

Review article by Chantal Mouffe

Rorty's pragmatist politics

Texts reviewed

Richard Rorty (1998a) *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richard Rorty (1998b) *Achieving our Country*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Richard Rorty (1999) *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin.

Since his path-breaking book of 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty has been known for his trenchant critique of the traditional conception of philosophy as a discipline concerned with the accurate representation of what is outside the mind and with access to a special understanding of the nature of knowledge. According to such a view, philosophy provides a tribunal of pure reason from which to judge other areas of culture. Rorty proposes to replace this 'foundationalist' approach with the 'edifying' conception of philosophy found in – among others – Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger who are deeply sceptical about systematic philosophy. He advocates an 'anti-representationalist' account which, instead of seeing knowledge in terms of getting reality right, envisages it as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality.

Rorty has played an important role in establishing a dialogue between Anglo-American analytic philosophy and its Continental counterpart and has greatly contributed to the revaluation of the pragmatist school. He has shown how recent analytic philosophy has been characterized by an increasing 'pragmaticization' of its original logical positivist tenets. A similar road has, in his view, been travelled by 'Continental' philosophers, with Deleuze and Foucault developing through a Nietzschean prism many insights already found in William James and John Dewey. He points out, however, that this convergence on the same 'pragmatic' or 'perspectivalist' alternative to the traditional notion of truth is not without serious differences in tone. While making basically the same theoretical points, the moral outlook of the Continental and the Anglo-American authors is different and, for Rorty, this has very important political consequences. Such a

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concern has progressively come to the fore in his recent work and it constitutes an important theme in his three last books.

To be sure, the political implications of his critique of foundationalism have never been absent from Rorty's reflections. In several essays collected in the volume *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* published in 1991, he was already stressing the political implications of the critique of ideas like 'objectivity' and 'transcendence' and asserting that pragmatism was clearing the ground for democratic politics. One of his main contentions was that only by reinterpreting objectivity as solidarity and by dropping the question of how to get in touch with 'reality' could one begin asking the really pertinent questions for democratic politics, those concerning the limits of our community and the types of communities we want to identify with. He pointed out that a crucial consequence of the anti-representationalist approach was to force us to acknowledge the unavailability of a 'God's eye-standpoint' detached from our language and our beliefs and face the inescapability of 'ethnocentrism'.

Rorty is convincing when he argues that a pragmatist approach allows us to pose the relevant questions for democratic politics. By bringing to the fore the contingent nature of our identities and communities and the fact that truth is not something that is to be discovered 'out there' but created through our various practices, it does help us to envisage more adequately how a democratic society can best be established and furthered. Against those philosophers who believe that democratic advances are linked to progresses in rationality and that we need to find neutral premisses from which to justify to all possible audiences the superiority of liberal democracy, Rorty is right to urge us to relinquish the idea that liberal democratic societies are the rational solution to the problem of human coexistence, a solution that other peoples will adopt when they cease to be 'irrational'. I also share his view that a theory of truth and notions like unconditionality and universal validity are not necessary for democratic action. I find his 'contextualist' perspective to be much more fruitful than the search of Kantian inspired philosophers like Habermas for a viewpoint standing above politics whence to formulate arguments which would not be 'context-dependent' and from which one could infer an obligation to pursue democratic politics. This rationalism has no real purchase on democratic politics and we should better direct our attention and efforts to the creation of commonly shared vocabularies and hopes.

There are nevertheless some problems with Rorty's argumentation which reveal the limits of his approach. In his view, it is not rationality which is at stake in democracy but sympathy and shared beliefs. It is through persuasion, not through universalistic moral discourse that societies will become more democratic. What is required is a manifold of practices and pragmatic moves which could persuade people to broaden the range of their commitments to others and to build a more inclusive community. All that is of course very important, but is it sufficient? Are there not structural obstacles to the extension of democracy that cannot be tackled through persuasion and would require a deep transformation of social relations?

