RORTY ON POLITICS, CULTURE, AND PHILOSOPHY: 
A DEFENCE OF HIS ROMANTICISM

MIKLÓS NYÍRŐ

Abstract: Rorty’s historicist romanticism is a peculiar and oft criticized feature of his neopragmatism. I attempt to show that it should be regarded not so much as a more or less exceptionable philosophical approach, but rather, as a practice in ‘cultural politics’—which is his ultimate definition for philosophy—prompted by his acute political concerns and his views on the nature of moral progress.

Keywords: Crisis of contemporary liberal democracies; romanticism; historicism; cultural politics.

“[…] everything depends on keeping our fragile sense of American fraternity intact.”

Introduction

Many of the critiques levelled against Rorty are due to his departure from certain aspects of Dewey’s thought. Perhaps the two main differences between Dewey’s and Rorty’s conceptions of democracy are that Rorty rejects—what Putnam reconstructs (1992, 180-82) as—the “epistemic justification” of democracy in Dewey, on the one hand, and he also rejects Dewey’s idea of a “creative democracy” (Dewey 1981), on the other. While Dewey’s conception incorporates a notion of positive freedom, emphasizing the individual’s contribution and immediate participation rather than institutions and representation, Rorty’s emphasis falls on the latter and, accordingly, on a notion of negative freedom. This difference is largely due, as I would maintain, to Rorty’s strong appeal to a kind of romanticism—a romanticism centering on imagination “as the ability to change social practices by proposing advantageous new uses of marks and noises” (Rorty 2007a, 107-8). In this paper I will mainly focus on that appeal, and especially on the possible motives behind it. I will qualify Rorty’s romanticism as a ‘historicist’ one in order to emphasize its basic trait which differentiates it from the traditional, rather universalist notions of romanticism.

Many, among them Richard Bernstein (2008, 24), think that Rorty’s romanticism is due to his confessed early disillusionment with philosophy (Rorty 1999, 9-11). As opposed to this view, my central goal is to demonstrate why Rorty’s historicist, romantic pragmatism might be reasonably regarded as timely indeed, especially with regard to its move beyond a merely naturalistic and instrumental version of pragmatism. Since his romanticism—as I see it—is a
powerful response to a crisis diagnosed by Rorty concerning contemporary liberal democracies and, above all, America, and more specifically, it is prompted by his views on the nature of moral progress, in the second part I address these themes. In the third part I sketch certain aspects of his notion of a “literary culture”, and I do that because Rorty invests his hopes regarding how to overcome the aforementioned crisis chiefly in the emergence of such a post-philosophical culture. Finally, in part four I consider the role Rorty assigns to philosophy in such an envisioned context.

**Crisis of America, Crisis of Contemporary Liberal Democracies**

Rorty depicts at least four levels of crises discernible in contemporary liberal democracies, more specifically, regarding America. These concern leftist politics, America’s national identity, democracies under the pressures of globalization, and finally, the self-image of contemporary liberal democracies.

Rorty persistently criticizes contemporary American leftism, and openly speaks about an ‘Eclipse of the Reformist Left’. In various narrations he sketches the genealogy of the so called ‘cultural’ Left, within which he distinguishes between two predominant trends. The first one stands for a version of ‘postmodernism’ which sees “modern liberal society as fatally flawed” and “insists that nothing will change unless there is some sort of total revolution” (Rorty 1999, 17-8). Such a ‘radicalism’ aims at subverting the established order, and fosters a disdain for America, thereby making reformist politics suspect in theory and impossible in practice. The second trend, the followers of which specialize in a politics of identity (or difference, or recognition), attempts to make a difference in people’s lives and as such fits altogether into a reformist liberal project. However, insofar as “this cultural Left thinks more about stigma than money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed” (Rorty 1998a, 77), its predominant political orientation represents a turn away from class-struggle, and for that reason it is minoritarian by definition. Moreover, this orientation also plays a decisive role in the breakup of the traditional alliance between the academics and the labour movement. As to both trends, Rorty is convinced that they have fundamentally misguided political initiatives, insofar as both represent a move into non-majoritarian politics. According to him, the very emergence of the cultural Left is an expression of the fact that “frustration has taken the place of hope” (Rorty 1999, 232).

