

Community and its Paradoxes: Richard Rorty's 'Liberal Utopia'

Anti-foundationalism has so far produced a variety of intellectual and cultural effects, but few of them have referred to the terrain of politics. It is one of the merits of Richard Rorty's work to have attempted, vigorously and persuasively, to establish such a connection. In his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press 1989), he has presented an excellent picture of the intellectual transformation of the West during the last two centuries and, on the basis of it, has drawn the main lines of a social and political arrangement that he has called a 'liberal utopia'. It is not that Rorty tries to present his (post-) philosophical approach as a theoretical grounding for his political proposal – an attempt (which Rorty rejects) that would simply 'reoccupy' with an anti-foundationalist discourse the terrain of the lost foundation. It is rather that anti-foundationalism, together with a plurality of other narratives and cultural interventions, has created the intellectual climate in which certain social and political arrangements are thinkable.

In this essay I will try to show that, though I certainly agree with most of Rorty's philosophical arguments and positions, his notion of 'liberal utopia' presents a series of shortcomings which can only be superseded if the liberal features of Rorty's utopia are reinscribed in the wider framework of what we have called 'radical democracy'.¹

I

Let us summarize, in the first place, the main points of Rorty's argument. At the beginning of the book he asserts his primary thesis in the following terms:

... this book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet for ever incommensurable. It sketches a figure whom I call the 'liberal ironist'. I borrow my definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.²

The milieu in which these objectives are attainable is that of a postmetaphysical culture.

The specifically political argument about the contingency of the community is preceded by two chapters on 'the contingency of language' and 'the contingency of selfhood' which constitute its background. Rorty points out that two hundred years ago two main changes took place in the intellectual life of Europe: the increasing realization that truth is fabricated rather than found – which made possible the utopian politics of reshaping social relations – and the Romantic revolution which led to a vision of art as self-creation rather than as imitation of reality. These changes joined forces and progressively acquired cultural hegemony. German idealism was a first attempt at drawing the intellectual consequences of this transformation, but ultimately failed as a result of confusing the idea that nothing has an internal nature to be represented with the very different one that the spatio-temporal world is a product of the human mind. What actually lies behind these dim intuitions of the Romantic period is the increasing realization that there is no intrinsic nature of the real, but that the real will look different depending on the languages with which it is described, and that there is not a meta-language or neutral language which will allow us to decide

between competing first-order languages. Philosophical argument does not proceed through an internal deconstruction of a thesis presented in a certain vocabulary but rather through the presentation of a competing vocabulary:

Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.³

At this point, Rorty, faithful to his method, simply drops the old conception of language and embarks upon a new operation of redescription through Donald Davidson's philosophy of language, with its rejection of the idea that language constitutes a medium of either representation or expression, and its similarity with the Wittgensteinian conception of alternative vocabularies as alternative tools. Mary Hesse's 'metaphoric redescriptions' and Harold Bloom's 'strong poet' are also quoted in this connection.

After having shown the contingency of language, Rorty gives selfhood a turn. Here the main heroes are Nietzsche and (especially) Freud. For Nietzsche it is only the poet who fully perceives the contingency of self:

... Western tradition thinks of a human life as a triumph just in so far as it breaks out of the world of time, appearance and idiosyncratic opinion into another world – the world of enduring truth. Nietzsche, by contrast, thinks the important boundary to cross is not the one separating time from atemporal truth but rather the one which divides the old from the new. He thinks a human life triumphant just in so far as it escapes inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions. This is the difference between the will to truth and the will to self-overcoming. It is the difference between thinking of redemption as making contact with something larger and more enduring than oneself and redemption as Nietzsche describes it: 'recreating all "it was" into a "thus I willed it"'.⁴

But it is Freud who represents the most important step forward in the process of de-divinization of the self. He showed the way in which all the features of our conscience can be traced back to the contingency of our upbringing:

He de-universalizes the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet's inventions. He thus let us see the moral consciousness as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political or aesthetic consciousness.⁵

