

Resenhas

Richard Rorty. *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.* London: Harvard UP, 1998. 152 pages.

Richard Rorty. *Para realizar a América: o pensamento de esquerda no século XX na América.* Translation by Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr., Alberto Tosi Rodrigues, and Leoni Henning. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 1999. 148 páginas.

Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and Social Hope.* London: Penguin, 1999. 288 pages.

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The body of the original, English-language version of the first book are three William E. Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization written at Stanford Humanities Center in 1996-97 and delivered there in 1997: "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey", "The Eclipse of the Reformist Left", and "A Cultural Left". To these lectures, dedicated to the memory of Irving Howe and A. Phillip Randolph, Jr., are appended two earlier talks, "Movements and Campaigns", delivered at the Graduate Center of the City College of New York in a colloquium dedicated to the memory of Irving Howe and published in *Dissent* in 1995, and "The Inspirational Value of Great Literature", delivered at the Modern Language Association of America in 1995 and published in *Raritan* in 1996.

The Brazilian version of *Achieving our Country* omits these appendices, but is augmented by an introductory essay, "Pragmatismo e Neopragmatismo", by the first of the translators of the volume (author of *Richard Rorty: a filosofia do Novo Mundo em busca de mundos novos*, Vozes, 1999), and by extensive footnotes, which explain references presumably unknown to the Brazilian reader, but which are not effectively distinguished from Richard Rorty's own. Ghiraldelli Jr.'s essay, like Richard Rorty, displays only cursory acquaintance with Anglophone philosophy and cites virtually nothing published by Rorty before 1990, thus ignoring the intricacies of the development of his thought. It is curious that on the

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cover of the translation, the letter "r" in "America" (one of them anyway, and what kind of subtitle repeats words in the title in the first place?) is turned around backwards, in so far as the New Leftist spelling of "America" as "Amerika" is picked out by Rorty as a symbol of its anti-American despair.

The third book above, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, is a collection of Rorty's "lighter" (that is, non-technical and mostly cultural and political) essays written during the 1990's, before the composition of *Achieving our Country*, which hence is a rewriting of much of this collection into a longer and more cohesive whole. The twenty essays of this volume, augmented by an Introduction and an Afterword, are divided in five sections: Autobiographical (containing solely the not-to-be-missed "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids"); Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism; Some Applications of Pragmatism; Politics; and Contemporary America.

"Moses Supposes His Toes-es Are Roses,..."

In way of initial evaluation of these books, let us say that, though we have all come to know for some time that we need not take the spontaneous philosophy of the scientists at all seriously, if we are still ignorant about the fact that we should be equally blasé about the spontaneous politics of the philosophers, it should remedy our lack of disdain.

Rorty clarifies in these essays his until recently mostly occulted political agenda; and we might also speculate about why he has turned to political theory and politically-edged culture critique with increasing frequency in the ultimate decade. Perhaps in his declining years, Professor Rorty is too tired to do real philosophy and must settle for commenting on political things; or perhaps like Plato's philosopher he is compelled to reenter the Cave in order to try to convince the troglodytes that things are sunnier on the other side and political talk is the best way of getting their attention without having them think he's a screwball; but probably, after thirty years of insisting that there is no philosophy to be done, but only pragmatic stuff, he is finally getting around to the stuff.

At least Rorty demonstrates in these essays the fertility of his panoply of his post-modern moves and attitudes in the sphere of political theory; but having said this, we shall not address the chore of pointing out how most the maneuvers he adopts have been employed in the discussion of other topics through the course of his career, a career that has made him, by good measure, the most read American philosopher of the final

generation of last century, that is to say, the caboose on the Twentieth Century Limited.

Instead, I shall respond to the content of his political doctrine.

Rorty is an anti-Communist, anti-Big Business, Americans for Democratic Action left-liberal Democrat, the sort (like my own father) that successively supported, with greater or lesser reservations, Roosevelt, Truman, Adlai Stevenson, Kennedy, Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, the kind to get to the main point that supported the War in Vietnam because he believed that it was morally and politically justified in order to oppose the Communist menace. In other words, he is what we young student radicals of the 1960s considered and called a right wing pig. I myself was (as a college freshman and while my second eldest brother, Lt. Com. Stephen F. Erickson, USN, Rt., was serving in Da Nang after Tet) a "Yippie organizer" (along with John Krich) at the In hoperation of Pigasus the Pig in Washington, D.C., in 1968, an out of state agent provocateur at Ohio State University after the Cambodian Invasion and before the Kent State Massacre, aiding and abetting the flight of members of the Columbus Eight; and a conspirator and participant in the take-over of the Reed College Administration Building, and member of the notorious Bookstore Eight, in Portland, Oregon. Among various and sundry other felonious activities that would have struck a 38-year old Ivy League professor and analytic philosopher, as little more than infantile Leftism!

