

## Fraternity Reigns | Richard Rorty

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Our long, hesitant, painful recovery, over the last five decades, from the breakdown of democratic institutions during the Dark Years (2014-2044) has changed our political vocabulary, as well as our sense of the relation between the moral order and the economic order. Just as 20th-century Americans had trouble imagining how their pre-Civil War ancestors could have stomached slavery, so we at the end of the 21st century have trouble imagining how our great-grandparents could have legally permitted a C.E.O. to get 20 times more than her lowest-paid employees. We cannot understand how Americans a hundred years ago could have tolerated the horrific contrast between a childhood spent in the suburbs and one spent in the ghettos. Such inequalities seem to us evident moral abominations, but the vast majority of our ancestors took them to be regrettable necessities.

As long as their political discourse was dominated by the notion of "rights" -- whether "individual" or "civil" -- it was hard for Americans to think of the results of unequal distribution of wealth and income as immoral. Such rights talk, common among late-20th-century liberals, gave conservative opponents of redistributionist policies a tremendous advantage: "the right to a job" (or "to a decent wage") had none of the resonance of "the right to sit in the front of the bus" or "the right to vote" or even "the right to equal pay for equal work." Rights in the liberal tradition were, after all, powers and privileges to be wrested from the state, not from the economy.

Of course socialists had, since the mid-19th century, urged that the economy and the state be merged to guarantee economic rights. But it had become clear by the middle of the 20th century that such merging was disastrous. The history of the pre-1989 "socialist" countries -- bloody dictatorships that paid only lip service to the fraternity for which the socialist revolutionaries had yearned -- made it plausible for conservatives to argue that extending the notion of rights to the economic order would be a step down the road to serfdom. By the end of the 20th century, even left-leaning American intellectuals agreed that "socialism, no wave of the future, now looks (at best) like a temporary historical stage through which various nations passed before reaching the great transition to capitalist democracy."<sup>1</sup>

The realization by those on the left that a viable economy required free markets did not stop them from insisting that capitalism would be compatible with American ideals of human brotherhood only if the state were able to redistribute wealth. Yet this view was still being criticized as "un-American" and "socialist" at the beginning of the present century, even as, under the pressures of a globalized world economy, the gap between most Americans' incomes and those of the lucky one-third at the top widened. Looking back, we think how easy it would have been for our great-grandfathers to have forestalled the social collapse that resulted from these economic pressures. They could have insisted that all classes had to confront the new global economy together. In the name of our common citizenship, they could have asked everybody, not just the bottom two-thirds, to tighten their belts and make do with less. They might have brought the country together by bringing back its old pride in fraternal ideals.

But as it happened, decades of despair and horror were required to impress Americans with lessons that now seem blindingly obvious.

The apparent incompatibility of capitalism and democracy is, of course, an old theme in American political and intellectual life. It began to be sounded more than two centuries ago. Historians divide our history into the 100 years before the coming of industrial capitalism and the more than 200 years since. During the first period, the open frontier made it possible for Americans to live in ways that became impossible for their descendants. If you were white in 19th-century America, you always had a second chance: something was always opening up out West.

So the first fault line in American politics was not between the rich and the poor. Instead, it was between those who saw chattel slavery as incompatible with American fraternity and those who did not. (Abolitionist posters showed a kneeling slave asking, "Am I not a man, and a brother?") But only 40 years after the Civil War, reformers were already saying that the problem of chattel slavery had been replaced by that of wage slavery.

The urgency of that problem dominates Herbert Croly's progressivist manifesto of 1909, "The Promise of American Life." Croly argued that the Constitution, and a tradition of tolerant individualism, had kept America hopeful and filled with what he called "genuine good-fellowship" during its first hundred years. But beginning with the first wave of industrialization in the 1870's and 1880's, things began to change. Wage slavery -- a life of misery and toil, without a sense of participation in the national life, and without any trace of the frontiersman's proud independence -- became the fate of more and more Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville had rejoiced that an opulent merchant and his shoemaker, when they met on the streets of Philadelphia in 1840, would exchange political opinions. "These two citizens," he wrote, "are concerned with affairs of state, and they do not part without shaking hands." Croly feared that this kind of unforced fraternity was becoming impossible.

From Croly to John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger in the 1960's, reformers urged that we needed some form of redistribution to bring back Tocquevillian comity. They battled with conservatives who claimed that redistributive measures would kill economic prosperity. The reformers insisted that what Theodore Roosevelt had called "the money power" and Dwight Eisenhower "the military-industrial complex" was the true enemy of American ideals. The conservatives rejoined that the only enemy of democracy was the state and that the economy must be shielded from do-gooders.

