



# PUBLIC SEMINAR

## Richard Rorty: The Dark Years

by Richard J. Bernstein

No one was more acute than Rorty in echoing and epitomizing the accusations and taunts of his critics. In “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” he tells us that conservative culture warriors characterize him “one of the relativistic, irrationalist, deconstructing, sneering, smirking intellectuals whose writings are weakening the moral fibre of the young” (Rorty 1999:2). Leftist radical thinkers accuse him of being one of those intellectual snobs who care only about the learned cultured elite to which he belongs. “I am sometimes told by critics from both ends of the political spectrum, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts” (Rorty 1999:5). These sharp criticisms and the dismissive reviews of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* provoked Rorty to write his autobiographical essay, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids.” where he explains how he came to his present views, especially about the relation of philosophy and politics and why “they were not adopted for frivolous reasons” (Rorty 1999: 5).

Rorty was clearly responsible for some of these caricatures. He taunted Marxist critics by championing “bourgeois liberalism“; he accused conservatives of being “greedy and

selfish”; he defended the need for patriotism at a time when many academic leftists thought this was little more than an apology for American imperialism. Nevertheless, the portrait of Rorty as a clever, light-hearted, sneering intellectual snob is a gross distorting caricature. It misses the dark side of his thinking and his profound worry about the fate of liberal democracy. When we fully appreciate this dark streak in Rorty, then many of his key concepts including contingency, irony, solidarity, social hope take on a deeper and richer meaning.

Consider his essay “Looking Backwards from the Year 2096,” originally published in the New York Times in 1996.<sup>1</sup> In this imaginative reconstruction of America’s history, Rorty claims that “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” (Rorty 1999: 243). Rorty adopts the optimistic stance that by 2096 there has been a recovery from the Dark Years. According to Rorty’s narrative a sense of fraternity and moral progress had characterized America from its origins, despite many setbacks and shameful events in its history. However, things began to change in the 1980s when a sense of fraternity and solidarity became a faint memory. A burst of selfishness had produced tax revolts in the 1970s, 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 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 from their constituents on prisons rather than on day care. (Rorty 1999: 247)

In Rorty’s imaginary scenario a military dictatorship takes over in 2014 and is finally toppled by the “Democratic Vistas Party” in 2044. By 2096 there is a resurgence of a feeling of fraternity as our most cherished ideal. Rorty’s primary concern in this essay is the ominous threat to liberal democracy. In a 1997 interview Rorty was quite bleak about the future. “I don’t have much faith that we can keep liberal democracy going. . . . I expect we’ll get more dictatorships in the future” (Rorty 2006: 60). “There is a crisis coming for all the old industrial democracies. I don’t think culture and ideas have much to do with it. The idea of solidarity of which I wrote—that was just an optimistic scenario about how America might eventually get itself back together again after a fascist revolution. For all I know, this time the fascists will win; the dictators will be there forever” (Rorty 2006: 60-1).

This dark prognosis is already anticipated in Rorty’s interpretation of George Orwell’s *1984*, especially his interpretation of the last part of the novel that centers on O’Brien who declares “The object of torture is torture.” Some literary critics think that this is where Orwell’s novel begins to deteriorate; they discount his “apocalyptic desperation.”

Rorty, on the contrary, argues that Orwell “sketched an alternative scenario, one which led in the *wrong* direction. He did so by convincing us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible” (Rorty 1989: 175). In the view of *1984* I am offering, Orwell has no *answer* to O’Brien, and is not interested in giving one. Like Nietzsche, O’Brien regards the whole idea of being “answered,” of exchanging ideas, of reasoning together, as a symptom of weakness. Orwell did not invent O’Brien to serve as a dialectical foil, a modern counterpart to Thrasymachus. He invented him to warn us against him. . . . He does not view O’Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and as *possible*. (Rorty 1989: 176)