In retrospect, the Rorty of *Achieving our Country* characterizes 'Nam as a wasteful and unwinnable war (though in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, he calls it shameful, perhaps for other reasons than these just cited), and hence he credits the anti-War left of the Sixties and early Seventies with having actively opposed the war, thus bringing the country to its senses. Let him know the moral outrage that we felt toward parents and teachers who were in complicity with the Viet Nam War does not abate, even after thirty years, when the rightness of our actions is cynically reduced to mere instrumental rationality! Which is what Rorty does by refusing to admit his hawkish sense and sensibility to have been in error. The sometime Doctor of Spin only admits that, while the anti-Communist politics of the Old Left was ethico-politically warranted, it was mistaken to conduct that policy through the instrument of a land-war in Asia. In brief, he remains the reactionary swine (here I regress to the scatological aesthetics of the New Left) of early middle age, lamenting yet the New Left's youth-in-Asia of the Old Left.

The New Left (a perspective that was perhaps never comprehensible to Latin American leftists) saw both the orthodox Communists who supported or acquiesced in the oppression of the Eastern European peoples as well as the American imperialists of either liberal or conservative persuasions who oppressed Latin America, African and Southeast Asian peoples as right-wingers, and especially porcine right-wingers. Card-carryin' and fellow-travelin'... "won't get you where you want to go. NO! If you want her, you must send her/somewhere where she's never been before."

Rorty turns his back to the possibility of a simultaneous opposition to both Soviet and American imperialism, à la Chomsky, when he insists that the destabilization of socialist governments in Latin America was a necessary condition of freeing the Eastern Europeans from the Communist menace. In short, he argues that what was right, American leftist anticommunism or the anti-American imperialism of the New Left, depends solely on who was being more greatly oppressed, the Eastern Europeans or the Latin Americans.

Que porco direitista!

Our Dick is Trickier than Your Dick

Yet he does not accept this animalesque assessment of his politics. He has, he believes, bona-fide leftist credentials, which he trots out in a biographical passage to supplement "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids". His maternal grandfather, the theologian, who influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., and his parents, sometime Communists, and eventual Trotskyite political organizers and activists, were part of the central tradition of left-liberal politics in America, and he has done no more than to follow in their footsteps... becoming, depending how you look at it, not a Joe-Hill Wobbly, but the self-styled first main American "public intellectual" since John Dewey, or else the thinking-man's Will Rogers.

The New Leftists who see those of his ilk as non-leftists, Professor Rorty lectures us, should remember, first, that there are no enemies on the left (an old saw of the French Revolution), and hence there is little point to nefarious contrasts between leftists and liberals, New Leftists and Old Leftists, and so on; and secondly, that Brahmins like himself are a necessary condition for genuine political reform (as Marx himself was a class traitor). Don't blame Rich if the Superior Man, out of noble obligation, helps out those of us lacking his elevated intelligence and refined education, not to mention his left-liberal wealth and power!

Dick Rorty then goes on the offensive, though not to the point of unabashed left-bashers like J. "Dock-of-the-Bay,-Resting-my-Bone" Searle or H. "Jabber the Hut" Bloom, much less like Friedrich Will's boy. The New Left, which was born in the instrumentally requisite Anti-war Movement, has for the most part degenerated into a Cultural Leftism (this perspective Brazilian leftists have no trouble comprehending, since they have the "festive PT" as a hermeneutic bridge-concept). His critical points are threefold. First, this Leftism of the "politically correct", as practiced by the intellectuals in American universities, is a spectator Leftism, which does a lot of philosophizing and theorizing in a left Heideggerian, postmodern way, which, though great for personal self-expression, does not cut it for the public thing, because it never gets down from Cloud-Cuckoo Land to analyze the issues in a detailed and sober manner.

Second, it is a "Movement" Leftism, which is a messianic kind of thing, ineffectually foundationalist or historicist, instead of a "campaign" Leftism, which is pragmatic and empirical and hence effective for making concrete and significant changes.