In spite of their many points in common, Freud is more useful, according to Rorty, than Nietzsche, because the former shows that the conformist bourgeois is only dull on the surface, before the psychoanalytic exploration, while the latter relegates 'the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals'.⁶

Finally we reach the contingency of the community, which should be dealt with in more detail because it concerns the main topic of this essay. Rorty finds an initial difficulty here: he is attached to both liberal democracy and anti-foundationalism, but the vocabulary in which the former was initially presented is that of Enlightenment rationalism. The thesis that he tries to defend in the following two chapters is that, although this vocabulary was essential to liberal democracy in its initial stages, today it has become an impediment to its further progress and consolidation. This involves him in an effort to reformulate the democratic ideal in a non-rationalist and non-universalist way.

Rorty starts by clearing out of his way the possible charges of relativism and irrationalism. He quotes Schumpeter as saying, 'To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian'; and he includes Isaiah Berlin's comment on this passage, 'To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need: but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity'.⁷ It is these assertions that Michael Sandel is brought into the picture to oppose: 'If one's convictions are only relatively valid, why stand for them unflinchingly?'⁸ Thus, the relativism debate is opened in its classical terms. Rorty steps into this debate by trying to make a non-issue of relativism. He starts by discarding two notions of absolute validity: that which identifies as absolutely valid with what is valid to everyone and anyone – because in this case, there would be no interesting statement which would be absolutely valid; and that which identifies it with those statements which can be justified to all those who are not corrupted – because this presupposes a division of human nature (divine/animal) which is ultimately incompatible with liberalism. The only alternative is, as a consequence, to restrict the opposition between rational and irrational forms of persuasion to the confines of a language game, where it is possible to distinguish reasons of belief from causes for belief which are not rational. This, however, leaves open the question about the

rationality of the shifts of vocabularies and, as there is no neutral ground upon which to decide between them, it looks as if all important shifts in paradigms, metaphors or vocabularies would have causes but not reasons. But this would imply that all great intellectual movements such as Christianity, Galilean science or the Enlightenment should be considered to have irrational origins. This is the point at which Rorty concludes that the usefulness of a description in terms of the opposition rational/irrational vanishes. Davidson – whom Rorty quotes at this point – notes that once the notion of rationality has been restricted to internal coherence, if the use of the term is not also restricted, we will find ourselves calling 'irrational' many things we appreciate (the decision to repress a certain desire, for instance, will appear irrational from the point of view of the desire itself). If Davidson and Hesse are right, metaphors are causes and not reasons for changes in beliefs but this does not make them 'irrational'; it is the very notion of irrationality that has to be questioned. The consequence is that the question of validity is essentially open and conversational. Only a society in which a system of taboos and a rigid delimitation of the order of subjects has been imposed and accepted by everybody will escape the conversational nature of validity; but this is precisely the kind of society which is strictly incompatible with liberalism:

It is central to the idea of a liberal society that, with respect to words as opposed to deeds, persuasion as opposed to force, anything goes. This open mindedness should not be fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, not because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake. *A Liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be.* That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with 'philosophical foundations'. For the attempt to supply such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies.⁹

This question of the relationship between foundationalism (rationalism) and liberalism is treated by Rorty through a convincing critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He accepts their vision that the forces put into movement by the Enlightenment have undermined the Enlightenment's own convictions, but he does not accept their

conclusions that, as a result of this, liberalism is at present intellectually and morally bankrupt. According to Rorty the vocabularies which presided over the initiation of a historical process or intellectual movement are never adopted by them when they reach maturity, and in his view ironic thinking is far more appropriate to a fully-fledged liberal society than rationalism.