One of Rorty’s most pessimistic passages occurs in the context of his discussion of Orwell. I do not think that we liberals *can* now imagine a future of “human dignity, freedom and peace.” That is, we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future. We can picture various socioeconomic setups which would be preferable to the present one. But we have no clear sense of how to get from the actual world to these theoretically possible worlds, and thus no clear idea of what to work for. . . . We liberals have no plausible large-scale scenario for changing the world so as to realize the “technical possibility of human equality”. . . . Sometimes things prove to be just as bad as they first looked. Orwell helped us to formulate a pessimistic description of the political situation which forty years of further experience have only confirmed. (Rorty 1989: 181-2)

I suspect that if Rorty were alive today he would say that recent experience has

substantially confirmed this pessimistic description. Ironically, O'Brien is Rorty's fictional double. I mean this in a precise sense. O'Brien would completely agree with Rorty that socialization "goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first" (Rorty 1989: 185). After all, O'Brien himself affirms that "men are infinitely malleable." Iris Murdoch once shrewdly remarked "it is always a significant question to ask any philosopher what he is afraid of?" The answer for Rorty is clear—that something like O'Brien's post-totalitarian scenario—the world that Orwell described so vividly—will actually come to be. In such a world the very idea of "liberal democracy" will be obliterated. There isn't even a word for it in the eleventh edition of *Newspeak*—the authoritative lexicon in the world of 1984.

Rorty's dark vision of what is dangerous and yet possible is directly related to the passage from *Achieving Our Country* that went viral on social media. Rorty identifies himself with the "Reformist Left"—a term he uses "to cover all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964 struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong" (Rorty 1998: 43). He contrasts the "Reformist Left" with the "New Left"—a label he uses "to mean the people—mostly students who decided, around 1964, that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system" (Rorty 1998: 43). During the 1960s there was the beginning of the eclipse of this Reformist Left and a turn by the New Left to cultural issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. The great achievement of the New Left and its legacy has been a decrease in the types of sadism and humiliation evidenced in issues of race, gender and ethnicity, but its great failure, according to Rorty, has been its neglect of poverty, unemployment, and the widening gap between the rich and poor. Since 1973 "the assumption

that all hardworking American married couples would be able to afford a home, and that the wife could then, if she chose, stay at home and raise kids, has begun to seem absurd" (Rorty 1998: 85) There has been a split among those who think of themselves as leftists—a disconnect between those who have been primarily concerned with economic issues and diminishing the gap between the rich and the poor and those who focus their attention almost exclusively on cultural issues. Left radicals have been primarily located in the academy; their books and articles are read almost exclusively by other academic radicals.

They have virtually no connection with the working poor. Furthermore, the economic consequences of globalization are producing "a world economy in which an attempt by any one country to prevent immiseration of its workers may result only in depriving them of employment. This world economy will soon be owned by a cosmopolitan upper class which has no more sense of community with any workers anywhere than the great American capitalists of the year 1900 had with immigrants who manned their enterprises" (Rorty 1998:85). If this trend continues, then "not only in the United States but in all the old democracies we shall end up in an Orwellian world." (Rorty 1998: 87) In such a world, there may be no supernational analogue of Big Brother, or any official creed analogous to Ingsoc. But there will be an analogue to the Inner Party—namely the international cosmopolitan super-rich. They will make all the important decisions. The analogue of Orwell's Outer Party will be the educated comfortably off, cosmopolitan professionals . . . the people like you and me. (Rorty 1998:87)

Rorty feared the reality that we are now living through. Here is the full passage from which selections went viral on social media. [M]embers of labor unions, and the unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even

trying to prevent wages from sinking or prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else. At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. A scenario like that of Sinclair Lewis’ novel *It Can’t Happen Here* may then be played out. For once such a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen. In 1932, most of the predictions made about what would happen if Hindenburg names Hitler chancellor were wildly overoptimistic. One thing that is likely to happen is that the gains made in the past fifty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back in fashion. The words “nigger” and “kike” will again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having manners dictated to them by college graduate will find an outlet (Rorty 1998:89-90)

But how is this pessimistic—or rather, all too realistic—scenario related to the themes that resonate throughout Rorty’s corpus—themes such as contingency, solidarity, irony and social hope? Rorty is not only concerned with the contingency of language and selfhood, he is deeply concerned with the contingency of a liberal community. The practices of a liberal democratic community are the result of a series of fortunate chance events in the past. There are no metaphysical, philosophical, or political guarantees that these practices will continue to survive.