This debate simmered through the first two decades following the Second World War. During that relatively halcyon period, most Americans could get fairly secure, fairly well-paying jobs and could count on their children having a better life than theirs. White America seemed to be making slow but steady progress toward a classless society. Only the growth of the increasingly miserable black underclass reminded white Americans that the promise of American life was still far from being fulfilled.

The sense that this promise was still alive was made possible, in part, by what the first edition of the "Companion" called the "rights revolution." Most of the moral progress that took place in the second half of the 20th century was brought about by the Supreme Court's invocation of

constitutional rights, in such decisions as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Romer v. Evans* (1996), the first Supreme Court decision favorable to homosexuals. But this progress was confined almost entirely to improvements in the situation of groups identified by race, ethnicity or sexuality. The situation of women and of homosexuals changed radically in this period. Indeed, it is now clear that those changes, which spread from America around the world, were the most lasting and significant moral achievements of the 20th century.

But though such groups could use the rhetoric of rights to good effect, the trade unions, the unemployed and those employed at the ludicrously low minimum wage (\$174 an hour, in 2095 dollars, compared with the present minimum of \$400) could not. Perhaps no difference between pres-

ent-day American political discourse and that of 100 years ago is greater than our assumption that the first duty of the state is to prevent gross economic and social inequality, as opposed to our ancestors' assumption that the government's only moral duty was to insure equal protection of the laws laws that, in their majestic impartiality, allowed the rich and the poor to receive the same hospital bills.

The Supreme Court, invoking this idea of equal protection, began the great moral revival we know as the Civil Rights Movement. The *Brown* decision initiated both an explosion of violence and an upsurge of fraternal feeling. Some white Americans burned crosses and black churches. Many more had their eyes opened to the humiliations being inflicted on their fellow citizens: if they did not join civil rights marches, they at least felt relieved of guilt when the Court threw out miscegenation laws and when Congress began to protect black voting rights. For a decade or so there was an uplifting sense of moral improvement. For the first time, white and black Americans started to think of each other as fellow citizens.

By the beginning of the 1980's, however, this sense of fraternity was only a faint memory. A burst of selfishness had produced tax revolts in the 70's, stopping in its tracks the fairly steady progress toward a full-fledged welfare state that had been under way since the New Deal. The focus of racial hate was transferred from the rural South to the big cities, where a criminal culture of unemployed (and, in the second generation, virtually unemployable) black youths grew up --

a culture of near constant violence, made possible by the then-famous American "right to bear arms." All the old racial prejudices were revived by white suburbanites' claims that their tax money was being used to coddle criminals. Politicians gained votes by promising to spend what little money could be squeezed from their constituents on prisons rather than on day care.

Tensions between the comfortable middle-class suburbs and the rest of the country grew steadily in the closing decades of the 20th century, as the gap between the educated and well paid and the uneducated and ill paid steadily widened. Class division came into existence between those who made "professional" salaries and those whose hourly wage kept sinking toward the minimum. But the politicians pretended to be unaware of this steady breakdown of fraternity.

Our nation's leaders, in the last decade of the old century and the first of the new, seemed never to have thought that it might be dangerous to make automatic weapons freely and cheaply

available to desperate men and women -- people without hope -- living next to the centers of transportation and communication. Those weapons burst into the streets in 2014, in the revolution that, leaving the cities in ruins and dislocating American economic life, plunged the country into the Second Great Depression.

The insurgency in the ghettos, coming at a time when all but the wealthiest Americans felt desperately insecure, led to the collapse of trust in government. The collapse of the economy produced a war of all against all, as gasoline and food became harder and harder to buy, and as even the suburbanites began to brandish guns at their neighbors. As the generals never stopped saying throughout the Dark Years, only the military saved the country from utter chaos.

Here, in the late 21st century, as talk of fraternity and unselfishness has replaced talk of rights, American political discourse has come to be dominated by quotations from Scripture and literature, rather than from political theorists or social scientists. Fraternity, like friendship, was not a concept that either philosophers or lawyers knew how to handle. They could formulate principles of justice, equality and liberty, and invoke these principles when weighing hard moral or legal issues. But how to formulate a "principle of fraternity"? Fraternity is an inclination of the heart, one that produces a sense of shame at having much when others have little. It is not the sort of thing that anybody can have a theory about or that people can be argued into having.