The limits of Rorty's pragmatism all stem, I believe, from the fact that, in his urge to demystify the importance of systematic philosophy, he becomes suspicious of all forms of theorizing and ends up denying the usefulness of any kind of theoretical reflection for politics. This is why he is left with a very unsatisfactory conception of politics, reduced to banal features and unable to grasp the structure of power relations and the dynamics of political antagonisms. Since this rejection of theory constitutes the central theme of *Achieving our Country* as well as being a leitmotiv in many essays collected in *Truth and Progress* and in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, those books provide a good place to test my hypothesis. I shall argue that, if Rorty is unable to envisage the conditions of realization of the very objective to which he has recently passionately committed himself: the revival of the Left, this is due to the trivial conception of politics to which he is condemned by his anti-theoretical stance. It is one thing to assert that democracy does not need philosophical *foundations* and that all attempts to find them are bound to fail, a completely different one to claim that democratic politics can do without theoretical reflection. Every understanding of politics is informed, at least implicitly, by a theoretical framework and, without being able to problematize it, we are bound to remain hostage of the common sense dominant at a given time. Hence the necessity of theory.

Cultural versus 'real' politics

The central target of Rorty in *Achieving our Country* is the 'cultural Left', the heirs of the New Left of the 1960s who are accused of having abandoned the terrain of 'real politics'. Real politics, for him, means addressing economic inequality through the passing of laws to impede 'the rich soaking the poor'. For the pre-1960s reformist Left, the existing prejudices were a by-product of economic injustice and their main concern was to tackle economic inequality. The new cultural Left has broken its ties with such a perspective. It is no longer self-ishness but sadism which has become its principal enemy; Freud has replaced Marx, and philosophy, not political economy, is today seen as the necessary preparation for political action. As Rorty puts it, 'the cultural left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed' (Rorty 1998b: 77). The central theme of the cultural Left is the 'politics of difference'; its key notions are 'identity' and 'recognition'.

While acknowledging that the economic determinism of the reformist Left was simplistic and that the post-1960s Left has been at the origin of important advances in 'civility' and has led to a significant decrease in the amount of 'socially accepted sadism', Rorty's final judgement on its role is profoundly negative. He ends up by presenting cultural leftists as politically sterile and as being mainly responsible for the current collapse of 'common dreams' and the 'disuniting of America'. He accuses them of having abandoned the vocabulary of liberal politics, central to American identity, and criticizes them for their lack

of 'patriotism' and their rejection of American values. Instead of acting, this 'spectatorial' Left uses a revolutionary rhetoric which has no effective purchase on the majority of Americans. Obsessed with attacking 'the system', it does not engage with the issues which affect 'real' people. This is why in recent years – while cultural leftists were busy fighting in the universities – the gap between rich and poor has enormously widened. Faced with such an alarming situation, claims Rorty, it is high time for the Left to 'get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy' (Rorty 1998b: 105).

From a certain point of view Rorty's vehemence against cultural politics is rather puzzling since in his theoretical work he has so convincingly argued for the central role of cultural practices in shaping who we are and the way we define our aims and obligations. One of the most interesting essays in *Truth and Progress* is called 'Human rights, rationality and sentimentality', in which, criticizing the search for transcultural universals on which to found human rights, he insists that what is important is the development of a 'human rights culture'. In his view, we should see our task 'as a matter of making our own culture – the human right culture – more self-conscious and more powerful, rather than of demonstrating its superiority to other cultures by an appeal to something transcultural' (Rorty 1998a: 171). Against the human rights foundationalists who imagine that their acceptance is a matter of rationality and moral knowledge, he suggests that what is at stake is 'a progress of sentiments'. The spread of human rights culture is not a matter of becoming aware of the moral law and of our moral obligations but the result of the right kind of 'sentimental education'. Novelists, poets, cineasts have therefore a crucial role to play in such a progress.

I do share Rorty's insistence on the central role played by narratives – what I would prefer to call 'discourses' – in construing our self-image and I have always found the first part of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989), where he brings to the fore the contingent nature of language, selfhood, and community, utterly convincing. I read it as providing important arguments for the view – already present in Gramsci – that it is in the whole field of what is broadly defined as 'culture' that our conception of reality takes shape. But, if the field of culture provides a crucial terrain for political action, how can Rorty be so dismissive of cultural politics? How can he establish such an opposition between cultural and 'real' politics? Why does he draw such a line between the 'material' and 'real' and the 'merely' cultural?

