

# Taking Rorty Seriously

KAI NIELSEN *The University of Calgary and Concordia University*

*RÉSUMÉ : Richard Rorty est souvent vu comme une sorte de clone américain de Derrida et considéré, en tant que tel, comme irresponsable à la fois au plan philosophique et au plan politique. Je soutiens que c'est là une caricature. Rorty propose à la fois une version unifiée, pénétrante et raisonnée du pragmatisme, et une métaphilosophie originale et stimulante, imprégnée de la tradition analytique et qui, tout en lui adressant un défi de taille, lui reste néanmoins tout à fait accessible. Tel est mon propos principal. J'ai deux sous-thèmes : 1) que Rorty a été caricaturé par la gauche; et 2) qu'une position comme celle de Rorty et celle du marxisme analytique peuvent être compatibles.*

## 1.

Richard Rorty tends to get a bad press among analytic philosophers—and among some non-analytic philosophers, as well. He is often thought to be irresponsibly frolicsome, and to be turning his back in a rationally unmotivated way on all that he, and we, have learned from analytic philosophy. He is, the line goes, playful and literary where we need careful argument and conceptual clarification, albeit set in a well-crafted narrative (Blackburn 1993, pp. 83-106). I think such remarks are unfair and uninformed. Rorty does utilize a more relaxed, more literary style than most philosophers are wont to do. It makes him more fun to read, more accessible to a wider range of intellectuals who are not philosophers and, with it, he is mercifully free of the deadening drone of a scientific manner. He also, sometimes, in a way that is not in accord with how things are now done in philosophy, tries to josh analytic philosophers (and others) out of their more questionable and often unexamined postures or preconceptions. But—and this shall be the major burden of my account—he

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does argue, clearly and probingly, and he does, his occasional disavowals notwithstanding, in fact have a clearly articulated and carefully interlocked form of pragmatism that includes a well-thought-out metaphilosophy, a metaphilosophy that deeply challenges how philosophy, particularly in our ambience, is both standardly practised and conceptualized (usually rather uncritically) (Nielsen 1996, pp. 71-95). Moreover, this is done in terms accessible to analytic philosophers, and is informed by the analytic tradition. Rorty's account, in fine, is a nuanced, not unsystematic, account that comes to grips with central issues both in and about analytic philosophy in a way that deserves careful—though, of course, not uncritical—attention. He is not to be shrugged off, as he so often is, as an irresponsible figure of fun frolicking with Derrida in Paris.

That is my text, but I have two subtexts as well. The first is that Rorty has also been unfairly—and, for the most part, unperceptively—received by the Left. He is neither a patsy for the American capitalist order and its political establishment nor an irresponsible, shoot-from-the-hip commentator on political affairs, but a serious, though somewhat conservative, social democrat, deeply suspicious of “grand theory” (political, social scientific, and philosophical), but firmly committed to intelligently commenting on the social and political problems of our time. In this he consistently and honourably follows in the tradition of John Dewey. The second subtext is that Rorty, and neo-pragmatists generally, should not be so spooked by the ghost of “grand theory” that they continue to ignore the careful and politically relevant work of analytical Marxians such as G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and David Schweickart (Nielsen 1993, pp. 1-21). Neo-pragmatists such as Rorty can and should come to grips with them. Moreover, they can do this without, as a result of such attention, becoming entrapped in “grand theory,” grand meta-narratives, some incoherent teleology of history, or the distortions of ideology, and (in Rorty's case) in a way that would strengthen his own mildly Left orientation (Nielsen 1983, pp. 319-38). Rorty should become sensitive to, and make use of, such analytical Marxian work, as they, in turn, would profit by exchanging their sometimes rather Neanderthal “scientific realist” and unthought-out metaphilosophical preconceptions for a consciously pragmatist metaphilosophical orientation. Philosophical work, we should not fail to note, can be careful and deeply politically relevant while remaining metaphilosophically simplistic. Be that as it may, Marxism and Pragmatism have had happy marriages (marriages which were not marriages of convenience), as can be seen, for example, in Sidney Hook's early (1933) *Towards The Understanding of Karl Marx*.

