of global economic issues. Indeed, in one flurry he goes so far as to suggest the reverse argument of *Achieving Our Country*: that a global polity is a necessary goal of leftist cosmopolitans.

“We are in danger of winding up with only two genuinely global, genuinely international, social groups: the super-rich and the intellectuals, that is the people who attend international conferences devoted to measuring the harm being done by the super-rich fellow cosmopolitans.

How can such cosmopolitan, jet-setting intellectuals help increase the chances of a global egalitarian utopia? *I suspect that the most socially useful thing we can do is to continually draw the attention of the educated publics of our respective countries to the need for a global polity, which can develop some sort of countervailing power to that of the super-rich.*” (1999: 233-234, Emphasis added.)

How do we make sense of this ambiguity? Do we follow a national or a global project? Rorty is unlikely to give us an answer, certainly not beyond the problematic of: state politics is credible and global politics is a (laudable) utopian hope. But this may be due to the fact that the question is, as it stands, poorly articulated.

Understandings of and agendas toward the question of globalisation are undermined by an unnecessary abstraction. Globalisation is often treated as the independent variable that confronts a dependent variable – the state – in a grammatically predetermined contest that ensures the primacy of one or the other, but never both. It is argued that by employing a both-and logic, global politics can be re-addressed from a pragmatic perspective. Indeed, such a move can be supported in Rorty’s own thought. In an appendix to *Achieving Our Country* – ‘Movements and Campaigns’ - Rorty questions what the world would be like if we dropped abstract epithets that stand for something outside or antecedent to human activity:

“What would our past look like if we decided that (in the words that Bruno Latour takes as the title for his brilliant book) “we have never been modern” – that history is an endless network of changing relationships, without any great climatic ruptures or peripeties, and that terms like “traditional society”, “modern society,” and “postmodern society” are more trouble than they are worth?” (1998: 121)

Arguably, Rorty’s reification of state-level politics is *far more trouble than it is worth*. Perhaps it gets in the way of pragmatic reformism? To qualify, this argument is slightly different to the common

critique of *Achieving Our Country*. Most good liberals have been troubled by Rorty's national pride; seeking both to negate it on grounds of taste and to demonstrate that there is much to be gained from openness to the traditions of 'Others' (Dallmayr, 2001; Turner 2004). While there is great worth in this argument, it is not made here. At one level, my concern is with the internal consistency of Rorty's pragmatism; charting how it might be thought differently. This is not the concern of most critics. At another level, I do not share the view that thinking globally is a way to give up national attachments. At best this line would only reproduce the dichotomy between state and global level politics from the opposite direction. At worst it could paint a rosy gloss on the history of nation-state imperialism which arguably underpins and - for some - *sustains* the cosmopolitan potentials within globalisation (Brassett & Bulley, 2006).

In pragmatic fashion, the argument can be made by illustrating the advantages of taking a non-dichotomised understanding of the global polity. This image re-deploys Rorty to emphasise that politics is best understood as a *transnational* "network of changing relationships" rather than a set of exclusive state polities. Indeed, Rorty's own predilection for campaigns is now more readily perceptible as an instance of politics that spans local, national, regional and global sites.

Globalisation is an often-used yet radically under-specified term. It has variously been understood as economic liberalisation, Americanisation, Internationalisation or relative de-territorialisation (See Scholte, 2001). While causal dynamics differ between each perspective they all include some notion of heightened economic, communicative, and political interconnection. However, much of the debate over globalisation has turned on a rationalist-driven 'states vs. markets' dichotomy (Ohmae, 1995; Strange, 1996; Hirst and Thompson, 2000). This zero-sum contest belies a capacity of the state to secure a more gradual transformation in state-market relations; or, a positive-sum diffusion of power amongst non-state actors operating in multiple sites of authority in the global polity. A simple way out of this dichotomy is to look at governance.