Perhaps what Rorty really objects to is the *type* of cultural politics of the post-1960s Left more than the fact that they are engaged in cultural politics. He would certainly not be so critical if they were involved in a patriotic celebration of American ideals. What seems to irritate him so deeply is the denunciation by leftists of the myth of America as a land of freedom and equality. It is their rejection of American values that he finds reprehensible. Indeed, in one article of 1995, reprinted in *Truth and Progress*, we find a much more positive attitude with respect to the political implications of cultural practices. Examining what can guard a society from feeling comfortable with the humiliation of the powerless, Rorty argues that only detailed descriptions of their pain could make them aware

of the contrast between their lives and those of the privileged and bring the same contrast home to the privileged. This is how he envisages the possibility of reform. He then asks who could provide such descriptions and answers: 'in contemporary liberal society, a vast range of people: journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, novelists, dramatists, painters' (Rorty 1998a: 322). He adds that books like *Uncle's Tom Cabin*, *Les Misérables*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *The Children of Sanchez* serve to mobilize those who are humiliated and to unsettle those who are responsible for that humiliation.

Passages like that are much more consistent with the main tenets of his work than his recent diatribes against the cultural Left. However, there are many pages in *Achieving our Country* which make it clear that he sees cultural politics as a distraction from 'real' politics defined as struggles about economic inequalities. Rorty categorizes as 'cultural' struggles around race, ethnicity, sexuality, and declares them to be of secondary interest. To be fair, he does not dismiss them. He even acknowledges that American leftist academics have a lot to be proud of and that, by encouraging students to adopt attitudes which the Right sneers at as 'politically correct', they have made America a far more civilized society. The drawback is that, 'During the same period in which socially accepted sadism has steadily diminished, economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased' (Rorty 1998b: 83). Hence his call to come back to 'real' politics and the need for the cultural Left to talk much more about money, even at the cost of talking less about stigma.

It is as if the widening gap between rich and poor was the consequence of the emphasis by the post-1960s Left on 'recognition' and 'humiliation'; as if the United States would have implemented a series of progressive measures in health, education, and income redistribution if only the leftists in the universities had not dedicated themselves to theory and cultural issues. Rorty even goes as far as seeing a collusion between radicals and conservatives: 'Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate' (Rorty 1998b: 14).

I would certainly not deny that an effective left-wing movement needs to have an economic strategy and tackle issues of redistribution, but there is no reason why this should be seen as antithetical to engaging with the fight against what Rorty calls 'social stigma'. Why should one oppose the reformist Left which 'tried to help people who were humiliated by poverty and unemployment' with the cultural Left whose initiatives 'have been directed toward people who are humiliated for reasons other than economic status'? Why should there be a contradiction between 'passing laws' and 'making cultural issues central to public debates'? Surely there are many areas like reproduction, immigration, criminal justice – to name only a few – where those two sides cannot be separated. But those connections are not self-evident and they might even be concealed by the dominant discourse. Without theoretical scrutinizing many forms of inequality appear as 'natural' and cannot be challenged. The relevance for politics of several theoretical currents decried by Rorty lies precisely in their bringing to the fore what the liberal perspective impedes us from seeing.

Why theory?

We touch here on the key issue. It is clear that the source of Rorty's antipathy towards the cultural Left comes from his dismissal of the relevance of theory for politics. Time and again he scorns academic leftists for the time they spent on 'theorizing' and 'problematizing concepts', thinking that 'dissolving political agents into plays of differential subjectivity, or political initiatives into pursuits of Lacan's impossible object of desire, helps to subvert the established order' (Rorty 1998b: 93). Who could deny the existence of some pretentious works of obscure and useless theorizing? And there are indeed people who are convinced that by writing that kind of book they are engaging in important political activity. But this is no ground for rejecting the necessity of, in many cases, 'problematizing familiar concepts' and for affirming that 'These futile attempts to philosophize one's way into political relevance are a symptom of what happens when a Left retreats from activism and adopts a spectatorial approach to the problems of the country' (Rorty 1998b: 94). Far from being a frivolous diversion from real concerns, scrutinizing the key markers of our 'common sense' is a powerful tool to liberate our imagination and open our minds to new possibilities. Like great works of literature whose inspirational value is praised by Rorty, theoretical activity can enhance our awareness of how our world could be different.