Such a frustration is also expressed in a widespread decline of national pride. In Rorty’s eyes, as opposed to the relativist impact inherent in multiculturalism, America does have a national identity. It consists above all in the fact that, from the very beginning of its formation, America has embodied the promise of a possible construction of a classless society. This promise does not contradict, but rather, goes hand in hand with this nation’s inclusivism, that is, with a traditional American pluralism as “the attempt to make America […] a community of communities” (ibid., 252). However, Rorty calls attention to a social and political decline that has taken place during the more recent decades. One of the symptoms of such a decline is that in spite of economic growth the chasm between the rich and the poor has deepened. In that regard Rorty speaks of the danger of ‘Brazilianization’ (ibid., 231), the menace of the emergence of an overclass coupled with the steady immiseration of everybody else. Meanwhile, moral progress during that period was confined mostly to improvements in the situation of racially, ethnically or sexually identified groups, but not in that of the economically oppressed. Rorty’s main concern is that “America, the country that was to have witnessed a new birth of freedom, will gradually
be divided by class differences of a sort that would have been utterly inconceivable to Jefferson or to Lincoln" (ibid., 259). Several further events—such as the protests against the Vietnam War with their anti-American charge, and again, the Watergate scandal which led to the masses thinking of the bureaucrats as the enemy, etc.—also contributed to the fact that the traditional American fraternal ideals, as well as patriotism, have become more and more unfashionable. The basic momentum is a widespread loss of faith in America—in liberal democracy, with its promise of the construction of a classless society. For Rorty, the fact of such a “moral decline” is evident (ibid., 257).

He also emphasizes that insofar as America is giving up its role of being the vanguard of a global egalitarian utopia, it is about to lose both its world-historical significance and “its soul” (ibid., 234). Moreover, under the pressures of globalization the aforementioned aspects of crisis are only becoming more and more menacing. “[T]he central fact of globalization—as Rorty writes—is that the economic situation of the citizens of a nation state has passed beyond the control of the laws of that state” (ibid., 233). National laws of any country cannot control either the global pool of capital or the labour market, anymore. Among the consequences is that “no nation’s economy is sufficiently self-contained to permit long-term social planning by a national government” (ibid., 258), and each nation’s economy is passing out of the control of its government and its voters. Another, even more threatening aspect of globalization is that “[w]e now have a global overclass which makes all the major economic decisions […] in entire independence of the legislatures, and a fortiori of the will of the voters, of any given country” (ibid., 233). This foreshadows the emergence of hereditary castes, of these utter enemies of democratic constitution. To that extent, the tendencies inherent in globalization not only threaten the social project of Enlightenment, but are pregnant with the menace of turning it into its very opposite.

Rorty regards the enumerated crises as being fundamentally moral in nature. The moral decline of America—and, by extension, that of the contemporary liberal democracies—can be conceptualized as a relapse from an egalitarian notion of democracy (referring to the social ideal of equality of opportunity) to that of a constitutional one (referring to the system of a freely elected, representative government). The main difference between these two notions is that while egalitarianism presupposes constitutionalism, the latter does not incorporate the former’s need for moral progress toward a widespread utopian vision of democracy in the egalitarian sense (Rorty 2007b, 2).