## 2.

Richard Rorty, in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), and even more so in his more recent writing, has stressed his adherence to *anti-*

*representationalism*, by which he means an account “which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality” (Rorty 1991a, p. 1). Beliefs, on an anti-representationalist account, do not represent reality, but are tools for dealing with reality. Rorty is frequently accused of being an anti-realist, and, *if* we mean by “anti-realism” that no linguistic items *represent* any non-linguistic items, then Rorty is indeed an anti-realist, and Donald Davidson is as well. On such a construal, anti-realism and anti-representationalism just come to the same thing. But that is not how “realism” and “anti-realism” have standardly been understood. Realism is usually taken to be the belief that a certain class of statements (say, scientific statements), but not all types of statement (say, value judgements), has an objective truth-value—has objective truth-conditions—which obtains independently of our means of knowing them. Put otherwise, these statements are true or false of a reality that is utterly independent of us. The anti-realist, by contrast, denies that the claimed type of statement has such a status. *Pace* the realist, these statements, anti-realists argue, can only be understood by reference to the thing that counts as evidence for them. They are denying that statements of such a type have the sort of the objective status claimed by the realist. What they are *denying* is that these particular types of true statements—in our case, scientific statements—stand in representational relations to non-linguistic items, while admitting that some other kinds of statement (say, matter-of-fact, common-sense statements) can correspond to facts of the matter they represent. Some of their terms, the claim goes, can represent non-linguistic items. This, as Rorty points out, is an in-house dispute that arises only within a *representationalist framework*. Anti-representationalists, by contrast, eschew the whole problematic, denying that either the notion of “representation” or that of “fact of the matter” has “any useful role in philosophy” (Rorty 1991a, p. 2). So, while Rorty is emphatically rejecting realism—including, of course, metaphysical realism and “scientific realism”—he is not an anti-realist. He is neither a realist nor an anti-realist. *He is rejecting the whole idea*, as Davidson does as well, *that beliefs, any beliefs at all, can represent reality*. It makes no sense to say either that they represent reality or fail to represent reality. Neither “represent” nor “fails to represent” has a coherent use here.

Anti-representationalism, which goes well with the perspectivism and contextualism of pragmatism, rejects the so-called discipline of epistemology as well as metaphysics. There is no grand appearance/reality distinction as we find in Plato, Descartes, or Kant, for on an anti-representationalist account there can be no gaining a glimpse at how things are in themselves: the reality behind the appearance. Some allegedly privileged types of vocabulary—say, physics, or (as would have been claimed in another age) metaphysics or theology—do claim accurately to represent

reality while the other discourses are said to be mired in appearance. But with the demise of representationalism goes the very idea that there is some determinate way the world is there to be discovered and accurately represented (depicted) by some “true philosophy”—perhaps an epistemology or a philosophy of language (à la Michael Dummett) taken as *First Philosophy*, a philosophy foundational for the rest. And there is no science—neither physics, linguistics, nor cognitive science—that is going to be able to step in and do the job—the *giving of the one true description of the world*—that philosophy cannot do (Rorty 1997, pp. 6-16). Such a conception, i.e., the uniquely true description of the world, is incoherent if anti-representationalism is on the mark. For there is no sense to the claim that one vocabulary is closer to reality than another. There are just different forms of discourse answering to different more-or-less-distinctive interests. Given the concerns of fundamental physics, a description of the world in terms of colours has no place. Given common-sense observation and aesthetic interests, it does. It is not that one form of discourse gives us a truer account of reality than another. They are all—or, at least, most of them are—valuable for certain purposes and not for others. The idea of a discourse telling us what reality really is, what the world is like in itself, is without sense. It is not just (*pace* what Rorty sometimes says) that it is not a useful idea; it is an incoherent one (Rorty should have stuck with his earlier Carnapian scorn—Rorty 1993a, pp. 444-46). We can speak of reality-versus-appearance in some specific context (e.g., real gold versus fool’s gold, real beer versus beer without alcohol), but not, at least if we want to make sense, in the broad way of the tradition of metaphysics or foundationalist epistemology. This big reality-versus-appearance dichotomy is not, to repeat, just useless; it could not be useful, for it is incoherent, unless we want to say some incoherencies (perhaps some conceptions of God) are sometimes useful.

It does not make sense, Rorty has it, to speak of reality as it is in itself, abstracting from the way it is represented. For one thing, we do not know what “reality as it is in itself” means, and, for another, language does not function in the representational way assumed in that sentence—a type of sentence central to the metaphysical tradition of “scientific realism.” But, unless some sentences of that type are not only intelligible but also true, “scientific realism,” and other forms of metaphysical realism as well, are down the tubes.

