

## CLASS POLITICS AND CULTURAL POLITICS

Susan Dieleman

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

[sdielem@siue.edu](mailto:sdielem@siue.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** After the 2016 election of Donald Trump, many commentators latched on to the accusations Rorty levels at the American Left in *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty foresaw, they claimed, that the Left's preoccupation with cultural politics and neglect of class politics would lead to the election of a "strongman" who would take advantage of and exploit a rise in populist sentiment.

In this paper, I generally agree with these readings of Rorty; he does think that the American Left has made the mistake of putting class on the political backburner. However, I suggest that this position follows from his view that economic security is vital for solidarity. Because economic security is under increasing threat in contemporary America, so too is solidarity. If greater solidarity is a goal of liberal democracy, then class politics, aimed at ending selfishness, ought to be as much a priority for the American Left as is cultural politics, aimed at ending sadism.

**Keywords:** Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser, solidarity, selfishness, sadism

### Introduction

In *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty accuses the American Left of many failings. Some of these accusations became fodder for much of the commentary that accompanied the passage from *Achieving Our Country* that went viral after the election of Donald Trump to the American Presidency. Some commentators latched onto his claim that the contemporary American Left was (and continues to be) mistaken in its focus on ending sadism rather than selfishness. That is, Rorty's claims were – if not explicitly, then certainly implicitly – marshaled in support of arguments against politics that prioritize issues of identity and culture.<sup>1</sup> On this reading, the Left's

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<sup>1</sup> As David Rondel puts it, "a majority of post-election commentators have tended to read *Achieving Our Country* as, among other things, an admonishment of so-called 'identity politics' in favor of an 'Old Left' politics of redistribution and economic justice" (Rondel 2018, 2). Of course, the skill with which Rorty's arguments were handled varied greatly, and according to the purposes of the commentators. For a sample of these commentaries, see Bérubé, 2016; Friedersdorf, 2017; Helmore 2016;

mistake in and leading up to the 2016 presidential election was to focus on racial, gender, and other sorts of identity-based inequalities while ignoring economic inequality. As a result, the Left made space for a "strongman" who could take advantage of and exploit a rise in populist sentiment. The neglect and marginalization of poor and working-class white people in the United States led those same people to turn to someone who would provide them with a way of achieving economic success rather than to deprive them of it.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I generally agree with these readings of Rorty; he does think that the contemporary Left in America has made the mistake of putting class on the political backburner. However, I want to delve deeper into why it is that Rorty seems to be so preoccupied with class in *Achieving Our Country*. The obvious reason would be that economic inequality causes undue suffering, which he argues a good liberal society ought to minimize. However, I suggest in this paper that Rorty's preoccupation with class politics in *Achieving Our Country* is in no small part a result of his view that economic security is vital for solidarity. Because economic security is under increasing threat in contemporary America, so too is solidarity. And if greater solidarity is a goal of liberal democracy – which, for Rorty, it is – then *class politics*, aimed at ending selfishness, ought to be as much a priority for the American Left as is *cultural politics*, aimed at ending sadism. Thus, even though Rorty speaks disapprovingly of cultural politics in *Achieving Our Country*, it is a mistake to think that Rorty's call for a return to class politics in this text means he is uninterested in cultural politics. Indeed, class politics and cultural politics are connected in complex, mutually-reinforcing ways that Rorty worries contemporary Leftists have failed to understand.

In the first section of this paper, I provide an overview of Rorty's claim that the American Left should

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Illing, 2019; Kilian, 2017; Metcalf, 2017; Lara 2017; Seal 2016; Senior, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty's work was also called upon in debates about "post-truth," a topic I don't consider here, but is relevant to debates about the role of the American Left. See, for example, Mendieta 2017; Read 2016.

return to class politics, as it's presented in *Achieving Our Country* and supported by other writings. In the second section, I locate this claim in the larger context of Rorty's work, and in particular in relation to two of his papers from the 1990s: "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage" (originally published in 1996) and "Justice as a Larger Loyalty" (originally published in 1997). Relating his arguments in *Achieving Our Country* to the claims made in these two papers shows how Rorty thinks class politics and cultural politics are connected. In the third and final section of this paper, I conclude by showing how my reading of Rorty on class politics and cultural politics can blunt the edges of his debate with Nancy Fraser over whether redistribution or recognition ought to be prioritized in our theories of and attempts to minimize injustice. Ultimately, I argue that Rorty and Fraser share similar prescriptions for the American Left: it is time to pay attention to class again, because failing to do so risks the possibility of achieving our country.