Now, it is one of Rorty’s central convictions that the loss of social hope expressed in such a relapse is mainly due to our current political ideas and vocabularies governing our public practices. These vocabularies might be satisfactory for sustaining constitutionalism, but they are no longer suitable for sustaining egalitarianism. This point is confirmed—at least partially—by the fact that neither of the two so far available scenarios leading up to an egalitarian utopia seems to be feasible today. The Marxist version, demanding a proletarian revolution and the abolition of private entrepreneurship, has failed. The non-Marxist, non-violent one, which was based on the hope that a measure of economic prosperity could bring about successive political reforms and eventually a kind of welfare state which ensured equality of opportunities, proved to be illusory, too. For economic growth is in itself not a guarantee of egalitarian politics. As Rorty (1989, 181-82) repeatedly points out, at the present we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual situation to a future of human dignity, freedom and peace. It is precisely for this reason that Rorty explicitly makes an effort to try “to reformulate the hopes of liberal society”, and he does so “in a nonrationalist and nonuniversalist way” (ibid., 44).
A possible reawakening of egalitarian hopes demands both that the society undergo moral progress toward embracing the social ideal of equality, and that political institutions of that society also mirror this ideal, embodying more and more of the social sentiments of fraternity and solidarity. Accordingly, a shift must occur in the politicians’ convictions regarding the general estimation of the relation between the economic and the moral orders, and also the main task of the political bodies. They must move beyond that legal impartiality which makes room for socially unjust and morally unacceptable inequalities. From an egalitarian view, “the first duty of the state [should be, indeed,] to prevent gross economic and social inequality,” as opposed to the present situation wherein “the government’s only moral duty [is] to ensure ‘equal protection of the laws’” (Rorty 1999, 246). Since social justice is not simply a legal matter, but rather—and above all—, should be a practical requirement feeding on social feelings of fraternity and solidarity, a radical change must occur within our overall political practices and ultimately in our public vocabulary. At the present, our political vocabulary—originating in the rationalism of the Enlightenment—centres primarily on the notion of rights. That notion certainly played a decisive role during the establishment and development of constitutional democracies. However, since it does not promote the aforementioned, desirable social sentiments, it is no longer sufficient enough to steer events toward liberal goals, and thus, to keep alive the egalitarian hopes.

Moreover, a further point underlines even more the need for exceeding—although, obviously not entirely leaving behind—our current rights-talk and predominantly rationalistic public vocabulary. If one understands morality as Rorty does, namely, “neither as a matter of applying the moral law nor as the acquisition of virtues but as fellow feelings, the ability to sympathize with the plight of others” (ibid., 249), then everything turns on the question of how such an ability might be brought about. Now, Rorty’s crucial point is—and I can only agree with him—that moral insight “is not, like mathematics, a product of rational reflection. It is instead a matter of imagining a better future, and observing the results of attempts to bring that future into existence” (2007b, 8). Insofar as moral progress might be a result of extending the bounds of our imagination, Rorty’s historicist romanticism—where romanticism is “a thesis about the nature of human progress” with “imagination [as] the chief instrument of the good” (Rorty 2007a, 108)—should be regarded as an approach introduced for the purpose of ‘trying to reformulate the hopes of liberal society’. For “liberal societies depend on a sense of solidarity with and sympathy for one’s fellow human beings”, as Bernstein also claims (2003, 132), and the need for moral progress toward elevating those feelings may justify Rorty’s nonrationalistic and nonuniversalist approach.

Literary Culture

Rorty announced the possible emergence of a nonrationalistic, post-philosophical culture—which is just as desirable according to him as a post-religious culture—in his Introduction to the volume he edited on The Linguistic Turn. Later on, he came to invest all of his liberal hopes—hopes that the liberal tradition of tolerance, individual freedom and demand for social equality will prevail—in a so conceived “new dawn”, a dawn regarded by him as introducing “not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity” (Rorty 2000a, 1).

Namely, Rorty agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno that—as he puts it—“the forces unleashed by the Enlightenment have undermined the Enlightenment’s own convictions” (Rorty
1989, 56), due to the destructive power of skepticism built into its rationalism. Although Rorty shares this premise, he does not share their well-known conclusion. Rather, he points to the need for a “utopian vision of a culture which [is] able to incorporate […] the dissolvant character of rationality” (ibid., 57). It is the rise of such a ‘literary culture’—which began to emerge when Hegel introduced historicism into first philosophy—that according to him might promise an imaginative and possibly moral awakening.

The literary culture Rorty envisages is a radically historicist and nominalist one. The historicism he advocates stands in sharp opposition to metaphysics—metaphysics conceived as the discipline which aims at capturing a final, single matrix of what is real behind all appearances (a ‘metaphysics of presence’ in the Heideggerian sense). The project of metaphysics embodies a hope for what Rorty labels as ‘redemptive truth’, the prospect that a set of true beliefs could give an answer to our persistent and pressing practical questions such as ‘what to do with ourselves?’. While that prospect presupposes that “history does not really matter” (Rorty 2007b, 6), historicism acknowledges and takes into account, also in the political respect, what is yet to emerge, that is, the unpredictable new.