### 3.

Rorty, consistently with his anti-representationalism, is a *minimalist* about truth. He rejects correspondence, coherentist, and pragmatist theories of truth. Indeed, he thinks we should have no *theory* of truth at all, though, given the long history of theories of truth, it is a good idea to have an account of how “true” and “truth” function. Not wanting a theory of

truth does not mean that he is sceptical about the very idea of truth, believing that we never have good grounds for taking one claim to be true and another to be false. His is not the absurd task, sometimes ascribed to Kierkegaard, of collapsing talk of truth into nonsensical claims about “subjective truth.” In an unproblematically ordinary sense, some claims are objectively true and others false, and, in many instances, we do not know what to say, but that does not make truth wanton, as some of his critics seem to think he is giving us to understand. His minimalist account says that a sentence “S” is true if and only if S. Thus “‘The cat is on the mat’ is true” if and only if the cat is on the mat. This bare and correct statement of what truth is and what it means to assert something to be true does not commit one to a correspondence, coherence, or a pragmatic theory of truth or to any *theory* of truth at all. It does not say “that behind the true sentence S, there is a sentence-shaped piece of non-linguistic reality called ‘the fact of S’—a set of relations between objects which hold independently of language—which makes ‘S’ true” (Rorty 1991a, p. 4). We do not have any understanding of what it would be for such a correspondence to obtain or fail to obtain. The whole idea is unintelligible. But this denial of correspondence must not lead us to think that truth is something we make up or construct. Our linguistic practices do not determine what is true, though we can only *speak* of something being true or false from inside some linguistic practice. But that is a different thing from saying our linguistic practices produce truth or make certain things true. “‘S’ is true if and only if S” is just the truistic—but, for all of that, true—minimalist disquotational claim that this is what truth is. It is called “disquotational” because on the left-hand side we have the sentence mentioned, and on the right-hand side we have, with the quotation marks taken off, the sentence S used. There is neither here a manufacturing of truth by linguistic practices nor any mysterious correspondence between language and the world. The latter would require us to do the impossible—nay, the unintelligible—namely, to be able to stand somewhere outside language and compare language and the world to see whether they do or do not correspond to each other like a map corresponds to what is mapped or a photograph to what is photographed.

Rorty argues that his account of truth does not make truth a linguistic artefact, and does not imply anything like linguistic idealism. There are, of course, links between our language and the rest of the world, but these links are *causal*, not *epistemological*. Our language, like our bodies, is shaped by our environment, and, indeed, our language could no more be “out of touch” with our environment—grandiosely, the world—than our bodies could. Indeed, to suggest that this could obtain is to say something which is unintelligible.

What an anti-representationalist such as Rorty denies is that there is any *explanatory* or *epistemic* point in trying to pick out and then to

choose among the contents of our language—or of our minds—and, with that, to claim that this or that item corresponds to reality, or represents reality in a robust way which some other such item does not and, indeed, cannot. Moreover, the property truth is neither a normative property yielding us criteria for correcting our beliefs nor an explanatory property explaining why we have the beliefs we have, or regard some beliefs as justified and warranted and others as not. It has the *disquotational* use just specified and a *commendatory* use. In saying that a belief is true, we in one way or another commend it. And it has, as well, a *cautionary* use—namely, to remind us that, no matter how rationally justified a belief is or how rationally acceptable it is (even ideally rationally acceptable), it still might turn out to be false. Because of these uses, we would be badly served by replacing “truth” with “warranted assertability,” or even “being super-assertable.” Giving attention to the disquotational, commendatory, and cautionary uses of “true,” however, does not add up to a theory, let alone a normative or explanatory theory of truth (a semantical theory does not have much point), but makes clear the use of “true” so that we will come to command a clear—or at least a clearer—view of its role in our lives (Rorty 1991a, pp. 126-61; 1993b, pp. 1-25; 1995b, pp. 282-300). Without getting subjective or relativistic about truth, we do better without a theory of truth and, most prominently, without a correspondence theory of truth. We should attend closely to the use of “true” and “truth” in the language-games in which they occur, and to sufficiently and accurately describe them so as to break, by a perspicuous description, the grip of the metaphysical pictures we tend to get tangled in (e.g., correspondence conceptions) when we think about truth. After that descriptive work is well done, there is no need at all for, or any point in, a *theory* of truth. In giving the description, we will not be attempting to provide a survey of “the whole of the language” (something that probably does not make sense), but to “assemble reminders for a particular purpose.” Hence, the pointlessness, if not the very impossibility, of “semantical theories” of truth.