The poet and the utopian revolutionary, who are central historical actors in Rorty's account, play the role of 'protesting in the name of society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image'. And he adds in a crucial passage:

This substitution (of the protest of alienated people by the revolutionary and the poet) seems to cancel out the difference between the revolutionary and the reformer. But one can define the *ideally* liberal society as one in which the difference is cancelled out. A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words, and not deeds. It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did.¹⁰

Rorty brings the figure of the liberal ironist into focus by comparing it with Foucault (an ironist who is not liberal) and with Habermas (a liberal who is not ironist). In the case of Foucault, there is an exclusive emphasis on self-realization, self-enjoyment. Foucault is unwilling to consider the advantages and improvements of liberal societies because he is much more concerned with the ways in which these societies still present this process of self-creation. They have even, in many senses, imposed increased controls over their members which were unknown in pre-modern societies. Rorty's main disagreement with Foucault is that, in his view, it is not necessary to create a new 'we'; 'we liberals' is enough. With Habermas the situation is the opposite. For him, it is essential that a democratic society's

self-image has an element of universalism which is to be obtained through what he calls a process of domination-free communication. He tries to maintain – even if through a radical recasting – a bridge with the rationalistic foundation of the Enlightenment. So, Rorty's disagreement with Foucault is essentially political while with Habermas it is purely philosophical.

Finally, we should consider for our purposes two possible objections to Rorty's liberal utopia which he tries to answer. The first is that the abandonment of the metaphysical grounding of liberal societies will deprive them of a social glue which is indispensable for the continuation of free institutions. The second is that it is not possible – from a psychological point of view – to be a liberal ironist and, at the same time, not to have some metaphysical beliefs about the nature of human beings. Rorty's answer to the first objection is that society is not pulled together by any philosophical grounding but by common vocabularies and common hopes. The same objection was made in the past about the disastrous social effects which would derive from the masses' loss of religious beliefs, and the prophesy proved to be wrong. Ironists have been essentially elitist and have not contributed excessively to the improvement of the community. The redescription in which they engage frequently leads to attack on the most cherished values of people and to their humiliation. On top of that, though the metaphysicians also engage in redescrptions, they have the advantage over ironists in that they give to people what claims to be true in nature, a new faith to which they can adhere. But here Rorty says that the primary difficulty is that people are demanding from ironist philosophers something that philosophy cannot give: answers to questions such as 'Why not be cruel?' or 'Why be kind?' The expectation that a *theoretical* answer can be given is simply the result of a metaphysical lag. In the post-philosophical era it is the narratives which perform the function of creating those values:

Within an ironist culture. . . it is the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic which are assigned a job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstration of a common human nature was supposed to do.¹¹

II

I am in agreement with a great deal of Rorty's analysis, especially with his pragmatism and with the account that he gives of what is happening in contemporary theory. I certainly subscribe to his rejection of any metaphysical grounding of the social order and with his critique of Habermas. Finally, I also endorse his defence of the liberal democratic framework. However, I think that there is in his 'liberal utopia' something which simply does not work. And I do not think that it is a matter of detail or incompleteness but an internal inconsistency of his 'ideal society'.

Let us start with his characterization of liberal society as a type of social arrangement in which persuasion substitutes for force. My main difficulty is that I cannot establish between the two as sharp a distinction as Rorty does. Of course, in one sense the distinction is clear: in persuasion there is an element of consensus while in force there is not. But the question which remains is: to what extent in persuasion/consensus is there not an ingredient of force? What is it to persuade? Except in the extreme case of proving something to somebody in an algorithmic way, we are engaged in an operation which involves making somebody change her opinion without any ultimate rational foundation. Rorty quite correctly limits the domain of reason to the interior of any particular language game, but the difficulty subsists, because language games are not absolutely closed universes and, as a consequence, decisions within them have to be made which are undecidable by the system of rules which define the structure of the game. I agree with Rorty/Davidson that recognition of this fact does not justify describing the decision as irrational, and that the whole distinction between rational and irrational is of little use. But what I want to point out is something different: it is that a decision to be made under those conditions is going to inevitably include an element of force. Let us take Davidson's example of somebody who wants to reform herself and decides to suppress a desire – for example, an alcoholic who decides to stop drinking. From the point of view of the desire there is only repression – that is force. And this argument can be generalized. Let us consider various possible situations:

Situation A

I am confronted with the need to choose between several possible

courses of action, and the structure of the language game that I am playing is indifferent to them. After having evaluated the situation, I conclude that there is no obvious candidate for my decision but I nevertheless make *one* choice. It is clear that in this case I have repressed the alternative courses of action.