As we can see in the current debate about multiculturalism, the most pressing issue today for democratic politics is how to deal with *pluralism*. There is no way to approach this question without the help of a theoretical framework. If we choose the liberal one, we will see pluralism as a *fact* which needs to be accommodated so as to make room for all points of view. Some liberals emphasize the pluralism of interests, others the pluralism of values, but in both cases the common assumption will be that a consensus can be reached which will satisfy all 'reasonable' people. To be sure liberals acknowledge that some people will have to be excluded but, since they are deemed 'unreasonable', this does not jeopardize their claim that liberalism can establish an all-inclusive society. Another theoretical approach, however, envisages pluralism in a different manner. The fundamental insight elaborated, albeit in different ways, by Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault is that there cannot be a consensus which is not based on some form of exclusion. According to such a view, any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power and is ultimately political. Antagonisms will therefore never disappear and democratic politics needs to come to terms with the dimension of what I have elsewhere proposed to call 'the political'.¹ By bringing to the fore the necessary moment of 'decision' and the fact that political questions can never be simply of a technical nature, a democratic politics informed by the theoretical framework referred to as 'post-structuralism' is, in my view, better equipped to grasp the nature of the challenges with which our societies are confronted today than one which remains within liberal parameters.

Rorty would not concede this point. He is adamant that theory is not only useless but pernicious for politics. The reason is, I submit, that he constructs an idea of 'theory' such that he is unable to distinguish between a grand theory

aiming at providing a final explanation of phenomena and an understanding of theoretical interventions as providing tools which help us to grasp the conditions of emergence of certain specific phenomena. This is clearly revealed in his article on 'Feminism and pragmatism' where he argues against trying to integrate feminism into a general theory of oppression and suggests that all that feminists need is a pragmatist approach. Relinquishing the search for the final universal cause of women's oppression, a pragmatist feminist, he claims, 'will see herself as helping to create women rather than attempting to describe them more accurately' (Rorty 1998a: 212). Instead of envisaging the task of feminism in terms of penetrating reality beneath current appearances or as the elimination of cognitive distortion, she will elaborate a new language and new set of beliefs in order to modify social practices so as to create a society in which the male-female distinction is no longer of much interest. He asserts that 'Feminists who are also pragmatists will not see the formation of such a society as the removal of social constructs and the restoration of the way things were always meant to be. They will see it as the production of a better set of social constructs than the ones presently available, and thus as the creation of a new and better sort of human being' (Rorty 1998a: 227).

While being at one with Rorty in thinking that the feminist struggle should not be interpreted as a form of moral progress consisting in going from a distorted to an undistorted perception of moral reality, I do not accept the alternative that he proposes, i.e., to redescribe moral progress with metaphors of evolutionary development taking place through the creation of new vocabularies. I agree that no general theory of women's oppression is needed to advance feminist demands, but his evolutionary story seems to miss something important. Dismissing the role of theory, Rorty affirms that he prefers to stick to merely empirical possibilities of liberation. I do not see why this should mean denying the possibility that theoretical insights could play an important role in visualizing the conditions under which those empirical possibilities could be fostered.

The importance of several currents of post-structuralism for feminism lies in having put in question the existence of a pre-given unitary subject 'woman' and in having shown how the category 'woman' is constructed within a variety of discourses legal, medical, political, etc. The feminist journal *m/f*, for instance, played a crucial role in studying the construction of the category 'woman' and in scrutinizing the way women's subordination resulted from the way sexual difference was produced in diverse practices, discourses, and institutions.² Such a theoretical analysis can, no doubt, make feminists aware of the types of practice where new vocabularies are necessary in order to create different identities for women.

By rejecting theory *in toto* without distinguishing between foundationalist general theories and other types of theory, Rorty deprives himself of a tool that I take to be really necessary to advance the different struggles to which he is otherwise committed. He declares that one does not praise movements of liberation for the accuracy of their diagnoses but for the imagination and courage of their proposals and suggests distinguishing between utopianism and radicalism in the following way:

Radicals think that there is a basic mistake being made, a mistake deep down at the roots. They think that deep thinking is required to get down to this deep level, and that only there, when all the superstructural appearances have been undercut can things be seen as they really are. Utopians, however, do not think in terms of mistakes or of depth. They abandon the contrast between a superficial appearance and a deep reality in favor of the contrast between a painful present and a possibly less painful, dimly seen future.

(Rorty 1998a: 214)

But why deprive utopians of the help theory can offer them in understanding what needs to be done to move away from the painful present?

There is another problem, though. Rorty sees contemporary feminism as an example of 'evolutionary struggle' relying not on argument but on 'prophecy' and he hopes that:

At some point in the development of our society, guilty relief over not having been born a woman may not cross the minds of the males, any more than the question 'noble or base-born?' now crosses their minds. That would be the point at which both males and females had *forgotten* the traditional androcentric language, just as we have all forgotten the distinction between base and noble ancestry.