As I see it, Rorty’s romanticised version of pragmatism aims precisely at dealing with this historicist dimension. Namely, the Rortyan sense of historicism also implies that, with regard to politics, neither the framework presented by naturalism in itself nor that of a rather instrumental pragmatism can suffice. For purposes, individual or communal, come in two flavours. They are either known antecedently (like the natural ones prompted by our biological or physiological needs) or are yet to emerge (like the moral ones cropping up culturally). Restricting ourselves to a horizon of already known purposes, to the horizon of a naturalist perspective, is as undesirable as it can be. "Brave New World […] shows us what sort of human future would be produced by a naturalism untempered by historicist Romance," writes Rorty (2000d, 189). In turn, mere instrumentalism is also doomed to failure where the goals may appear no sooner than the means for achieving them. Now, this latter is the case—as e. g. Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom have shown—with language. One’s “new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide” (Rorty 1989, 13).

It is Rorty’s historicist focus on the unforeseeably new, together with the parallel notion of the unique capacity of language to produce entirely new ‘logical spaces’, that also explains why Rorty puts so much emphasis on nominalism. For nominalism follows from the historicist view—and it does so prior to its philosophical underpinning (namely, anti-representationalism)—that the future is determined by nothing else than our linguistic imagination.

Rortyan historicism implies that neither philosophy, nor natural science, nor instrumental problem-solving have anything to do with questions of ‘purposes yet to emerge’, and therefore, with questions of political guidance or individual redemption. They tell us nothing about what purposes to have. Individual redemption—that is, an answer to such a question—can be achieved through imagination, by entering into “non-cognitive relations … [with] other human beings, relations mediated by human artefacts such as books and buildings [etc., which] provide a sense of alternative ways of being human” (Rorty 2007, 93). For this reason, literature—as the best means for that kind of improving ourselves—stands forth in Rorty’s eyes as the primary vehicle for improving our moral imagination. In turn, in a high culture where moral inquiry becomes predominant, philosophy becomes marginalized, since it cannot help us choose among the various forms of life.
The Role of Philosophy

For most of his life, Rorty has been troubled by the metaphilosophical question of “what, if anything, philosophy is good for” (Rorty 1999, 11). Early in his career—on the pages of his aforementioned Introduction from 1967—he came to reject philosophy’s foundational role by arguing that any attempt at founding a method without tacit reference to some of the conclusions to be reached by that very method is inevitably circular. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature he reinforced this point by saying that “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and […] there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence” (1980, 178). Rorty’s so conceived historicism led him to accept Hegel’s definition of philosophy as ‘its time, held in thought’. He interprets this to mean that “human social practices in general […] are the product of concrete historical situations, and […] they have to be judged by reference to the needs created by those situations” (2007b, 6). Philosophy, from this view, should be content to regard itself as ancillary to historiography—it is to be studied in the context of its social situation.

This historicist stance has many consequences, among them the primacy of practice over and against theory, the fact that no philosophical foundation can possibly be given to any practice, the breakdown of all kinds of universalism, a limited and revised relevance of rationality, etc. Now, many aspects of Rorty’s views concerning the relation between philosophy and politics seem to suggest that his politically relevant reflections are mainly extended applications of his previously arrived at philosophical ideas. Compare the following to the above enumerated consequences of his historicism: Rorty emphasises the priority of democracy over philosophy, denies that philosophy could offer a defence for democracy in terms of conclusive arguments, refuses to make use of any kind of universalism in his liberal utopia, limits the role of argumentation to the normal discourse of the public sphere, etc.

Nevertheless, what I would like to suggest is that the relation between philosophy and politics in Rorty’s case is rather the opposite. Although from his historicism it does not necessarily follow—he maintains—that thenceforth politics should be regarded as the centre of philosophy, and he consistently refuses the notion that one could presume inferential relations between philosophical standpoints and political convictions, in fact, Rorty also acknowledges that one’s political leanings might predispose a person to favour certain philosophical notions. For example—as he says—“if your devotion [to democracy] is wholehearted, then you will welcome the utilitarian and pragmatist claim that we have no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness” (2007a, 34). There is a plausible inference from democratic convictions to philosophical notions promoting anti-authoritarianism.