### I. Rorty's Call to Return to Class Politics

Rorty takes on two central tasks in *Achieving Our Country*. The first is to provide a redescription of the history of the American Left, which he traces through three phases.<sup>3</sup> The first is what he calls the reformist Left of the first half of the twentieth-century, including those thinkers of the Progressive Era, as well as "all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong" (Rorty 1998a, 43). Rorty's term, "reformist Left," is a more capacious term than "Old Left," where the latter is a term that was used

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<sup>3</sup> Rortyan redescrptions, it is worth noting, are never really an attempt to accurately represent history or a particular state of affairs, but an attempt to render salient a particular way of looking at things, rather than another, and to achieve certain ends, rather than others. Thus, criticisms that his account of the history of the American Left is inaccurate because it leaves out one or another significant moment or movement miss the mark insofar as they are criticisms only of the accuracy of his (re)description.

by historians to distinguish early adherents to socialism from both the "New Left" which took over their cause, and early "liberals" who were not socialists. He refuses to buy in to a description of the American Left that sees some Leftists (namely liberals) as insufficiently radical to deserve the name. Rorty's reformist Left, therefore, includes both socialists and liberals of this early part of the twentieth century, and is intended to break down the rift internal to the Left between reformers and revolutionaries. Both liberals and socialists should be recognized as having been on the same side, he thinks, advancing "the cause of social justice" (45).

The second is the New Left that emerged around 1964 in response to the Vietnam War, and includes people who decided "that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system" (Rorty 1998a, 43). The New Left, made up mostly of students engaged with Students for a Democratic Society, "felt justified in giving up their parents' hope that reformist politics could cope with the injustice they saw around them" (66). Though Rorty criticizes the New Left for giving up reform in favor of revolution, he recognizes that they "accomplished something enormously important, something of which the reformist Left would probably have been incapable. It ended the Vietnam War" (67). In so doing, "the New Left may have saved us from losing our moral identity" (68). The moral identity that the New Left helped save is of a country that makes peace rather than war.<sup>4</sup> The civil disobedience of the New Left during the Vietnam era, ranging from draft resistance to protests that broke through police lines, shut down induction centers, and blocked recruiters, helped prevent America from becoming a garrison state – that is, a state that prioritizes military matters over social, political, or

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty writes, "The Left, the party of hope, sees our country's moral identity as still to be achieved, rather than needing to be preserved" (Rorty 1998, 30-31). This is what distinguishes the Left from the Right, he thinks. Whereas the Left is hopeful that their vision of a better America can be achieved, the Right "thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact" (31).

economic ones. When compared with the garrison state that America could have become were it not for the New Left, Rorty argues that even the “many and varied stupidities” of the movement are excusable (70).<sup>5</sup>

The third Left Rorty identifies is the cultural Left, which grew out of the splintering of the New Left and now exists primarily in the academy. The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, emerged out of the confluence of the New Left’s adoption of the Marxist claim that the system cannot be reformed and the “widespread post-Watergate feeling that the American government is hopelessly corrupt” (Rorty, Nystrom, and Puckett 2002, 16). The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, has holed up in the academy and engaged, for the most part, in abstract theorizing that is of little help to the broader American Left that exists outside the academy. Though there are Leftists outside the academy, working as “labor lawyers and labor organizers, congressional staffers, low-level bureaucrats, ... journalists, social workers, and people who work for foundations” (Rorty 1998a, 77), they bear little resemblance to the academic, cultural Left. Whereas the former are interested in what laws need to be changed in order to create a hoped-for America, the latter have given up on the reformists’ hope that there is an America worth achieving.

