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## Review of “Achieving Our Country”

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## Book Review

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*Achieving Our Country*, by Richard Rorty (Harvard University Press, 1998. 151 pages. Paperback \$12.95. ISBN 0-674-00312-8.)

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### Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*: Literature-Based Pragmatic Leftism as Public Philosophy

The cultural left has a vision of America in which the white patriarchs have stopped voting and have left all the voting to members of previously victimized groups, who are expected to be as angelic as the straight white males were diabolical. If I shared this expectation, I too would want to live under this dispensation. Since I see no reason to share it, I think the left should return to the business it was in during the first two-thirds of the century: piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy. <sup>1</sup>

Richard Rorty's academic home moved to Stanford University recently, and it was there from 1996 to 1997 that he wrote the Massey Lectures which became *Achieving Our Country*, a simply written book of some 140 pages. Having used *Achieving Our Country* in an undergraduate honors humanities class in the fall of 1999, and having discussed the book with a half-dozen colleagues, my own reaction to it has gone through several stages, with my "quotient of approval" concerning Rorty's cleverness somewhat on the rise.

One agrees, as to a tautology, that the world would be a better place if there were less cruelty in it. A problem, sometimes, is to determine whether a social practice or a disparity in resources, though a difficulty for those who experience its downside, is cruel, or is really able to be redressed socially.

Rorty's readers, at least those who pick this book up sharing its author's concerns about injustice, will see the big and growing gap in income between classes of American citizens, as well as the disparity in wealth and resources which obtains between the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere, as *prima facie* sources of significant cruelty. Readers who have thought carefully about social justice are also apt to agree with Rorty that racism, homophobia, and sexism are hardy roots of discrimination.

Agreeing with Rorty about the moral rightness of these particular concerns merely places one among a large majority of one's colleagues at the College of Liberal Arts or at Widget University, virtually anywhere across the nation.

And Rorty, being that Rorty, isn't writing to fit comfortably into a consensus about what's cruel. He takes unusual pains to discredit the metaphysical pretensions of academics who have made it a goal to

oppose homophobia, racism, and sexism, but who have grounded their conclusions in esoteric or metaphysical writings. Rorty makes the same criticism of Marxists who theorized about the historical logic of late capitalism (or about who should be labeled a 'bourgeois reactionary') as he does of contemporary postmodernist professors of literature who, in theorizing knowingly about power, sex, and race, are busily writing books intended only for each another.

In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty thus ties contemporary literary theory and Marxism together, excoriating each for having excessive metaphysical pretensions. In this familiar anti-metaphysical vein, Rorty is going after contemporary cultural leftists and old-style Marxist academics just like he went after his contemporaries in analytic philosophy twenty-some years ago.

The one way in which Marxism comes off much worse than contemporary culture theory, of course, is that Rorty sees Marxism as having actually been practiced on people, to monstrous effect, and so cannot brook any academic sympathy for it at all. Besides, postmodernist professors of literature really have made it harder to be cruel to others based upon their gender, race, or affectional preference, or so Rorty praises in articles published around the time that his book skewers them.<sup>2</sup>

So Rorty recommends, along with his appeal to piecemeal market reforms, as indicated in the header, a literature-based path to enlightening the wider public about issues of cruelty and injustice. And readers who are in agreement with Rorty about cruelty's being represented by income gaps and prejudice might easily part ways with him about how to solve problems.

But I think that Rorty's approach is a useful one, and that opposing cruelty is a many-dimensional task, one in which we can use all the help that we can get. If reading Upton Sinclair or Harriet Beecher Stowe contributed to making the world a better place, then promoting books that celebrate human diversity, or that expose cruel practices today, should also do more good than harm. This seems difficult to argue with.

Reading critical, positive and progressive texts is at least one approach to helping people to become more aware and more concerned. Though Rorty's reading program is only a partial solution to reducing cruelty, it is not a bad partial solution, and it is one that has some hope of making a difference in public attitudes, at least among those who form their attitudes by reading philosophy, novels, and poetry.

It is easy to be put off by Rorty's sustained quest to achieve a more empathetic world by encouraging people to read. When I first saw that he was continuing to recommend reading Walt Whitman and John Dewey I found myself thinking, "Why does Rorty claim that encouraging people to read the books he likes would move us towards progressive solidarity on social issues?" It seemed to me as though Rorty thought that there was an invisible literary hand at work, that people would be affected in the right way by finding and reading the right books. And though it seemed true that muckraking writers earlier in the century exposed and affected the meat packing business, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* affected even earlier attitudes towards slavery, the reliance on reading books to change social attitudes runs up against the fact that fewer and fewer people seem to read novels or imaginative literature for serious purposes. Those well-educated few who do read intelligent and serious books are not apt to think that literary tropes are reliable guides to thinking carefully about social reform.

On the hypothesis that it cannot hurt to work for social justice along many lines, I do now think that *Achieving Our Country* and its recommendations are worthwhile. But there are better informed, more

analytically adequate, and more intellectually serious approaches to the problems that Rorty raises. They are found in the work of Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and Cass Sunstein, to name just three. There can be no doubt that Sen's theory of human well being, which is careful about identifying remediable shortfall, and which has a robust analysis of poverty, racism, and sexism, is vastly superior to Rorty's smugly ironic literature-based approach when it comes to diagnosing and proposing concrete solutions to real-world injuries. And Sen's epistemic stance, perhaps best exhibited in "Positional Objectivity,"<sup>3</sup> is superior to Rorty's avoidance of serious moral epistemology. If one were to take a literature-based approach to issues of poverty and suffering, Nussbaum's fine-grained and psychologically rich theories about the shape of a good human life, and her views about the role of literature in achieving an appropriately sensitive life of the mind, are both vastly superior to Rorty's. These contrasts illustrate the cost to Rorty of having abandoned careful theorizing for ironic jargon. And if using the law to achieve social good one-case-at-a-time is a goal, then the caution, care, and focused Deweyan pragmatism of Cass Sunstein repays careful study on such issues as sexism, pornography, and why markets aren't adequate solutions to problems of social justice. Spending time with these authors repays the reader in substantial and intellectually deep ways. They have the advantage, over Rorty, of being both clever and wise.

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Notes:

1. Richard Rorty, "Essay: The American Road to Fascism," *The New Statesman*, May 1998, pp. 28-29.
2. In his article titled "The Dark Side of the Academic Left", in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 1998, Rorty says that the cultural left has had significant success in one area. "They have decreased the amount of sadism in our society. Especially among college graduates, the casual infliction of humiliation is much less socially acceptable than it was during the first two-thirds of the century." (Page B5.)
3. Amartya Sen, "Positional Objectivity," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Spring 1993, pp. 126-145.