Situation B

I want to persuade somebody to change his opinion. As the belief I want to inculcate in him is not the Hegelian truth of the opposed belief that he actually has, what I want to do is not to *develop* his belief but to *cancel it out* of existence. Again, force. Let us suppose that I succeed in my efforts. In that case, he has been *converted* to my belief. But the element of force is always there. All I have done is to convince my friend that he becomes my ally in killing his belief. Persuasion, consequently, structurally involves force.

Situation C

There are two possible courses of action and two groups of people are split about which to follow. As the two courses of action are equally possible within the structure of the situation, the *différend* can only be solved by force. Of course this element of force will be actualized in many different ways: either by one group persuading the other (and we are back to situation B); or through a system of rules accepted by both parts to settle the *différend* (a vote for instance); or by the *ultima ratio*. But the important point to see is that the element of force is going to be present in all cases.

Clearly the kind of society that Rorty prefers is that in which the third solution to situation C is excluded, but this still presents various difficulties. The first is that it is simply not possible to oppose force and persuasion given that persuasion is *one* form of force. The discussion is thus displaced to an analysis of the way in which force is organized in society and of the types of force that are acceptable in a liberal society. The second problem is that the element of physical force cannot be eliminated even in the freest of societies. I doubt that Rorty would advocate persuasion as an adequate method of dealing with a rapist. And strikes, or student sit-ins – which are perfectly legitimate actions in a free society – try to achieve their goals not only through

persuasion but also by forcing their antagonist to surrender to violence. There are, of course, many intermediate cases.

For the same reasons I tend to deal with the distinction between reform and revolution in a different way from Rorty. In my view, the problem is to displace the terrain which made the distinction possible. For the classical ideal of Revolution does not involve only the dimension of violence that Rorty underlines but also the idea that this violence had to be directed towards a very specific end, which was to give a new foundation to the social order. Now, from this point of view I am a reformist, not because my social aims are limited but simply because I do not believe that society has such a thing as a foundation. No doubt Rorty would agree with me on this point. Even the events which in the past *have been called* revolutions were only the overdetermination of a multiplicity of reforms which cover vast aspects of society but by no means the totality of them. The idea of turning the whole society upside-down does not make any sense. (Which does not mean that many ugly things were not committed in the attempt to perform this impossible operation.) But if, on the one hand, I am trying to relocate revolution within reform, on the other hand, I am very much in favour of reintroducing the dimension of violence within reform. A world in which reform takes place without violence is not a world in which I would like to live. It could be either an absolutely unidimensional society, in which 100 per cent of the population would agree with any single reform, or one in which the decisions would be made by an army of social engineers with the backing of the rest of the population. Any reform involves changing the status quo and in most cases this will hurt existing interests. The process of reform is a process of struggles, not a process of quiet piecemeal engineering. And there is nothing here to regret. It is in this active process of struggle that human abilities – new language games – are created. Could we, for instance, think what the workers' identity would have been without the active struggles with which they were involved during the first stages of industrial societies? Certainly many of the workers' abilities which will be essential to the process of democratization of Western societies would not have developed. And the same, of course, can be said of any other social force. Thus, the radical democratic 'utopia' that I would like to counterpose to Rorty's liberal one does not preclude antagonisms and social division but, on the contrary, considers them as constitutive of the social.