And third, it has abandoned the mainstay issues of traditional American Leftism-to wit, opposing economic and racial oppression-in order to support a program of cultural politics, featuring feminism, homosexual rights, and the black identity movement, which is valuable as far as it goes, but which has played into the cynical right wing political program of wholesale economic exploitation. Rorty throws us a curveball here, because we might have expected him to take a more post-modern position here, to the effect that the fact that the push to economic equality has been for the most part abandoned by the erstwhile Left not a sign of the end of politics, when the traditional spectrum of doctrine from to right thinking to the sinister does not hold, because the world itself has changed, and the threats are different and the opportunities are different. Yet in fact he shows his true colors, that of Bourbon in the case, for he has learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

In essence, Rorty recommends that cultural leftists get off their high horse and re-establish their traditional alliance with Big Labor, so that the Left can once more play electoral hardball on an inevitably capitalist playing field, thus fulfilling the lapsed tradition of true American Leftism. Here we might agree with Rorty's none too stop the presses attack on the Cultural Left as being theory-drunken and obscurantist, aesthetico-spiritual in lieu of pragmatico-economic, and in cahoots with Big Money, even if his me-too-ist lip-service to abortion and gay rights

(though he hankers to put the kibosh on ethnic cultural separatism) makes him appear, all of a sudden, not your right-wing pig, after all, but some kit-and-caboodle liberal P-I-G pig.

Lasts Licks

Seven quickies for edification and debate: First, if Rorty is into writing confessional literature these days, why doesn't he tell us where he stands on toughies like Affirmative Action in the Third Millennium? Decades back he 'fessed up to deeming it pragmatic to fire politically incorrect professors, but it all depends on whose ox is getting gored, doesn't it? Second, why does he remain silent about Radical Ecology? Do the plants and animals, not to mention the fungi, get cut into the Neo-Pragmatist Dispensation? Or are ecological campaigns too Centrist, or too Anti-Economic, for a Leftist Blueblood? Third, where's the foreign policy meat, East Timor, Tibet, Londonderry, etc.? Does he agree with Jürgen "I Got My Reasons" Habermas that laser-bombing Saddam Hussein and all his friends to smithereens is good Southpaw Politics? Fourth, what exactly's his beef with Alasdair MacIntyre and the Communitarians? Are they too Tory, or too shanty Irish, for white-lace libs to have in for tea? Fifth, if he believes so much in utopian thought, why doesn't he query, "Who's going to take out the garbage? What're you going to put in its place?" Ask and answer. Sixth, does he seriously believe the New World Economic Order is unpragmaticistical because it prices pricey, Rust-Bowl Joe-Six-Pax out of their cushy Union berths? Seventh, how does it feel to hang ten on the wave of the present political turmoil, knowing all the time that yesterday's headlines, and headliners, will soon be tossed in the dust-bin of mixed-metaphorical history? Doesn't he know that Old Liberalism is far away too long in the tooth to have any bite, so that his Poly Sci musings are liable to seem much the mask for Neoliberalism?

Say heh! The opening and closing argument of the book, to bring our screed to a screeching halt, is that even if the good ole' U. S. of A. has done ignoble and, yes, Virginia, horrible things in the past, it is pragmatically important for American leftists to be proud-by God and General Washington!-to be Americans (the "God" is rhetorical: Rorty admonishing against God-talk in politics), and more specifically, to believe in the Great American Project as articulated in verse and tome by the poet Walt Whitman and the educational theorist John Dewey. That is to say, however erroneous American political behavior has been,

its conduct did not leave upon it the indelible mark of miasmal and Hawthornesque sin (again rhetorical, sin and miasma not being operative concepts in the Rortyesque lexicon), but rather the Republic can always be reformed in the pie-in-the-sky future in such wise as to warrant the pride we take in it now. By jingo, that's capital! Makes his Uncle Sam big in the chest! This attitude is an aspect of what Mr. R has sometimes referred to, in a philosophical sense, as his Whiggishness, whereby and wherein Richie follows Freddie in deeming self-abnegation contrary to the Will-to-power. Yet then does Rorty subscribe to and endorse the position that even the Dutchmen Hun can also, in his natural lifetime, be redeemed from his genocidal past by some gung-ho! act of collective self-forgiveness? I presume that he - humanely, - all -too-humanely - does. Oblivion über Alles! For there are no limits to this pragmatically motivated and self-administered amnesty-program. His main view is that, contra Habermas, values do not have to be rationally established, because rationality is suitable for determining what means are appropriate for a given end, but not for selecting those ends in the first place. He admits this position has been adopted by extremists on both sides but never by liberal humanists like himself. It is all a matter of a consensus among his fellows and friends, his culture circle, and that is why he did not oppose the War in Viet Nam: this Centrist sow keeps the wrong company!

Somewhere in a kudzu-lined lane in Old Dominion sits a cracker-barrel philosopher, say, or a post-philosopher, drinking mint julep, not forgetting Ivan Karamatzov's old conditional sentence, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted," and not learning Voltaire's antecedent verdict, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him". Smiling obliviously, he is softly singing, "Dut, dut; dut, dut, da; duh, da; duh, duh...Heaven kno-o-ows! Anything goes...." And beside him, Booth Tarkington, in the robes of Hesiod, murmurs some magnificence like unto "Arrogance goeth before the comeuppance."