#### 4.

When it comes to fixing belief—determining what we are justified in believing and doing—as thorough a coherence of beliefs as we can attain is what is needed, though crucially some of those beliefs will be considered judgements which we will take to have some *initial* credibility. They are part of our inescapable cultural given, something that will obtain in all cultures, though the content will in some considerable measure vary from culture to culture. All peoples start with their in part distinctive cultural givens. There is no more a possibility of escaping that starting point than there is a way of shedding our own skins. But, now speaking of ourselves (people of a particular culture)—but the same thing will hold for others as well—if some of our considered judgements, even our firmest ones, do

not fit into a wide, coherent pattern of our beliefs (what John Rawls, and Rorty following him, call wide reflective equilibrium), then they will be, and should be, rejected (Rorty 1991a, pp. 175-96). And this can be true of any of them. None are immune from the *possibility* of rejection. Attaining wide reflective equilibrium will be a matter of winnowing some of them out, but not, *holus bolus*, trying to throw out all of them, or even the bulk of them, at a given time, or perhaps even ever. That, for good Davidsonian reasons—reasons that Rorty endorses—makes no sense at all. But any of them can be rejected, though not most of them, to say nothing of all of them, at once. But there is no *actual* reason to think that that will be the fate of most of our considered judgements. But, to repeat, there is no considered judgement that is immune from the *possibility* of rejection. Rorty, like Peirce and Dewey, is a thorough fallibilist. We justify one belief in terms of others by weaving and unweaving our web of beliefs until we, for a time, get the most coherent pattern we can forge. But we never escape fallibilism and historicism. What we are justified in believing—taking for true—comes to forging what for a time, but surely only for a time, is the widest and most coherent pattern of beliefs that we can muster.

What justification of beliefs comes to in all domains, Rorty contends, is best modelled in a Davidsonian-Rawlsian fashion by what Rawls calls wide reflective equilibrium. Starting by our own lights (with what other lights could we possibly start?) with an appeal to our firmest considered judgements in different domains, we seek to forge them into a coherent whole (consistency being a central element here) along with (that is, including in that whole) other things we learn and know or think we know or care about or that come to us from others as suggestions which we on reflection deem to have some plausibility. We seek, taking into consideration all these things, the fullest and most consistent and coherent package we can for a time gain. We devise such a package—rejecting here and modifying there all along the line—until, for a time, we get the widest consistent and most coherent pattern of beliefs and sentiments that we can at that particular time muster.<sup>1</sup> If we achieve this, then our beliefs are in wide reflective equilibrium, and when that wide reflective equilibrium is also *general* (that is, each adult person in the society has achieved wide reflective equilibrium, so that the “we” is for that time practically universal in that society), we have a wide reflective equilibrium that is also a general reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1995, pp. 141-42). General reflective equilibrium is plainly *just a heuristic*, but it serves as our touchstone, when it is extended from a society to the world, for (1) a maximally reasonable cluster of beliefs, and (2) for what would count as the fullest justification that could (even in principle) be had for our various beliefs and convictions in all domains. And, since we speak of *our* considered judgements and what *we* can get in wide reflective equilibrium (I do not speak now of *general* equilibrium), we will also need to have, with this wide reflective equilib-

rium, an intersubjective consensus. It will need to be the right sort of consensus, a consensus that is rooted in a wide reflective equilibrium. And it is that which gives us the only viable conception of objectivity we can have or need.<sup>2</sup> Objectivity, so understood, admits, of course, of degrees. It is also something that is invariably time-dependent. The full reasonability of wide and general equilibrium is the heuristically outer limit of objectivity (Rorty 1991a, pp. 175-96).