Indeed, it seems very much to be the case that it is Rorty’s wholehearted devotion to democracy—a devotion which made him claim that the most fundamental intellectual question is that of democracy versus totalitarianism (Rorty 1991, 29)—which destined his way of doing philosophy to the role of building up a conceptual ‘infrastructure’ for a possible revival of liberal democracy. For his philosophy is best approachable as an attempt to work out the conceptual prerequisites of defending what he takes to be the socio-political demands of the day. These demands consist in his eyes primarily in sustaining social hope and egalitarianism. When Rorty enumerates his motives for his pragmatic turn, he mentions the followings: “to exalt solidarity over objectivity, to doubt that there is such a thing as ‘desire for truth’ distinct from desire for justification, and to hold that, in Habermas’s words, “‘being in touch with reality’ has to be translated into ‘being in touch with a human community’” (Rorty 2000b, 56). That kind of large-scale ‘translation’—Rorty would say: redescription—sums up most of
Rorty's philosophical efforts, efforts which primarily aim at doing away with the traditional realist intuition and the corresponding mentalism with its imagery of representation and mirror of nature. Accordingly, Rorty himself summarizes his overall philosophical intentions in the following manner: “I am a hedgehog who […] really only has one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other” (2000a, 1). Bernstein (2008, 21-2) also takes the need to emphasize human self-reliance to be the “dominant theme” in Rorty’s work, and in that regard he talks about Rorty’s “deep humanism”.

More specifically, in the Mirror Rorty came to assign to philosophy the role of an edifying, hermeneutical practice as opposed to its traditionally systematic and epistemological vocation. As for their difference, Rorty claims that “[e]pistemology views the participants [of discussion] as united in […] a universitas—a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end. Hermeneutics views them as united in […] a societas—persons whose paths […] have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground” (1980, 318). Hermeneutical philosophy so conceived has an important, although ‘civilian’—and thus, political—relevance. For a pluralist democracy is supposed to be ‘a community of communities’, a societas of a plurality of universitas, wherein neither a ‘common ground’ nor even a mutual interest in arriving at a consensus can be taken for granted. In such a context, a hermeneutical, conversational philosophy might play a socio-political role as the public practice of initiating and furthering conversation between more or less incommensurable views. Since the aim of such a practice consists not so much in achieving consensus, but rather, in sustaining the very process of conversation, it might further cohesion and help to avoid non-linguistic conflicts. This is an utterly political role, although it is primarily confined to serve peaceful coexistence within a pluralist society.

It is later on that Rorty gives explicit voice to his more ambitious and less neutral claim that “what philosophers might do for democratic politics [is that they] get to work substituting hope for knowledge, substituting the idea that the ability to be citizens of a full-fledged democracy which is yet to come, rather than the ability to grasp truth, is what is important about being human. This is […] a matter of […] redescribing humanity and history in terms which makes democracy seem desirable” (Rorty 2000c, 3). Accordingly, in his posthumously published volume Rorty explicitly comes to regard philosophy as a practice in ‘cultural politics’. It consists in giving arguments, pro and contra, concerning linguistic practices (such as the usage of certain words, or whole topics of discussion) with the aim of promoting socio-political goals via an attempted change in a community’s linguistic practice (Rorty 2007a, 3). As opposed to his earlier view, then, Rorty finally admits the fact that a kind of politics constitutes the centre and essence of his philosophy, indeed. This is a politics of traditions and norms, which is “the site of generational revolt, and thus the growing point of culture” (ibid., 21). Hence, Rorty’s appeal to a historicist romanticism should be regarded as just such a cultural-political campaign, and it will not make much sense to those who understand philosophy in any other terms.

References


Institute of Philosophy,
University of Miskolc,
Wesseleány u. 40, 1075 Budapest,
Hungary
Tel.: 36-20-543-1505
nyiro.miklos@chello.hu