Decision-making prowess is becoming a key political variable that is informed by revolutions in communications and the social inter-penetration associated with globalisation. In global finance, for instance, there is an increasingly important *politics* of governance that focuses on technical issues of regulation (Underhill, 1997). Financial governance via non-state organisations like the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) may not strike Rorty as particularly 'real', but it has vast and ranging implications for the capacity of individual governments to set welfare spending targets. To look at 'governance' in this way, as opposed to simply 'governments', allows a more expansive view of politics (Czempiel & Rosenau, 1992). As Jan Aart Scholte affirms, this view does not give up on the state as Rorty implies:

The end of *statism* in no way entails the end of the state itself. However, governance now also involves suprastate (regional and transworld) regimes that operate with some autonomy from the state. In addition, many substate (municipal and provincial) governments today engage directly with spheres beyond their state. (2004: 3-4)

A diffusion of power and influence through international organisations like the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and the EU, as well as the growing salience of private and voluntary regulatory bodies like the BIS has meant a complex expansion of the public sphere (Brassett and Higgott, 2003). There is now a vast and interlocking network of regulation and sites of decision-making where policies of a (quasi-) global nature are made (Ougaard and Higgott, 2002). Such a diffusion of power and regulatory capacity suggests a different set of political questions than can be gleaned from Rorty's current occupation with state-based leftist agendas: If regulation is increasingly conducted in trans-national spaces what is the utility of *exclusively* state-centred accounts of politics? If global capital mobility restricts the capacity of states to levy taxes, shifting the burden of tax from capital to labour, then how should the left respond? If global warming is a result of multiple agents throughout the world then how can one state make a difference? And how do we make sense of the growth of non-governmental activism - global civil society - that increasingly proffers answers to these questions?

Of course, a number of answers have been suggested. Jurgen Habermas (2001) and David Held (1995) posit the extension of international law and the growing institutionalisation of human rights norms as a rational extension of social democracy within the global polity. But, what I want to suggest is that Rorty's pragmatism may be a productive resource for engaging these questions. The problematic and contested nature of the global polity requires the kind of imaginative constructions of solidarity that Rorty celebrates. More importantly, the activists from global civil society who engage with and contest the universal readings of global integration are working in a similar vein to Rorty's 'liberal ironists': all too aware of the problem of speaking to and for 'others' but nevertheless conscious that their own vocabulary of leftist reform is simply the best one we have to work with.

The point can be made by revisiting Rorty's account of human rights. In *Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality* (1998a) Rorty seeks to qualify interest in human rights discourse by arguing that it must be seen as a culture; a culture we should fully support and seek to expand. In this way he undermines the universalism of human rights discourse and seeks to show that by dropping epistemology: "There is a growing willingness to neglect the question "What is our nature?" and to substitute the question "What can we make of ourselves?" (Rorty, 1998:168) Adding:

"We are much less inclined to pose the ontological question "what are we?" because we have come to see that the main lesson of both human history and anthropology is our extraordinary malleability." (Rorty, 1998:168-169)

Drawing on familiar themes of pragmatism, Rorty takes the contingent, ironic but still creative and constructive position that a “human rights culture” exists and should be expanded. Against those who would argue that we need a deeper sense of moral knowledge; of a truth that can answer problematic questions in any set of circumstances; Rorty moves full-scale to the contingency of politics and retorts:

“...on the pragmatist view I favour, it is a question of efficiency: a question about how best to grab hold of history – how best to bring about the utopia sketched by the Enlightenment.

[...]

We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of a human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories, to the conclusion that there is probably no knowledge of the sort Plato envisaged.

[...]

In short, my doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to moral knowledge are *doubts about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status.*” (Rorty, 1998:172, Emphasis added)

Such a view recognises the possibility of intractable moral positions; arguing that “The *identity* of these people, the people whom we should like to convince to join our Eurocentric human rights culture, is bound up with their sense of who they are *not.*” (Rorty, 1998:178) It is a task of the human rights culture to drop the supposition that people who do not fit within this culture are necessarily less knowledgeable. Instead it would be better to see such people as deprived of “security” and “sympathy” – where security means “conditions of life sufficiently risk-free as to make one’s difference from others inessential to one’s self respect, one’s sense of worth.” And sympathy means the kind of reactions that people have to books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; “the sort that we have more of after watching television programs about the genocide in Bosnia.” (Rorty, 1998:180) Although he accepts that many people find sentiment a weak argument, Rorty argues that this is more from insecurity:

“...we have to overcome our sense that sentiment is too weak a force and that something stronger is required. This idea that reason is “stronger” than sentiment, that only insistence on the unconditionality of moral obligation has the power to change human beings for the better, is very persistent. I think that this persistence is due mainly to a semiconscious realization that if we hand our hopes for moral progress over to sentiment, we are in effect handing them over to *condescension*. For we shall be relying on those who have the power to change things – people like the rich New England abolitionists or rich bleeding hearts like Robert Owen and Friedrich Engels – rather than something that has power over *them.*” (Rorty, 1998:181)

The implications of sentimental education are important and as yet barely articulated in the either the scholarly or policy community concerned with the reform and maintenance of globalisation. In a field that has been marked by the opacity of its subject matter and close-knit nature of its governing circles,

the potential for a bottom-up, reason based, emergence of ethical discourse is minimal. A combination of top-down benevolence, marked by a willingness to reform, humanise, and generally augment the structures of global economic governance with concerns like accountability and justice is the (difficult) prerequisite for change. A pragmatic praxis would promote the experimental interplay of different actors working at multiple levels both public and private to achieve this end (See Brassett and Higgott, 2003). It is not that there is one rightful outcome or – as many neo-Marxists argue – one rightful agent. Rather, the process itself could be of ethical value in its ability to foster a change in sentiments over time (Parker and Brassett, 2005). Cutting to the chase, we might need to enlist top-down, privately funded, western, bourgeois, NGOs if we wish to influence the life chances of grassroots, non-western, poor people on the receiving end of economic and financial austerity.

### 3. Towards a Global Pragmatic Praxis

Rorty seeks to drop traditional philosophical questions like “what are we” in favour of imaginative questions like “what can we make of ourselves”. The move at once makes pragmatism more political and more tenuous. The uncertain and contested world of politics requires a different analysis to the one Rorty provides. This is not to dispense with Rorty. Rather, it is to reconstruct his philosophy for the complex challenges provided by global politics. The task is for pragmatism to adapt to ongoing practices of reform within the global polity. As Richard Bernstein argues,

“Inspirational liberalism may be a healthy antidote to legalistic rights-based liberalism and to the abuses of the infatuation with theorizing by postmodern cultural critics. *But without pragmatic toughness and a concrete programme for reform*, [Rorty’s]... liberalism too easily degenerates into an empty rhetorical hand waving.”(2003: 138, emphasis added)

In a global polity where technocratic obfuscation has often de-limited leftist reform to tinkering within states, a *concrete agenda of pragmatic reform* would look to uncover the trans-national linkages and ideas that might suggest – *and educate our sentiments about* – alternative global futures. In this final section, a global pragmatic praxis is elaborated via a narrative of the campaign for a Tobin Tax within global civil society.

Global civil society is often invoked as the likely agent of reform within the global polity. Opinions range from liberal readings which speak of “transnational citizen action”, with an emphasis on knowledge dissemination and institutional lobbying (Edwards & Gaventa, 2001) through to more radical views of civil society as the vanguard of a new era of protest against global capitalism (Cox, 1999). From a pragmatic perspective intent on “step by step reform of the system we currently have” (Rorty 1998: 105) the task is to identify and deliberate upon the potential(s) for an imaginative re-description of the politics of globalisation. A global pragmatic praxis should be 1) reflexive to the

contingency of ideas and political practices, and 2) *engaged with* the practical questions of how theory and politics in the global polity can interact in a more imaginative and sympathetic way.

### *From Tobin to Porto Alegre*

James Tobin proposed a small tax on foreign currency transactions in 1972. By his own admission the “idea fell like a stone in a deep well”. But, for his part, he re-made the proposal several times throughout his life citing that: “If I cast it in the water again, it is because events since my first try have strengthened my belief that something of the sort needs to be done.” (1978: 155) These events were the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and the end of the post-war ‘embedded liberal compromise’ (Ruggie, 1982). Convinced of the long-term impracticability of monetarism and resigned that capital controls would not be restored, he proposed a moderate reform, “to throw some sand in the well greased wheels” of global currency markets: a charge on foreign currency exchanges – 0.1 % - to dampen speculation. In addition, the tax could levy extensive revenues – estimates range from \$150 - \$300 billion per year - to be used for projects like universal healthcare, education, and agendas for poverty eradication (Patomakki, 2001; ul Haq et al, 1996).