So, in my view, Rorty has based his argument on certain types of polarization – persuasion/force, reform/violence-revolution – which are not only simplistic but also inconsistent because the role of the goodies presupposes the presence, inside it, of baddies. Any theory about power in a democratic society has to be a theory about the forms of power which are compatible with democracy, not about the elimination of power. And this is not the result of any particular persistence of a form of domination but of the very fact that society, as Rorty knows well, is not structured as a jigsaw puzzle and that, as a consequence, it is impossible to avoid the collision of different demands and language games with each other. Let us take the case of recent debates in America concerning pornography. Various feminist groups have argued that pornography offends women – something with which I could not agree more. But some of these groups have gone so far as to ask for legislation permitting any woman to take to court the publishers of the pornographic material or advertisement. This has raised the objection – which I also share – that this would create a climate of intimidation which could affect freedom of expression. Where should the line be drawn between what is pornographic and what is artistic expression, for instance?

Obviously a balance has to be established between antagonistic demands. But it is important to stress that the balance is not going to be the result of having found a point at which both demands harmonize with each other – in which case, we would be back to the jigsaw puzzle theory. No, the antagonism of the two demands is, in that context, ineradicable, and the balance consists of limiting the effects of both so that a sort of social equilibrium – something very different from a rational harmonization – can be reached. But, in that case, the antagonism, though socially regulated and controlled, will subsist under the form of what could be called a 'war of position'. Each pole of the conflict will have a certain power and will exercise a certain violence over the other pole. The paradoxical corollary of this conclusion is that the existence of violence and antagonisms is the very condition of a free society. The reason for this is that antagonism results from the fact that the social is not a plurality of effects radiating from a pre-given centre, but is pragmatically constructed from many starting points. But it is precisely because of this, because there is an ontological possibility of clashes and

unevenness, that we can speak of freedom. Let us suppose that we move to the opposite hypothesis, the one contained in the classical notion of emancipation – that is a society from which violence and antagonisms have been *entirely* eliminated. In this society, we can only enjoy the Spinozian freedom of being conscious of necessity. This is a first paradox of a free community: that which constitutes its condition of impossibility (violence) constitutes at the same time its condition of possibility. Particular forms of oppression can be eliminated, but freedom only exists in so far as the achievement of a total freedom is an ever receding horizon. A totally free society and a totally determined society would be, as I have argued elsewhere, exactly the same. I think that the reason why Rorty is not entirely aware of these antinomies is the result of his insufficient theorization of what is involved in the notion of ‘persuasion’ and of the total opposition he has established between ‘persuasion’ and ‘force’.

III

Persuasion is an essentially impure notion. One cannot persuade without persuasion’s other – that is, force. One can speak of the force of persuasion but one would never say that one had been ‘persuaded’ of the correctness of the Pythagorean theorem. The latter is simply *shown*, without any need for persuasion. But one cannot say either that persuasion is simply *reducible* to force. Persuasion is the terrain of what Derrida would have called a ‘hymen’. It is the point in which the ‘reasons’ for a belief and the ‘causes’ of the belief constitute an inseparable whole. The adoption of a new paradigm in Kuhnian terms is a good example of what I mean. A multitude of small reasons/causes ranging from theoretical difficulties to technical advances in the tools of scientific research overdetermine each other in determining the transition from normal to revolutionary science. And for reasons that I have explained earlier – and which are also clearly present in some way in Kuhn’s account – this transition is not an indifferent and painless abandonment but involves repression of other possibilities, it is the result of a struggle. This is obviously more clearly visible when we refer to the politico-ideological field. Now, as I have argued with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle*, there is a name in our political tradition which

refers to this peculiar operation called persuasion which is only constituted through its inclusion, within itself, of its violent opposite: this name is ‘hegemony’.

I refer to our book for all aspects concerning the genealogy of the concept of hegemony from the Russian social-democrats to Gramsci, for its structural characteristics and for its forms of theoretical articulation within the project of a radical democracy. Here I want only to underline some aspects which are relevant to the present discussion. The most important one is that ‘hegemony’ is the discursive terrain in which foundationalism began disintegrating in the history of Marxism. What had been so far presented as a necessary consequence of an endogenous development determined by the contradiction between development of the productive forces and existing relations of production, became, escalating from Lenin to Gramsci, the result of a contingent process of political articulation in an open ensemble whose elements had purely relational identities. That is that History (with a capital ‘H’) was not a valid object of discourse because it did not correspond to any a priori unified object. The only thing we had was the discontinuous succession of hegemonic blocs which was not governed by any rationally graspable logic – neither teleological, nor dialectical or causal. As in the relation between the desire that I want to suppress – in Davidson’s example – and the decision to suppress it, there is no internal connection at all. On the other hand, there is an important dialectic here to detect between necessity and contingency. If each of the elements intervening in a hegemonic bloc had an identity of its own, its relations with all the others would be merely contingent; but if, on the contrary, the identity of all elements is contingent upon its relations with the others, those relations, *if* the identity is going to be maintained, are absolutely necessary.