(Rorty 1998a: 224)

I find this passage very revealing about one aspect of Rorty's approach which I intend to bring to the fore later: his lack of grasp of the relations of power which structure social relations and of the antagonisms that they imply. This is what makes him believe that social change is only a question of persuasion and invention of new vocabularies. Every analysis in terms of power relations is dismissed as belonging to the discourse of the radical and retaining the rhetoric of scientism and realism. The only position which he allows is the one of the utopian who can only rely on hope, prophecy, and persuasion.

Private ironist versus public liberal

Beside opposing the radical to the utopian, Rorty establishes another distinction between the domain of the liberal and the domain of the ironist. This has provided a key to his thinking since *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* where he asserted the necessity of distinguishing public questions, i.e., questions about pain, from private questions about the point of human life. His hero is the 'liberal ironist' who as a liberal aims at encouraging tolerance and minimizing suffering and sees cruelty as the worst evil and who as an ironist acknowledges the contingency of his beliefs and desires and, contrary to the liberal metaphysician, does not look for philosophical foundations for his commitment to social justice. He sees Derrida as a 'private ironist', a 'romantic utopian' who belongs to the kind of philosophers 'who are interested in their own autonomy

and individuality rather than in their social usefulness and whose excursions into politics are incidental to their principal motives' (Rorty 1998a: 308). Habermas, for his part, is the typical example of liberal metaphysician and, while agreeing with his commitment to democratic politics, Rorty castigates him for hanging on to metaphysical notions like 'universal validity'. It is this urge towards universal validity that, in his view, explains Habermas's hostility towards people like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida whom he sees as 'criticizing reason' and undermining the Enlightenment project. According to Rorty however, the difference between metaphysician and ironist lies somewhere else:

Where Habermas sees a contrast between a socially useless, exhausted philosophy of subjectivity and a socially unifying philosophy of rationality-as-intersubjectivity, I see a contrast between the private need for autonomy and the public need for a synoptic view of the goals of a democratic society, a society held together by an agreement in Rawls's words, to give 'the priority of the right over the good,' to make justice 'the first virtue'.

(Rorty 1998a: 316)

Were Habermas to realize that people like Heidegger and Derrida are engaged in enterprises irrelevant to the public life of our society, he would cease seeing them as a threat to the democratic project.

Arguing with Habermas, Rorty affirms that it is time to 'peel apart Enlightenment liberalism from Enlightenment rationalism' and to recognize that liberal ironists and liberal metaphysicians can fruitfully collaborate in pursuing democratic objectives despite their disagreements on the nature and function of philosophy, which in his view is a pseudo-topic. He sees no incompatibility between the critique of rationalism developed by the so-called post-modern philosophers and the defence of traditional liberalism and traditional humanism.

There are those, however, who are not admitted into this enlarged liberal family because they do not pass Rorty's test for 'good liberals'. He draws the line in the following way:

As I see the situation, Dewey, Derrida and Habermas are three antiauthoritarian philosophers of human freedom and social justice. The difference between these three men on the one hand and Foucault and Lacan on the other is that the former are still devoted to the utopian social hope which animated the two scenarios at the beginning of my remarks, and the latter are not.

(Rorty 1999: 238)

What is at stake for Rorty is a profound difference in moral outlook between those who have hope in the possibility of advancing liberal institutions and who want to participate in this movement and the pessimists who refuse to indulge in utopian thinking, keeping to the role of spectator and being content with producing rationalizations of hopelessness.

Rorty is particularly critical of Foucault whose theoretical approach he sees as in great part responsible for the negative attitude of the cultural Left towards

liberal institutions. Indeed, he often refers to the post-1960s Left that he disparages as the 'Foucauldian Left'. He claims that 'Foucauldian theoretical sophistication is even more useless to leftist politics than was Engels' dialectical materialism. Engels at least had an eschatology. Foucauldians do not even have that. Because they regard liberal reformist initiatives as symptoms of a discredited "liberal humanism", they have little interest in designing new social experiments' (Rorty 1998b: 37).