## 5.

Such a coherentist account is not only anti-representationalist, but anti-foundationalist and holist as well. There are no basic beliefs (building blocks of knowledge) yielding certainties or even near certainties on which all the rest of our knowledge and justified beliefs are based. Neither science nor philosophy, nor anything else, can discover such beliefs. There are no such foundations. We have no criteria for proper basicity that has survived careful inspection, and there is no point at which our words or thoughts just represent our sense impressions or the world where one or the other constitutes the ground on which all our other knowledge is based. We have no such simple certainties or foundational knowledge, or any coherent conception of how some research program might lead us to either. What we have, instead, is a fallibilistic method of fixing belief by wide reflective equilibrium replacing epistemology and replacing, as well, a deductivist model of justification with a coherentist one (though, of course, deductive inferences are made within the coherentist model).

With the abandonment of foundationalism, and, with it, the Kantian understanding of the key role of epistemology—a conception which is held by many philosophers who are not Kantians—we abandon a classical self-image of the philosopher as someone who stands in some privileged perspective and can tell us in all domains what counts as genuine knowledge. We give up the deceptive self-conceit that the philosopher can know things that no one else can know so well. There is no possible transcendental or even quasi-transcendental perspective where, independently of some particular social practices and some particular domains, we can say what knowledge is and correct the ways of science or common sense by bringing in some conception of superior philosophical knowledge which enables us to judge common-sense beliefs and science and give the “real foundations of knowledge.”

## 6.

Rorty's pragmatism, like Dewey's, is a bald naturalism, being fully physicalist without being scientific or reductionistic. Without taking science to be the sole source of knowledge, its naturalism is Darwinian, seeking without reductionism to cleanse distinctions like mind vs. body and objective vs. subjective of Platonic or dualistic residues, getting rid in the process of



both God and God-surrogates such as Reason or the intrinsic nature of things. Indeed, these very dichotomies are to be rejected. Rorty sees everything as constituted by its relations to other things, and as having no intrinsic nature. Philosophy, trying to utilize such incoherent conceptions, cannot provide foundations for anything, including cultural artefacts that have become important in our lives, such as Newtonian mechanics, Darwinian biology, and mass democracy, but it can, where it is well done, provide clear *articulations* of them, and, as well, and distinctly, when, and if, the need arises, philosophers, pitching in with others, can provide piecemeal criticisms of them and of other practices as well (Rorty 1995a, p. 200). Here philosophers, in company with others, are being all-purpose intellectuals, though intellectuals without any special expertise that is distinctively philosophical (Rorty 1982, pp. xiii-xlvii, 211-30).

## 7

As Rorty has frequently been accused of being an anti-realist, so he has at least as frequently been accused of being a relativist. That he has always denied, but the criticism has persisted (Rorty 1993a, pp. 443-61). He certainly is not a relativist, if we mean by “relativist” the (incoherent) idea that the beliefs of all individuals, no matter how different, are “equally valid” or equally true, or, alternatively, that the beliefs of every group, however diverse, are “equally valid” or equally true. And he is not claiming, or giving to understand, that anything goes, that one belief is as justified as another. (Though this radical subjectivism should perhaps not be called “relativism.”) And he plainly follows Davidson in rejecting *conceptual* relativism—namely, the belief that there are conflicting or incommensurable ubiquitous conceptual schemes that differently characterize an undifferentiated content with no non-question-begging grounds for saying that one conceptual scheme is more adequate than another. Rorty, following Davidson, rejects the whole scheme-content distinction as incoherent. There is no standing outside all conceptual schemes and seeing or taking note of how they differ and how they differently characterize an undifferentiated reality. And there is, moreover, no understanding, or having some inarticulate or inchoate acquaintance with or grasp of, an undifferentiated reality. We can gain no epistemological access to anything which is practice-free that we could identify as an undifferentiated content.

Why has the charge of relativism so tenaciously stuck? I think it is because of Rorty’s *historicism*, which is frequently confused with relativism, because of his espousal of a rather freewheeling Emersonian romanticism, and because of his unfortunate talk of ethnocentrism (Rorty 1991a, pp. 13-17, 21-34, 203-10; 1996b, pp. 24-30). His historicism surfaces when he expresses, level-headedly and rightly—or so it seems to me—the belief that “no description of how things are from a God’s-eye point of view, no sky hook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-

developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were. Our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional" (Rorty 1991a, p. 13). Later in the same essay, he calls this tough-minded recognition of how things inescapably stand "ethnocentrism . . . an inescapable condition—roughly synonymous with human finitude . . ." (Rorty 1991a, p. 15). But this is *not* what "ethnocentrism" usually means, and it is certainly not relativism or subjectivism. It is perhaps best called historicism, or, perhaps better still, giving fewer hostages to fortune, just being what Cora Diamond and Hilary Putnam call being realistic—a sense of "realism" which has nothing to do with metaphysical realism or "scientific realism" (Diamond 1991, pp. 39-71). At any rate, this historicism is felt to be a threatening impediment to people in search of some ahistorical Archimedean point, some certainty, that would take them beyond contingency and finitude. Given this craving for an ahistorical Archimedean point, Rorty's view of things is something that they will regard with distaste, and perhaps even with anxiety, as relativism or (worse still) nihilism. Leszek Kolakowski's reaction to Rorty is a paradigm case of such anxiety (Kolakowski 1996b, pp. 52-57, 67-76).

Living without absolutes for people hooked on traditional notions, even when they clearly see their difficulties, is hard indeed. But Rorty's view is neither nihilistic nor relativistic. *Au contraire*, it is just showing in a realistic spirit what is, inescapably, anyone's situation. If it is thought that there is some possible alternative, it should be explained by those thinking so what would it be like to transcend or escape that situation? Rorty has made a strong case for claiming there is no transcending that or escaping it, and that, moreover, there is no need to. What is taken to be the charnel house of conceptual relativism is a chimera, for, while Rorty's account is fallibilistic and historicist, and yields no foundationalist Archimedean point, it does provide a bastion against relativism with (1) wide reflective equilibrium; (2) the rejection of the scheme-content doctrine, and, thus, conceptual relativism; and (3), a holism undermining any attempt at a balkanization of language-games. Together, these three notions provide grounds for criticizing and reforming our practices, and, with that, the grounds for our coming to have more adequate practices—practices, that is, that fit together into a wider and more coherent pattern. We have, by intelligently utilizing such conceptions, resources for seeing how we can and often should in a piecemeal way criticize our practices. This criticism can sometimes run deep, but any criticism, no matter how thorough, will rest on other practices. There is no Archimedean point independent of all practices from which to criticize practices or anything else. Indeed, there is no such Archimedean point, *period*. To ask for *that kind* of justification is to ask for something that makes no sense. To shed all our practices would be to shed all our language-games, and, thus, to

have no language at all, or indeed, no capacity at all, to understand anything, much less assess or criticize it. That would indeed be Lockejaw. But the acceptance of our finitude is not acquiescing in relativism or subjectivism or careening into nihilism. It is people with a penchant for religiosity who tend to so blinker themselves. It is a religiosity which persists, though in a thinly disguised form, when they proclaim themselves sturdy, no-nonsense, metaphysical or scientific realists. The quest for, or at least the longing for, absolutes dies hard.

8.

Rorty's Deweyan pragmatism comes out in his discussion of political liberalism. There, employing the method of wide reflective equilibrium, Rorty points to ways that we, though never being able to stand free of our acculturation, need not, if our circumstances are fortunate, be imprisoned by it. He remarks, "our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture which prides itself on *not* being monolithic—on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and a willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures" (Rorty 1991a, p. 14). That listening, as all listening, is, of course, still acculturated listening—there is no escape from that—but it is an acculturated listening in the light of being bombarded by the views of others with distinct acculturations and in the context of trying to face those views with understanding and an open mind—something which, of course, even with the best will in the world, is immensely difficult. This he takes to be the situation of some of us in the rich liberal capitalist democracies if we are lucky enough to be moderately well off and moderately well educated. However, like Rawls, he prefers a liberal democracy which is also a social democracy, and, again like Rawls, he does not deny that a socialist society could also be a liberal democracy.

It is in his defence of liberalism that he has, not unsurprisingly, taken a considerable amount of criticism from intellectuals to his Left, even from those favourably disposed to his anti-representationalism, and sometimes even to his historicism. What they find disturbing is what they take to be his complacency concerning the evils that emerge from these liberal capitalist democracies, including the very considerable difference between liberal rhetoric and the reality of these societies, the horrors complacently tolerated by and sometimes even directly or indirectly perpetrated by the ruling élites of these capitalist societies or by the dependent ruling élites in many of the societies the rich capitalist democracies dominate. Their track record with their own people is not something to inspire confidence, either. Reflecting on his praise of the rich capitalist democracies, his Left critics take him to be ethnocentric in a more familiar and less acceptable sense than the sense we have noted. One is ethnocentric in this more familiar sense when one uncritically takes one's own tribe and one's tribe's way of doing things to be the epitome of the right way of doing

things, the intellectual and moral exemplar for all to emulate or, at least, where emulation is impossible, to look up to and to envy. This seems to show itself in his praise of the particular way of life and the norms of political behaviour of these rich capitalist democracies (Rorty 1991a, pp. 197-202; 1996b, pp. 24-66, 84-88, 121-25; against this image of being a capitalist patsy, see Rorty 1994a, pp. 84-101).