Prior to the 1980s, Rorty did not explicitly deal with political issues in his major publications, but from the 1980s until his death in 2007, Rorty increasingly turned his attention to what he perceived as political dangers—and to what might be done to counteract them. Rorty’s disillusionment with Philosophy with a capital “P” and with foundational projects was, in part, motivated by its failure to address concrete political and economic issues. This is even suggested by the title of his provocative paper, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” where he argues that liberal democracy doesn’t require or need *philosophical* justification or legitimation. A primary reason for Rorty’s attraction to John Dewey is his pragmatic concern with those obstacles that threaten liberal democracy and with social reforms required to further the development of “creative democracy.” The gravest threat to liberal democracy is the undermining of a sense of fraternity and solidarity. Solidarity, for Rorty, is a “sense of other people and ourselves as being ‘we’—we feel that what affects them affects us because we, to some extent identify with them” (Rorty 2006:32).

Throughout *Achieving Our Country*, and in many of his other political writings, Rorty emphasizes how the growing disparity between the rich and the poor—the increasing acceptance and even celebration of greed and selfishness destroys the fabric of solidarity. In an Orwellian world human solidarity is obliterated. “What Orwell helps us to see is that it may have *just happened* that Europe began to prize benevolent sentiments and the idea of a common humanity, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments and any such moralities (Rorty 1989: 185). We are tempted to think that solidarity, our recognition of one another’s common humanity, stands outside of history and institutions. This is reflected in the way in which we speak of universal human rights or inalienable rights grounded in human nature.

Rorty argues that we should resist this temptation. In the final chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty writes: “I have been urging in this book that we try not to want something which stands beyond history and institutions. *The fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance*” (Rorty 1989: 189, my emphasis). The view that I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But this solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities in pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of “us” (Rorty 1989: 192). There is no necessity or grand narrative that guarantees moral progress. It can all too easily be reversed. If this regression is to be countered, it is not going to happen as a result of philosophical or religious treatises, but rather as a consequence of detailed descriptions of the pain and humiliation that people experience. This is why Rorty puts such emphasis on novels and journalistic reports of pain and humiliation in order to cultivate solidarity. Solidarity is not a given; it is not intrinsic to human nature; it is a fragile achievement that requires constant vigilance.

We can also see how irony is related to Rorty’s political worries about the fate of liberal democracies. Despite Rorty’s emphasis on “private irony,” there is a public face of his conception of irony. “Final vocabularies” consist of those set of words that we employ to justify our actions, beliefs and lives. They are “‘final’ in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse” (Rorty

1989: 73). There is no neutral ground; nothing to which we can appeal that is outside history to justify our final vocabularies. Rorty tells us that “ironists” are those who realize that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed and he knows that this claim is double edged. O’Brien, with his doublethink, is a master of redescription. Unlike the ironist, O’Brien does not have any real doubts about his final vocabulary. But if we are to counter the danger of the sophisticated fanaticism that O’Brien epitomizes, then the liberal ironist must attempt to describe democracy in a way that makes it as attractive as possible in hope of motivating people to vigilantly defend it. This is what Rorty seeks to do in many of his political writings, especially in *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty hopes that someday that nation-states will yield their sovereignty to a world federation, but “such a federation will never come into existence unless the governments of individual nation-states cooperate in setting it up, and unless citizens of these nation-states take a certain amount of pride (even rueful and hesitant pride) in their governments’ effort to do so” (Rorty 1998:3).