His main reproach to the 'Foucauldian' cultural Left is that they have abandoned the hope of improving liberal institutions. They want to subvert the existing order, imagining that the higher your level of abstraction, the more radical will be your critique. As he puts it:

Radicals treat 'bourgeois society' and 'bourgeois ideology' in the way which ironists treat metaphysics – as an insidious temptation that it is our duty to surmount. This has often produced the illusion that to criticize metaphysics *is* to criticize bourgeois ideology, and conversely. This causal assimilation produces, among radicals, the illusion that there is an important connection between ironist theory and radical politics.

(Rorty 1998b: 325)

This, of course, is doing precisely what he explicitly warns us against: attempting to bridge the gap between what belongs to the private and what is the domain of the public. In his view, the 'quasi religious spiritual pathos' of some anti-metaphysicians might be useful for some in their individual quest for private perfection, but, once it invades the terrain of the public and is taken as a guide for political deliberation, it becomes dangerous. This is why he argues that notions like 'impossibility', 'unreachability', and 'unrepresentability' should be relegated to the private. Rorty is sympathetic to the different forms of critique of metaphysics but he basically sees them as games played by philosophers and with very limited relevance. As long as one acts as a good patriotic liberal in the public realm, those games are harmless, but they should not interfere with politics.

Politics without antagonism

Politics, declares Rorty, is something to be deliberated about in banal, familiar terms. It is a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises and democracy is basically a question of people becoming nicer to each other and behaving in a more tolerant way. The enemies of human happiness are sloth, greed, and hypocrisy and through economic growth and the right kind of 'sentimental education' it should be possible to establish social justice. What 'we liberals' should do is to encourage tolerance and minimize suffering and to persuade other people of the worth of liberal institutions. Democratic politics consists in letting an increasing number of people count as member of our moral and conversational 'we'. This depends on people having more secure conditions of existence and sharing more desires and beliefs with others. What is necessary,

he says, is a bigger dose of liberalism and no deep theoretical analysis is needed in order to theorize democratic politics. Economic growth and the development of more tolerant attitudes is all that is required.

With such a vision of politics, Rorty's distaste for Foucault does not come as a surprise. No wonder he sees the influence of Foucault on the cultural Left as utterly negative. He claims that 'The Foucauldian Left represents an unfortunate regression to the Marxist obsession with scientific rigor. This Left still wants to put historical events in a theoretical context. It exaggerates the importance of philosophy for politics, and wastes its energy on sophisticated theoretical analyses of the significance of current events' (Rorty 1998b: 37).

In the end it is Foucault's debunking of the liberal self-image which Rorty finds intolerable. While agreeing with him that the subject is a social construction and that discursive practices go all the way down, Rorty refuses to acknowledge the role played by power relations in such a construction. This is why he cannot see that traditional liberalism and traditional humanism are profoundly affected by the adoption of an anti-representationalist approach and that they would, at least, have to be reformulated. But he cannot accept that. There is, in his view, nothing wrong with liberalism and he reacts to any critique as if it implied a total rejection – acting, incidentally, exactly in the same way as those critics of liberalism who, unable to envisage the possibility of radicalizing it, do indeed call for its rejection.

It is worth examining where exactly the moot point between Foucault and Rorty lies. In my view it is Rorty's liberal understanding of politics as taking place in a neutral terrain that is at the origin of his dismissal not only of Foucault but of a theoretical reflection on politics in general. As I pointed out earlier, what he cannot accept is that social objectivity is constructed through acts of power. He is happy to go along with the idea that the subject is a social construction but refuses to acknowledge the hegemonic dimension of discursive practices and the fact that power is at the very core of the constitution of identities. This would, of course, force him to come to terms with things that are foreclosed by his liberal framework, like the ineradicability of antagonism. Like Habermas, he wants to retain the vision of a consensus that would not imply any form of exclusion. Of course, in his case, such a consensus would not be reached through rational argumentation and deliberation but through persuasion and appeals to sentiments. But both of them deny the constitutive role of power and the ineradicability of antagonism. They are convinced that such a recognition would jeopardize the democratic project and they present it as a sign of 'despair'. As if to acknowledge the fact that liberal democracy is and will always be – like any other kind of society – structured through power relations would be to call for its overthrow as the only alternative!