Rorty responds that his radical critics—their self-images to the contrary notwithstanding—are part of that culture as well, and that even in criticizing it they show that they are largely accepting a considerable part of that general liberal culture. But in a footnote a bit of *realpolitik* hoves into sight when Rorty remarks, in a way that does not seem complacent at all, that he is not saying “that there is any particular reason for optimism about America or the rich North Atlantic democracies generally” (Rorty 1991a, p. 15). He goes on to say:

in the year I write (1990) . . . several of these democracies, including the United States, are presently under the control of an increasingly greedy and selfish middle class—a class which continually elects cynical demagogues willing to deprive the weak of hope in order to promise tax cuts to their constituents. If this process goes on for another generation, the countries in which it happens will be barbarised. Then it may become silly to hope for reform, and sensible to hope for revolution. (Rorty 1991a, p. 15)

But, Rorty adds, “at the present time the United State is a functioning democratic society—one in which change occurs, and can be hoped for as result of persuasion rather than force” (Rorty 1991a, p. 15).

These are fine sentiments. But it is not unreasonable to be more cynical, or at least more sceptical, about the situation than Rorty is, and much more pessimistic about any liberating change coming from such societies as long as they remain *capitalist* societies. That said, it is also in some sense true that the United States, and more so Holland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, are functioning democracies. In the United States democracy indeed functions badly, yet to some extent, though in degenerate ways, it continues to function. It is very much better in myriad ways than, for example, Malaysia, Mexico, or Turkey, to say nothing of the greater departures from democracy in Indonesia, Rwanda, Burma, Paraguay, or Saudi Arabia. Moreover, and distinctly, in the present situation, calls for revolution in rich capitalist democracies are unrealistic. Rorty is also right about the absurdity and close to utter apoliticality of the “post-modernist Left” (something that surely deserves shudder quotes). But he, too, quickly dismisses socialism as a viable conception in our world with the possibility down the road of a feasible instantiation (Rorty 1994b, pp. 119-26). And he ignores the work—work which is relevant to the above—of analytical Marxians such as G. A. Cohen, Joshua Cohen, Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, David Schweickart, and John Roemer. There we

have a variety of rigorous Marxian accounts, tied neither to old or new dogmas, proposing concrete agendas of the general type that Rorty applauded the Old Left for articulating. They do this while profiting from the mistakes of the Old Left and from developments in philosophy and the social sciences. They are also, with respect to socialism, attuned to the spent-force syndrome, to the realities of the present political situation generally, and are concerned carefully to think out what is to be done (Nielsen 1993, pp. 1-21). Moreover, there is in these accounts less confusion about normative matters than in the old Marxist Left, and there are clearly articulated models of market socialism attuned to how contemporary economies function or could feasibly be made to function without loss of efficiency. They set out a conception of a feasible socialist economy, together with conceptions of justice and democracy, that are only minimally utopian and are compatible with a liberal society. (I did not say a neo-liberal economic regime.)

Some of these accounts (particularly Roemer's) seem at least to be too scientific, but that could easily be remedied. More generally analytical Marxian accounts could also readily be adjusted to mesh with pragmatism and a metaphilosophy of the sort that Rorty develops. (Indeed, I think analytical Marxians would be better off with such a metaphilosophy and such a pragmatism.) A crucial issue would be whether we can reasonably expect theories of the scale or scope analytical Marxians deploy to work or to be capable of being refined into working. This is where Rortyan critique—or, for that matter, critique of Chomsky's or Foucault's sort—and a stress on particulars without much attention to something as suspect as *theory* in the social sciences *might* be very much to the point. But these analytical Marxians are plainly not (*pace* Jon Elster, Ernest Gellner, and Leszek Kolakowski) presenting either grand metanarratives or grand historical narratives of any kind, though some do offer theories of epochal social change (Nielsen 1983, pp. 319-38; 1989, pp. 497-539). Perhaps such theories do not have the empirical corroboration they need. Worse still, *perhaps* there are good conceptual or conceptual-cum-empirical reasons for thinking such corroboration cannot be had in the social sciences and that, instead, if we go for theories with such a scope, we will end up with what some anthropologists call just-so stories. But it does not follow from this that they are *teleological* fantasies. Still, all that notwithstanding, *perhaps* we should be much more concretely particularist in what we say and particularly in how we argue politically.