Now, the problem to be discussed is the internal logic of the hegemonic operation which underlies the process of persuasion. We will approach it by bringing to the analysis various devices which are thinkable as a result of the transformations which have taken place in contemporary theory. Let us start with the Wittgensteinian example of the rule governing the sequence of a numerical series. I say ‘one, two, three, four’ and ask a friend to continue it: the spontaneous answer would be to say ‘five, six, seven,’ etcetera. But I can say that the series I have in mind is not that but ‘one, two, three, four, nine, ten, eleven, twelve,’ etcetera.

My friend thinks that he has now understood and proceeds accordingly, but I can still say that the series is not what I had in mind, etcetera. The rule governing the series can be indefinitely changed. Everything depends, as Lewis Carroll would put it, on who is in command. Let us slightly change the example now. Let us suppose that we are speaking of a game in which player A starts a series and player B has to continue it the way he wants, providing that there is some visible regularity. Now, when it is again A's turn he has to invent a new rule which takes as its starting point the series as it has been left by B and so on. In the end, the loser is the one who finds the whole business so complicated that he is unable to imagine a new rule. The corollaries which follow from this example are the following: (a) that there is no such thing as the ultimate rule: it can always be subverted; (b) that as an indefinite number of players can come to participate in the game, the rule governing the series is essentially threatened – it is, to use Rorty's expression, *radically contingent*; (c) that the identity of each of the individual figures within the series is entirely relational, it is given only by its structural position within the rule that is at that moment hegemonizing the series, and it will change with the formulation of a new rule. I think this is important because the process of persuasion is frequently described as if somebody who has a belief A is presented with a belief B and the suggestion is of moving from one to the other. Things never happen that way. What happens is, rather, that new elements enter into the picture and the old rule is unable to hegemonize them – as if, for instance, an apparently chaotic series of numbers is introduced into our series and the challenge is to find a coherent rule which will be compatible with the new state of affairs. Very frequently the new rule is accepted, not because it is liked in itself, but just because it is a rule, because it introduces a principle of coherence and intelligibility in an apparent chaos. In the confused Italian situation of the early 1920s, many liberals accepted Fascism not because they particularly liked it, but because an explosive social situation existed which was both unthinkable and unmanageable within the framework of the traditional political system, and Fascism appeared the *only* coherent discourse which could deal with the new chaotic events. And if liberalism had wanted – which it did not – to present itself as an alternative hegemonic discourse articulating the new elements, it could only have done

so by transforming itself. Between the liberalism of 1905 and the liberalism of 1922 there are only 'family resemblances'. This is because, among other reasons, the latter had to be anti-fascist and this involved dealing with a new series of problems that radically transformed the discursive field. This is the reason why I do not agree with Rorty's assertion that we can be *just* liberals; that our 'we' has reached a point which does not require any further transformation. Even if we want to continue being liberals we will always have to be something more. Liberalism can only exist as a hegemonic attempt in this process of articulation – as a result of the radically relational character of all identity. Here I think that Rorty has not been historicist enough.

This is also the point – moving from Wittgenstein to Derrida – at which deconstruction becomes central for a theory of politics. Derrida has shown the essential vulnerability of all context. In his words:

Every sign, linguistic or not linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinitude of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchorage (*anchorage*). This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called 'normal'. What would a mark be that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way?¹²

Now, what is this saying if not that all context is essentially vulnerable and open, that the fact that one of the possibilities rather than the others has been chosen is a purely *contingent* fact? If the choice is not *determined* by the structure, it is down to the bottom a hegemonic operation, an essentially *political* decision.