“Achieving Our Country” is a phrase that Rorty appropriates from James Baldwin’s critique of violent white racism in America. In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin writes: “This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and which neither time nor history will ever forgive them, that have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.” Although Baldwin condemns this crime as unforgivable, he nevertheless does not “give up” on America. He concludes his book by expressing his hope. “If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world” (Baldwin’s passages are quoted by

Rorty 1998: 12-13). Baldwin expresses the social hope that that someday this racial nightmare will end and we may collectively achieve the type of democracy that both Whitman and Dewey projected for America. Rorty contrasts this hope with the story that Elijah Muhammad tells about white America—that there is no hope that white devils will ever change. In contrasting the stories that Baldwin and Elijah Muhammad tell about America, Rorty wants to make a more general point—the difference between agents and spectators—a distinction that he draws from Dewey. Rorty stresses what Hilary Putnam claimed to be at the core of pragmatism—taking the agent’s point of view as fundamental. Rorty’s critique of the academic left is that it too frequently assumes a detached spectatorship in condemning the “system,” “global capitalism,” “neoliberalism.” Frequently, academic critics seek to outdo each other in the theoretical sophistication of their critiques. What is lacking in these endless critiques is the attempt to connect with “real politics,” with formulating and advocating specific social policies and legislative programs that can alleviate human misery. Despite Rorty’s many sharp criticisms of Marx, Rorty does think that Marx was absolutely right in stressing the importance of the economy in determining the character of human life, but today the idea of a proletarian revolution no longer makes sense.

In a Deweyan spirit Rorty thinks that the only “realistic” alternative for achieving equality between the rich and the poor is gradual social reform. The Left for Rorty is the party of hope. Rorty hopes for a reinvigorated Left that will combine the virtues of the Reformist Left and the cultural legacy of the New Left—a Left that will fight against both selfishness and sadism, a Left that will mobilize Americans to become political agents for social change. The Left needs to realize that America has never been a morally pure country. There has been a history of extreme violence in America as well as the projection of democratic ideals. But if one focuses

exclusively on the intense shame of past (and current) horrors then there is no possibility of encouraging ordinary citizens to work for reform. If a Left wants to persuade citizens to mobilize themselves to further a type of solidarity that can effect improvement then it needs to “remind the country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation’s past—episodes and figures to which the country should remain true” (Rorty 1998: 3-4). This is what Rorty does in celebrating the democratic visions of Whitman and Dewey. The history of leftist politics in a America “is a story of how top-down initiatives and bottom-up initiatives have been interlocked” (Rorty 1998: 53). Top down initiatives come from people who generally have security, power and money but are nevertheless concerned with people who have less. They include the muckraking journalists, novelists and scholars. “Bottom-up left initiative comes from people who have little security money, or power and who rebel against the unfair treatment which they, or others like them, are receiving” (Rorty 1998: 53). Rorty cites a number of examples in American history where these two initiatives reinforced each other such as the early attempts to organize unions to fight for decent working conditions and the civil rights movement. “The people at the bottom took the risks, suffered the beatings, made all the big sacrifices, and were sometimes murdered. But their heroism might have been fruitless if leisured, educated, relatively risk free people had not joined the struggle. Those beaten by goon squads and the lynch mobs might have died in vain if the safe and secure had not lent a hand” (Rorty 1998: 54).

Prior to the 1960s the non-Marxist American Reformist Left was motivated by the conviction “that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy—that a cooperative commonwealth could be created by electing the right politicians and

passing the right laws . . . . But the Vietnam War splintered that Left” (Rorty 1998: 55). Many leftists gave up on the system, gave up on American constitutional democracy and began to call for a Total Revolution (although it was never clear what the “Revolution” really meant). The mid-Sixties saw the beginning of the end of a tradition which dated back to the Progressive Era. This Left Reformist tradition did *succeed* in initiating the social democratic changes characteristic of the New Deal. Rorty expresses his dismay that this reformist tradition has not been reconstituted. There has been a failure of the left to forge alliances with unions, unskilled workers and those who have suffered the demoralizing consequences of globalization. Today (2018) there is still too little evidence of a revival of the Reformist Left movement in America. The failure of the left to forge alliances with blue collar workers—the traditional base for the Democratic Party—has led many of them to become fervent supporters of Trump.

Rorty could not have fully anticipated how throughout the world, the intractable problems created by masses of people fleeing their countries and seeking immigration would lead to consequences that threaten liberal democracies and create conditions that favor authoritarian politics, but I don’t think he would have been surprised. He anticipated and feared that there would be outburst of resentment and the real possibility of collapse progressive social democratic ideals.