Perhaps the most vivid description of the American concept of fraternity is found in a passage from John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, "The Grapes of Wrath." Steinbeck describes a desperately impoverished family, dispossessed tenant farmers from Oklahoma, camped out at the edge of Highway 66, sharing their food with an even more desperate migrant family. Steinbeck writes: "I have a little food' plus 'I have none.' If from this problem the sum is 'We have a little food,' the movement has direction." As long as people in trouble can sacrifice to help people who are in still worse trouble, Steinbeck insisted, there is fraternity, and therefore social hope.

The movement Steinbeck had in mind was the revolutionary socialism that he, like many other leftists of the 1930's, thought would be required to bring the First Great Depression to an end. "The quality of owning," he wrote, "freezes you forever into the 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we.'" Late-20th-century liberals no longer believed in getting rid of private ownership, but they agreed that the promise of American life could be redeemed only as long as Americans were willing to sacrifice for the sake of fellow Americans -- only as long as they could see the government not as stealing their tax money but as needing it to prevent unnecessary suffering.

The Democratic Vistas Party, the coalition of trade unions and churches that toppled the military dictatorship in 2044, has retained control of Congress by successfully convincing the voters that its opponents constitute "the parties of selfishness." The traditional use of "brother" and "sister" in union locals and religious congregations is the principal reason why "fraternity" (or, among purists, "siblinghood") is now the name of our most cherished ideal.

In the first two centuries of American history Jefferson's use of rights had set the tone for political discourse, but now political argument is not about who has the right to what but about what can best prevent the re-emergence of hereditary castes -- either racial or economic. The old union slogan "An injury to one is an injury to all" is now the catch phrase of American politics.

"Solidarity Forever" and "This Land Is Your Land" are sung at least as often as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Until the last 50 years, moral instruction in America had inculcated personal responsibility, and most sermons had focused on individual salvation. Today morality is thought of neither as a matter of applying the moral law nor as the acquisition of virtues but as fellow feeling, the ability to sympathize with the plight of others.

In the churches, the "social gospel" theology of the early 20th century has been rediscovered. Walter Rauschenbusch's "Prayer against the servants of Mammon" ("Behold the servants of Mammon, who defy thee and drain their fellow-men for gain . . . who have made us ashamed of our dear country by their defilements and have turned our holy freedom into a hollow name. . . .") is familiar to most churchgoers. In the schools, students learn about our country's history from social novels describing our past failures to hang together when we needed to, the novels of Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Richard Wright and, of course, Russell Banks's samizdat novel, "Trampling the Vineyards" (2021).

Historians unite in calling the 20th the "American" century. Certainly it was in the 20th century that the United States was richest, most powerful, most influential and most self-confident. Our ancestors 100 years ago still thought of the country as destined to police, inform and inspire the world. Compared with the Americans of 100 years ago, we are citizens of an isolationist, unambitious, middle-grade nation.

Our products are only now becoming competitive again in international markets, and Democratic Vistas politicians continue to urge that our consistently low productivity is a small price to pay for union control of the workplace and worker ownership of the majority of firms. We continue to lag behind the European Community, which was able to withstand the pressures of a globalized labor market by having a full-fledged welfare state already in place, and which (except for Austria and Great Britain) was able to resist the temptation to impoverish the most vulnerable in order to keep its suburbanites affluent. Spared the equivalent of our own Dark Years, Europe still, despite all that China can do, holds the position we lost in 2014: it still dominates both the world's economy and its culture.

For two centuries Americans believed that they were as far ahead of Europe, in both virtue and promise, as Europe was ahead of the rest of the world. But American exceptionalism did not survive the Dark Years: we no longer think of ourselves as singled out by divine favor. We are now, once again, a constitutional democracy, but we have proved as vulnerable as Germany, Russia and India to dictatorial takeovers. We have a sense of fragility, of susceptibility to the vicissitudes of time and chance, which Walt Whitman and John Dewey may never have known.

Perhaps no American writer will ever again begin a book, as Croly did, by saying, "The faith of Americans in their own country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority." But our chastened mood, our lately learned humility, may have made us better able to realize that everything depends on keeping our fragile sense of American fraternity intact.

1. From the article "Socialism," by the labor historian Sean Wilentz, in the first edition of "A Companion to American Thought," eds. Richard Fox and James Kloppenberg (London and New York: Blackwell, 1995). That edition appeared exactly 100 years before the current one, which contains the article "Fraternity" excerpted here. Whereas the first edition contained no essay on fraternity, the latest edition has neither an essay on socialism nor one on rights. (For the full text of "Fraternity," see pp. 247-298 of "A Companion to American Thought," seventh edition, eds. Cynthia Rodriguez, S.J., and Youzheng Patel (London and New York: Blackwell, 2095).

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