Let us go back, with this distinction in mind, to Rorty's text. The first aspect of his liberal utopia with which I would take issue is his sharp division between the public and the private. It is not, of course, that I want to return to some 'grand theory' which would embrace both. The reason for my disagreement is exactly the opposite: Rorty sees as necessarily united many things which, for me, are radically discontinuous and held together only through

contingent articulations. Is the realm of personal self-realization really a *private* realm? It would be so if that self-realization took place in a neutral medium in which individuals could seek unimpeded the fulfilment of their own aims. But this medium is, of course, a myth. A woman searching for her self-realization will find obstacles in the form of male oriented rules which will limit her *personal* aspirations and possibilities. The feminist struggles tending to change those rules will constitute a collective 'we' *different* from the 'we' of abstract public citizenship, but the space which these struggles create – remember the motto 'the personal is political' – will be no less a communitarian and public space than the one in which political parties intervene and in which elections are fought. And the same can be said, of course, of any struggle which begins as a result of the existence of social norms, prejudices, regulations, etcetera that frustrate the self-realization of an individual. I see the *strength* of the democratic society in the multiplication of these public spaces and its *condition* in the recognition of their plurality and autonomy. This recognition is based on the essential *discontinuity* existing between those social spaces, and the essential character of these discontinuities makes possible its exact opposite: the contingent-hegemonic articulation among them of what could be called a global sense of community, a certain democratic common sense. We see here a second paradox of community: it has to be essentially unachievable to become pragmatically possible. So, what about the private? It is a residual category, limited to those aspects of our activity in which our objectives are not interfered with by any structural social barrier, in which their achievement does not require the constitution of any struggling community, of any 'we'. So, as we see, the classical terms of the problem are displaced: it is no longer a question of preventing a public space from encroaching upon that of private individuals, given that the public spaces have to be constituted in order to achieve individual aims. But the condition for a democratic society is that these public spaces have to be plural: a democratic society is, of course, incompatible with the existence of only *one* public space. What we should have is a multiple 'civic republicanism'.

As is clear, my idea of a democratic society is different in central respects from Rorty's liberal utopia. Rorty's utopia consists of a public space limited – as for all good liberals – to minimal functions and a private sphere in which individual agents seek their own ends. This system can certainly be reformed and

improved, but one has the impression that such improvements are of the type of improving a machine by designing a better model, not the result of struggles. Antagonism and violence do not play either a positive or negative role, simply because they are entirely absent from the picture. For me, a radically democratic society is one in which a plurality of public spaces, constituted around specific issues and demands, and strictly autonomous of each other, instils in its members a civic sense which is a central ingredient of their identity as individuals. Despite the plurality of these spaces, or, rather, as a consequence of it, a diffuse democratic culture is created, which gives the community its specific identity. Within this community, the liberal institutions – parliament, elections, divisions of power – are maintained, but these are one public space, not *the* public space. Not only is antagonism not excluded from a democratic society, it is the very condition of its institution.

For Rorty the three words 'bourgeois liberal democracy' constitute an indivisible whole; for me there is between them only a contingent articulation. As a socialist I am prepared to fight against capitalism for the hegemony of liberal institutions and, as a believer in the latter, I am prepared to do my best to make them compatible with the whole field of democratic public spaces, but I see this compatibility as a hegemonic construction, not as something granted from the beginning. I think that a great deal of twentieth-century history can be explained by dislocations in the articulation of the three components just mentioned. Liberal institutions (let alone capitalism) have fared badly in Third World countries and of the attempt to articulate socialism and democracy (if attempt it can be called) in the countries of the Eastern bloc, the record is simply appalling. Though my preference is for a liberal-democratic-socialist society, it is clear to me that if I am forced under given circumstances to choose one out of the three, my preference will always be for democracy. (For instance, if in a Third World country I have to choose between, on the one hand, a corrupt and repressive liberal regime, in which elections are a farce manipulated by clientelistic gangs, with no participation of the masses; and on the other, a nationalist military regime which tends to social reform and the self-organization of the masses, my preference will be for the latter. All my experience shows that, while in some cases the second type of regime can lead – with many difficulties – to an increasing liberalization of

its institutions, the opposite process does not take place in the first case: it is just a blind alley.)