Whether this is so, and, because of that, whether theories of the generality of those articulated by analytical Marxians will turn out to be impossible or improbable cannot be settled *a priori*. There is nothing in the very idea of a social science that makes it so. It is, rather, something to be settled by pragmatic trial and error. But rather than just waving a somewhat nostalgic goodbye to the socialist Left, Rorty—or others proceeding in

the same general way that Rorty proceeds—should come to grips with these issues. It seems to be just the thing to do for a thoroughgoing Deweyan who wants the problems of human beings to become the problems of philosophers: who wants to go from what Rorty calls *Philosophy to philosophy* (Rorty 1982, pp. xiv-xvii). Whether we could, or should, institute a market socialism or whether prior to that, starting in a progressive and wealthy capitalist society (e.g., Sweden), we should institute an unconditional lifetime basic income for everyone, replacing with it our creaking welfare systems, are issues which would deeply affect the lives of everyone. They answer—though surely they are not the whole of the answer—fundamentally to questions about how we should live the public part of our lives. For one who wants philosophy to go in a Deweyan direction, Rorty should welcome a careful consideration of such matters. They should be, for him, issues of considerable importance. They are among the issues that neo-pragmatists, if not Rorty himself, should concern themselves with in our common task of trying intelligently to keep utopian hopes alive and perhaps, in time and with luck, help to make them something more than just hopes.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

- 1 How can we tell for ourselves whether we have achieved or even approximated this? We might, of course, be deceived about whether we have gained the widest consistent and most coherent pattern of beliefs and sentiments that we can for a time muster, or even that we have gained a somewhat wider one than most people who are at all reflective carry around with them under their hats. We proceed, I respond, in a common-sensical way by inspecting our beliefs and sentiments and the propositions expressive of both; we also check with others who have done similar things to find whether they detect inconsistencies. Concerning those beliefs and sentiments, we seek to arrange matters in the way that seems to us the most perspicuous arrangement that we can, for the nonce, achieve, and, again, we consult others. We can and frequently do go wrong here, sometimes badly so. Again, fallibilism is the name of the game, but using the procedure I have just discussed, we seek something of an intersubjective consensus. Where we have tried as best we can to spot inconsistencies and incoherence and have dutifully checked this out with a diverse range of informed others, we have gone some considerable way toward being justified in having some confidence that our beliefs and sentiments are in something approximating a consistent and coherent pattern. Of course, we will never see things “from the aspect of eternity.” But what fallibilist ever thought we could?
- 2 It can be said that reflective equilibrium is itself an epistemology proffering a coherentist account of justification, and that Rorty arbitrarily, in effect, takes “foundationalist epistemology” to be pleonastic. It seems to me that epistemology has been pretty much a foundationalist business, but, if one wants to, one can, of course, speak of “coherentist epistemologies” and so classify reflective

equilibrium. Nothing substantive turns on that. But it does make Hegel, Dewey, Mead, Rawls, and Rorty look like they are doing something rather more similar to what Kant, Price, Ducasse, Chisholm, and Ayer are doing than they actually are. Also, and independently, given Rorty's derisive talk concerning method, some will say it is a mistake to speak of him as having any method at all (Rorty 1991a, pp. 63-77). But his deriding of method fits badly with what he says concerning reflective equilibrium and with much of his actual practice (Rorty 1991a, pp. 175-96). "Method" may be too grand a word for what he does, but there is a careful attempt on his part to see how things fit together, to display this clearly, and to acknowledge the value of such a fitting (Rorty 1982, pp. xiii-xxi).

- 3 I should like to thank Murray Clarke, Andrew Lugg, and R. X. Ware for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. That, at times, I have been stubborn is not, of course, their fault.

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