Rorty's project for the Left

Achieving our Country is certainly Rorty's more political book and it has not been well received by people on the 'cultural' Left who have taken it to be a wholesale

rejection of their politics. Since at several points in the book he acknowledges the positive contribution of the post-1960s Left, it is probably a little bit of an over-reaction. But it cannot be denied that the general impression with which the reader of the book is left with respect to the relevance of non-economic struggles is a negative one. Given Rorty's plea for the need to reunite the two parts of the Left, this is really unfortunate. But, with his constant calls for going back to 'real' politics and relinquishing 'secondary' issues, his rhetorics is clearly pushing into the opposite direction. This is why he ended up antagonizing the very people he was trying to persuade. The result has been an increased polarization, with the cultural Left defending itself by launching an attack against the 'conservative' Left.

This is a pity since some of the points made by Rorty in his recent books are really important and repay careful discussion. For instance, he needs to be listened to when he exhorts the Left not to abandon the struggle against economic inequalities and to put it at the centre of the fight for social justice; and also when he argues that such a struggle should not be envisaged as a rejection of liberal democratic institutions. What is wrong with 'really existing liberal democratic societies' is not their professed ideals. If we take the ethico-political principles which inform modern pluralist democracy to be the assertion of liberty and equality for all, the task for the Left is not to relinquish them but to fight for their effective implementation. This is precisely how, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), we envisaged the project of a 'radical and plural democracy'.³ But, pace Rorty, such a radicalization of the democratic ideals will require more than opening the minds of the rich to the sufferings of the poor. No amount of 'sentimental education' will do away with the existing structures of power and a profound transformation is needed in current hegemonic relations. To think in terms of a new hegemony, however, means to go beyond the traditional opposition between reform and revolution. This is something that Rorty is unable to do because his thinking is structured around binary oppositions: public/private, reform/revolution, force/consent, cultural/political, that need to be challenged by a radical democratic politics. We have here a good example of the importance of theory for politics. The relevance of Derrida's work in this field is precisely to deconstruct such oppositions, enabling us thereby to problematize some tenets of liberal ideology.

Beside his defence of liberal democracy, Rorty's call for 'patriotism' has also aroused many negative reactions. Here again everything hinges on the way this notion is defined. Provided that we understand by 'patriotism' the identification with one's society's ideals, with the best aspects of its democratic tradition, I do not have any problem with this notion. Indeed, I see such an identification as central to the idea of citizenship. To those who advocate an ideal of cosmopolitanism based on universal reason, I would object that democratic citizenship requires allegiance to a specific political association. This is not to say that the we should close ourselves from insights and criticisms coming from the outside or that we should endorse without criticism everything that is done in the name of 'our' country. The idea here is that it is only from our specific location within

a given tradition, and in a constant engagement with its strengths as well as its weaknesses, that we can really enter into relation with others and establish universal solidarities. Such an understanding of our identities and beliefs as contingent and dependent on our inscription in the variety of language games which constitute a community is a central tenet of Rorty and constitutes an important point of convergence of his work with post-structuralism.

No doubt the suspicion towards patriotism comes from the fact that, for many on the Left, it evokes an uncritical acceptance of the dominant ideology. And it is true that some of Rorty's formulations imply a view of US history far too apologetic. But this is not a reason to dismiss his claim. A democratic society requires a special sense of solidarity among its members; if this is missing, redistributive policies will not be accepted and this might lead to a dangerous polarization. Rightly understood, patriotism can contribute to this solidarity. It would be a serious mistake to leave the idea of patriotism to the Right. In many countries right-wing demagogues have already begun claiming the patriotic standpoint and they are busy articulating the demands of the popular classes in a xenophobic discourse. The way to counter them is not by discarding patriotism but by actively engaging in its reformulation. Clearly Rorty is right to remind the Left of the links between the struggle for economic justice and the idea of patriotism. This is in my view a very important issue for all Western societies. With many Left parties moving towards the 'centre', crucial issues concerning the distribution of income and wealth have become taboo because they might supposedly scare middle-class voters. The consequence, as we are already witnessing in Austria and in other places, is that it is right-wing populist parties and not leftist ones which are now mobilizing the popular sectors. Articulating a patriotism of the Left could, I believe, play an important part in the elaboration of a counter-offensive.

Which unity?

One of the central concerns raised by Rorty is the urgency of reuniting the Left. I do agree that a wide alliance should be established between the various groups struggling against the different forms of subordination and that a disunited Left will not be able to fight effectively for social justice. Such a struggle, as he stresses, cannot focus exclusively on the elimination of prejudice and it must engage with issues of class and money. Those aspects should not be separated, though, and it is indispensable to theorize the way in which the economic is articulated in terms of sexuality, gender, and race.