The question then arises, for anyone that professes to be pragmatic, what is to be done? Frankly, I don’t think Rorty offers much helpful advice. He is much more effective rejecting what he takes to be dead ends. One may agree that the insouciant use of vague terms like “late capitalism,” “globalization” or “neoliberalism” is not helpful in coming up with specific social policies. “The voting public, the public which must be won over of the Left is to emerge from the academy into the public square, sensibly wants to be told the details. It wants to know how things are going

to work after markets are put behind us. It wants to know how participatory democracy is supposed to function” (Rorty 1998: 104). Rorty criticizes the cultural Left because it has no answers to demands for concrete details. He “thinks that the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy. This was the business the American Left was in during the first two-thirds of the century” (Rorty 1998: 105). But when we ask Rorty to be specific and concrete about which “piecemeal reforms” are to be favored, he doesn’t offer answers—except in the most general and abstract terms.

It is not enough to be told that we need reforms that will lessen the disparity between the super-rich and the desperate poor. How is this to be achieved? And what is going to motivate the electorate to bring about economic redistribution? One can agree with Rorty that the Left needs to build alliances between different constituencies and social movements. But, once again, if we ask the question how this is to be achieved, Rorty is not really helpful. In Rorty’s defense, one might object that such criticisms are unfair because Rorty’s aim in *Achieving Our Country* was to provide a critical narrative of the history of the Left in twentieth century America, not to engage in the practical politics. But such a response is not adequate. One may have serious doubts whether the type of reformist politics that Rorty advocates still makes much sense today. Rorty was committed to the American constitutional system of electoral politics. He wanted to see the revival of the type of left Democratic Party that characterized the New Deal. He takes pride in the heritage that many members of his family played in advancing concrete social reforms of the New Deal. But given the paralysis of politics in the United States today, the sophisticated digital techniques for manipulating “public opinion,” the power of money in shaping politics, the disarray within the Democratic Party, the persistent failure for left intellectuals to establish politically effective alliances with

blue collar workers, Rorty opens himself to the criticism that he slips into a nostalgia a past era that is no longer relevant. Rorty, of course is not naïve. He expressed his pessimism about America's future and the future of liberal democracy over and over again. When asked directly in 2003 about whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about the future of America, he did not hesitate to answer "very pessimistic indeed" (Rorty 2006: 160). He sounded the alarm that America was moving toward a new form of fascism. But he refused to give into resigned spectatoral despair. "There is, to be sure, plenty of reason for pessimism, but it would be better to do what one can to get people to follow an improbable scenario than simply throw up one's hands" (Rorty 2006: 101). This is a key reason why Rorty insisted upon "ungrounded social hope." I do not know whether Rorty would have supported Bernie Sanders as the Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election. But I feel fairly confident that he would have praised the energy and dreams of many of his supporters. He would have taken it as evidence that the spirit of achieving our country is not dead—that there are still many ordinary citizens committed to Whitman's and Dewey's vision of a decent society where freedom and equality flourish.

If we are ever to rediscover from Dark Years that we are now living through, there will need to be a renewal of solidarity—"fellow feeling and the ability to sympathize with the plight of others" (Rorty 1999: 249). Rorty was at once brutally realistic about the present and passionately committed to the ideals he hoped the country might achieve. He believed that "you have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to dream country rather than to one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists the ideal has no chance of becoming actual" (Rorty 1998: 101). Rorty's hope and legacy is not to give up on the dream of

achieving our country, not to give in to becoming cynical spectators, to take pride in what is best in the American democratic tradition. In this respect, Rorty remains true to the pragmatic emphasis an agency and contingency. Liberal democracy is fragile and contingent. Rorty knew all too well that it could end and some new form of fascism might arise. If this is to be avoided (and there is no guarantee that it will be avoided) then we have to keep alive social hope; we have to be active and vigilant in defending liberal democracy; to encourage ordinary people to exert their political power to institute social policies and practices that will bring us closer to achieving our country.

## NOTES

1. Rorty, Richard (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (1998) *Achieving Our Country*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (1999) *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ (2006) *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, edited with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>1</sup> The essay was originally published with the title “Fraternity Reigns”