IV

Finally, I want to address the two possible objections to the argument that Rorty raises (see above), and his answers to them. Regarding the first objection, I think that Rorty is entirely correct and I have nothing to add. But in the case of the second objection, I feel that Rorty's answer is unnecessarily defensive and that a much better argument can be made. I would formulate it this way. The question is whether the abandonment of universalism undermines the foundation of a democratic society. My answer is yes, I grant the whole argument. Without a universalism of sorts – the idea of human rights, for instance – a truly democratic society is impossible. But in order to assert this, it is not at all necessary to muddle through the Enlightenment's rationalism or Habermas's 'domination-free communication'. It is enough to recognize that democracy needs universalism while asserting, at the same time, that universalism is one of the vocabularies, of the language games, which was constructed at some point by social agents and it has become a more and more central part of our values and our culture. It is a *contingent* historical product. It originated in religious discourse – all men are equal before God – was brought down to this world by the Enlightenment, and has been generalized to wider and wider social relations by the democratic revolution of the last two centuries.

A historicist recasting of universalism has, I would think, two main political advantages over its metaphysical version, and these, far from weakening it, help to reinforce and to radicalize it. The first is that it has a liberating effect: human beings will begin seeing themselves more and more as the exclusive authors of their world. The historicity of being will become more apparent. If people think that God or nature have made the world as it is, they will tend to consider their fate inevitable. But if the being of the world which they inhabit is only the result of the contingent discourses and vocabularies that constitute it, they will tolerate their fate with less patience and will stand a better chance of becoming political 'strong poets'. The second advantage is that the perception of the contingent character of universalist values

will make us all more conscious of the dangers which threaten them and of their possible extinction. If we happen to believe in those values, the consciousness of their historicity will not make us more indifferent to them but, on the contrary, will make us more responsible citizens, more ready to engage in their defence. Historicism, in this way, helps those who believe in those values. As for those who do not believe in them, no rationalist argument will ever have the slightest effect.

This leads me to a last point. This double effect – increasing freeing of human beings through a more assertive image of their capacities, increasing social responsibility through the conscience of the historicity of being – is the most important possibility, a radically political possibility, that contemporary thought is opening to us. The metaphysical discourse of the West is coming to an end, and philosophy in its twilight has performed, through the great names of the century, a last service for us: the deconstruction of its own terrain and the creation of the conditions for its own impossibility. Let us think, for instance, of Derrida's undecidables. Once undecidability has reached the ground itself, once the organization of a certain camp is governed by a hegemonic decision – hegemonic because it is not objectively determined, because different decisions were also possible – the realm of philosophy comes to an end and the realm of politics begins. This realm will be inhabited by a different type of discourse, by discourses such as Rorty's 'narratives', which tend to construct the world on the grounds of a radical undecidability. But I do not like the name 'ironist' – which evokes all kinds of playful images – for this political strong poet. On the contrary, someone who is confronted with Auschwitz and has the moral strength to admit the contingency of her own beliefs, instead of seeking refuge in religious or rationalistic myths is, I think, a profoundly heroic and tragic figure. This will be a hero of a new type who has still not been entirely created by our culture, but one whose creation is absolutely necessary if our time is going to live up to its most radical and exhilarating possibilities.

Notes

1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso 1985.
2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989, p. xv.
3. Ibid. p. 9.
4. Ibid. p. 29.
5. Ibid. p. 30.
6. Ibid. p. 35.
7. Ibid. p. 46.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. pp. 51-2.
10. Ibid. pp. 60-1.
11. Ibid. p. 94.
12. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc.*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press 1988, p. 12.