Indeed, the main problem with Rorty's proposals is that they amount more or less to coming back to the traditional kind of reformist politics that existed before the 1960s. While acknowledging the limitations of their exclusive focus on the economy and deploring the fact that issues of race, ethnicity, and gender were neglected, when he envisages what should be done, he speaks as if only the cultural Left had to learn from the reformist one. For example, his two suggestions

to revive the Left are: 'The first is that the Left should put a moratorium on theory. It should try to kick its philosophy habit. The second is that the Left should try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being American. It should ask the public to consider how the country of Lincoln and Whitman might be achieved' (Rorty 1999b: 92).

As if things were so simple and as if one could turn back the clock and go back to the 'good times' of the 1950s! Rorty sees the Vietnam war as the real turning point for the American Left. It is the moment when the break took place between its reformist and its culturalist components, when students began to develop a negative attitude towards their country and its institutions and lost hope in the possibility of transforming them through laws and reforms. He should be reminded, however, that the 1960s were a time when student mobilizations also happened in many European countries and that they were important in the emergence of what came to be known as 'the new social movements'. Surely this cannot be explained just as a phenomenon of mimicry of America. When we broaden the question of the evolution of the Left to include Europe, we realize that everything cannot be explained by the Vietnam war. Democratic politics underwent a fundamental change at that time. The new social movements were the expression of new forms of antagonisms which exploded for manifold reasons which need to be scrutinized. To grasp their specificity requires examining many different aspects, from the new mode of regulation of capitalism which became dominant to the transformations of democratic discourse through the politicization of forms of subordination hitherto considered as 'natural' like those linked to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Here again theory should play a crucial role.

The consequence of the emergence of those new antagonisms was the rejection of the traditional form of reformist politics, which in Europe resulted in a crisis of the social democratic model. Such a model had become unable to provide an adequate language to articulate those new forms of antagonism. This created a favourable terrain for the neo-liberal offensive of Thatcher and Reagan. Their success was to a great extent due to their capacity to mobilize the resentment created in many sectors by the shortcomings of the reformist and social-democratic model. It is the exhaustion of this model, not the new types of struggles which exploded in the wake of the 1960s, which is at the origin of the right-wing victory.

Now that many 'identities' have become politicized, the type of traditional reformist politics is definitively over, and to imagine, like Rorty, that one could establish a united Left on such a basis is to delude oneself. Only a new form of progressive politics, one in which commonality is created in a way which respects the specificity of the different struggles, can serve as a focal point for joint actions. Needless to say, far from being limited to the the United States, this question is also highly relevant in Europe. The forms might be different but the basic problem is the same. What is really at stake is the alliance between the progressive middle classes and the popular sectors. Only those who believe like Tony Blair that 'we are all middle class now' can fail to acknowledge that this is the

defining issue for the Left today. Instead of searching for a so-called 'third way' situated 'beyond Left and Right', what a progressive politics should concentrate upon is how to articulate the struggles for equality which nowadays take place in a variety of social relations. For such an articulation to be possible the different voices need to have the possibility of expressing themselves and their potential conflict should not be suppressed in the name of a supposed consensus. Such a view of democratic politics requires an understanding of pluralism clearly at odds with the one currently found in the various proposals for 'deliberative democracy'. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, both in its Rawlsian and in its Habermasian versions, the aim of the deliberative model is to do away with pluralism and to remove the possibility of conflict.⁴ Rorty, albeit in his own 'conversational' way, defends a similar conception. His pragmatism does not leave room for a theoretical understanding of the political in its antagonistic dimension and his way of envisaging the nature of democratic politics is therefore deeply flawed. In the end he provides the best refutation of his own thesis about the irrelevance of theory for politics. One thing at least is sure, the theoretical framework which informs his allegedly 'neutral' conception of politics does have one important consequence: it is what prevents him from formulating his spirited call for an united Left in an adequate way.

Notes

- 1 I have made this argument in a number of places. See for instance 'Democracy, power and the political' (Mouffe 2000: ch. 1).
- 2 A collection of the most important articles published in *m/f* can be found in *The Woman in Question* (Adams and Cowie 1990).
- 3 For that argument, see especially chapter 4 of the book (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).
- 4 For a development of this point, see 'For an agonistic model of democracy' (Mouffe 2000: ch. 4).

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