Why is Tobin’s proposal important? How is it relevant to pragmatic attempts to construct sympathy and solidarity towards suffering? One reason is the size of the FOREX market. It is larger than world production and trade combined. And, as the BIS details, it is still growing: “The 2004 survey shows a large increase in activity in traditional foreign exchange markets as compared to 2001. Average daily turnover rose to \$1.9 trillion in April 2004, up by 57% at current exchange rates and by 36% at constant exchange rates.”<sup>3</sup> It takes less than a month for FOREX markets to trade the value of world GDP. And it is the speculative market that such size facilitates which lies at the heart of Tobin’s argument. Simply put, by reducing the incentive to trade, we might reduce the incidence of currency crisis. Another reason is the revenue potential of the tax. While the technical possibilities are indeed promising there is a powerful symbol in the possible alternatives that global taxation could foster.

Although originally proposed and debated as a purely academic, purely economic idea, Tobin’s currency transactions tax has been picked up and extended within global civil society. To the chagrin of economists, groups like the French NGO ATTAC question the (political) authority of markets to decide social outcomes. Indeed the very name ATTAC – *Association for The Taxation of financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens* – is a sign that the power dimensions of global finance are brought into question. As their International Platform argues:

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<sup>3</sup>Triennial Central Bank Survey of Foreign Exchange and Derivatives Market Activity in April 2004, Preliminary Global Results, p.4, accessed [www.bis.org](http://www.bis.org)

Financial globalization increases economic insecurity and social inequalities. It bypasses and undermines popular decision-making, democratic institutions, and sovereign states responsible for the general interest. In their place, it substitutes a purely speculative logic that expresses nothing more than the interests of multinational corporations and financial markets.<sup>4</sup>

For ATTAC, the Tobin Tax is not then (just) a case of better economic rationality, it is also a mechanism for confronting the political and ideological power of financial markets. In this way, the politics of globalisation is opened up via the chance interplay between an imaginative economist's idea and the motives of northern (bourgeois) citizens groups. An alternative is put forward and debated in experimental fashion; educating the sentiments of 'citizens' about the suffering caused by financial markets.

Such a measure fits with a clearly anti-speculative perspective. It would sustain a logic of resistance, restore manoeuvring room to citizens and national governments, and, most of all, would mean that political, rather than financial considerations are returning to the fore.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the history of ATTAC is not one that fits within Rorty's schema – national or global. Founded in France in 1998 after the Asian Financial crisis, the group was set up with a proposal for global reform as its mandate (Cassen 2003; Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan, 2004). In the next few years the membership of ATTAC grew to around 60,000 and formed affiliate groups across the world in some 40 countries. The modus operandi of ATTAC is public discussion. Membership includes journalists, academics, Doctors, teachers amongst others. In small public meetings held in schools and cinemas, experts are invited to talk on subjects like the Tobin Tax in an effort to make understandable the often complex and arcane world of the global economy. In addition, ATTAC has been able to form links with NGO's and Trade Unions across the world; successfully establishing the World Social Forum (WSF) movement as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos (See Patomäki & Teivainen, 2004 for a good discussion of the WSF).

Groups like ATTAC, War on Want, WEED, and the Halifax Initiative have contributed to the evolution of thinking about Global Taxation. In particular the revenue potential of the TT has been celebrated in terms of its ability to fund global social democratic projects like universal healthcare and universal education. Of course, deep ambiguities pertain to the politics of global justice. Arguably, the institutional project of 'inclusion' and the practical solution to poverty proposed – *throw money at it* – fall shy of an appreciation of the complexity and context of injustice. For instance, activists from the developing south have been less than optimistic about the potential to reform institutions like the IMF.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Platform of the International Movement ATTAC' p.1, Accessed at <http://attac.org.uk/attac/document/plateformeintlen.pdf?documentID=2>

<sup>5</sup> 'Platform of the International Movement ATTAC' p.2, Accessed at <http://attac.org.uk/attac/document/plateformeintlen.pdf?documentID=2>

As one WSF delegate noted, “The Tobin Tax could easily become another big white elephant for social democracy”.<sup>6</sup>

However, from a pragmatic perspective, the contribution of the TT campaign is to open such issues/questions to a larger audience. In social forum discussions, in public meetings of ATTAC, and (even) the stylised narratives of charities, the opacity and technicality of finance is de-naturalised via a sentimental re-description. As Christophe Ventura remarked at the London Social Forum: “The Tobin Tax is a symbol, it tells a different story about the relationship between globalisation and the individual”.<sup>7</sup> Such discussions disturb the black box of global economic governance and open it up to a broad based democratic conversation: the tax is therefore conversation opener, not a stopper. As Bernard Cassen (2003: 43) says,

“Since Tobin was an establishment economist, a Nobel Prize-winner in economics from the United States at that, his proposal possessed a certain automatic initial legitimacy, serving to highlight the scandalous character of the flows of global speculation today. So for the purposes of agitation, it makes an excellent weapon. But, of course, we never for a second thought that the Tobin tax was the one solution to the dictatorship of financial markets. It was just one point of entry to attack them.”

Importantly, the ‘attack’ is now proceeding in a fundamentally transnational context. At any one of the World, Regional or Local social forums activists from different nations can discuss policy reforms for global institutions. This is not some bland assertion of global ‘unity’. Rather it is a recognition that the conversation about globalisation affects and can involve more than simply national politics.

Of course, global civil society represents an unhappy alliance of disparate voices. In any one of the hundreds of social forum seminars, there are Marxists, Social Democrats, liberal reformists, environmentalists, and anarchists. Subjects under consideration include resistance to capitalist globalisation, American and/or European imperialism, and the global spread of neo-liberalism. Moreover, it is easy to identify conflicts. Against the Development NGO’s who seek to break agricultural protection in the North, Jose Bove lobbies for minor reforms of the European Common Agricultural Policy to create jobs in Europe. Against ATTAC’s advocacy of the Tobin Tax to curb global financial speculation and raise revenue for development, Marxists critique such ventures because they “legitimise the right of investors to speculate against a currency, a country, the producers, the workers and its people”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Participant in discussion of Tobin Tax, World Social Forum, Mumbai, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ventura is secretary for international affairs of ATTAC France: remarks made at a meeting of ATTAC UK during the London Social Forum, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Delegate of the European Social Forum, Paris, 2003.

However, it is just such differences and conflicts that may be silenced in the process of achieving political consensus within and between states. A global pragmatic praxis would look beyond the confines of the state to campaigns that work across levels – local, national, regional, global – to achieve leftist objectives. A key implication of the social forum movement is that any rhetorical celebration of democracy must recognise and respond to the experiences of ordinary people leading ‘real’ lives. This is more than a critique of the current situation. It contains a sensitive appreciation of the problems and possibilities for building democratic spaces on a global scale. In this vein the ESF website states:

“...there must be an open gathering space where delegates from several organisations can get together for in-depth debate affirming that “another world is possible” and opposing “a process of capitalist globalisation, led by large multinationals and governments and international institutions for self-serving interests.” This process speeds up the concentration of wealth, gives rise to wars, economic, social and cultural exclusion and destruction of the environment. It restrains individual rights and freedoms, allowing the extreme-right to flourish. *It then becomes a question of building, through confrontation and democratic debate, alternatives in the real world and formulating articulate concrete proposals for effective action so that fundamental human rights prevail over financial and commercial interests.*”<sup>9</sup>

A global pragmatic praxis would understand the multiplicity of ‘we-groups’ at work within this process as engaged in a “shared social effort” to make the world “more just and less cruel”. Indirectly, the project suggests answers to the state-level problems that Rorty identifies; taxing capital and monitoring abuse of human rights by multinationals is more readily practicable on a global scale. And directly, the process itself enhances long term efforts at sentimental education; illustrating for broader publics the multiple sites of suffering in the global polity while at same time constructing solidarity to confront them.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has engaged the philosophical pragmatism of Richard Rorty. While sympathetic to Rorty, it was questioned whether his dichotomy between national and global politics is particularly useful. By dropping the dichotomy and developing Rorty’s own concept of sentimental education, it was suggested that pragmatism could be globalised. A global pragmatic praxis was elaborated via a narrative of the role of the Tobin Tax in the recent growth of global civil society in general and the social forum movement in particular. In a global polity where technocratic obfuscation has often delimited leftist reform to tinkering within states, a *concrete agenda of pragmatic reform* would look to uncover the trans-national linkages and ideas that might suggest – *and educate our sentiments about* – alternative global futures.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fse-esf.org/article567.html> Emphasis added.

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