One of the problems with this cultural Left, Rorty thinks, is that it has ignored economic inequality and focused on other, identity-based forms of inequality, like racial or gender inequality, instead. Or, to use Rorty’s terms, the cultural Left has been preoccupied with ending sadism, while forgetting to think about selfishness. While attempting to ameliorate racial and gender inequality is a laudable goal – one that Rorty himself has spent considerable time thinking about –

<sup>5</sup> Of course, by that same measure, so too are the less revolutionary-minded activities and identity-based oversights of the earlier, reformist Left. Surely, when compared with the prospect of becoming a garrison state, even socialists must recognize that liberalism is a lesser evil. Thus, the animosity between reformists and revolutionaries is misguided, Rorty thinks, and the internal rift that divides them needs to be overcome.

what Rorty laments is the fact that this focus displaced the focus on economic inequality. As he puts it, “It is as if the American Left could not handle more than one initiative at a time – as if it either had to ignore stigma in order to concentrate on money, or vice versa” (Rorty 1998a, 83).<sup>6</sup> So, Rorty argues that the Left needs to revisit the problem of selfishness by engaging in class politics, which it has largely abandoned as it retreated into the academy and turned its attention to the problem of sadism by engaging in cultural politics. To reinvigorate the American Left, Rorty thinks the cultural Left “would need to talk much more about money, even at the cost of talking less about stigma” (Rorty 1998a, 91). However, successfully engaging in class politics requires leaving behind the academy and the cynical and hopeless attitude about America that typifies it. Thus, the American Left should “put a moratorium on theory” and “try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans” (91-92).<sup>7</sup> These prescriptions comprise the second task of *Achieving Our Country*.

Why is it important to “put a moratorium on theory” if the cultural Left is to reengage with class politics in America? Rorty worries that, “in committing itself to what it calls ‘theory,’ this Left has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion” (Rorty 2007, 95). This is problematic because it represents a decidedly un-pragmatic search for the Truth of what America is and has been – a search that displaces efforts to improve a country in favor of

<sup>6</sup> This myopic or one-dimensional approach to politics plagues not just the cultural Left, however. Rorty notes that the reformist Left was notably weak on issues of racial or gender inequality: “most of the direct beneficiaries of its initiatives were white males” (75). But he does think that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. This isn’t to say that the work of the academic Left has been in vain – they’ve made American campuses into “morally better places” (260) – but it has, he thinks, run its course.

<sup>7</sup> To these two prescriptions, Rondel adds a third: “the Left should abandon the ideological purity characteristic of Marxist revolutionaries, and adopt in its place a pragmatic, piecemeal, reformist attitude” (Rondel 2018, 7). I do not identify this as a separate prescription offered by Rorty, but as an element of the first: if one abandons theory, all that is left – aside from an apolitical quietism – is “pragmatic, piecemeal reform.”

a sort of theoretical “arms race” that aims for ever-higher levels of abstraction. The cultural Left is beholden to the Truth, where the particular Truth they are interested in is the Truth of America as, as Rondel puts it, “both unforgivable and unachievable” (Rondel 2018, 10). This is their “redemptive truth” a term Rorty introduces to signal “a set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves” (Rorty 2007, 90). Redemptive truth, Rorty thinks, satisfies “the need to fit everything – every thing, person, event, idea, and poem – into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique” (90).<sup>8</sup> Whereas religion used to provide this sort of redemptive truth to its followers, philosophy came to take on that role during the Enlightenment. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty’s claim is that the cultural Left still yearns for a redemptive truth; it has not been able to “kick its philosophy habit.” This yearning for a redemptive truth manifests in the cultural Left’s obsession with philosophical theorizing about America: “Redemption by philosophy would consist in acquiring a set of beliefs that represent things in the one way they truly are” (91). When it comes to America, the representation that the cultural Left has got hold of is of an America that is irredeemable and hopeless.

The search for redemptive truth, and especially the cultural Left’s assumption that discovering the Truth of America through abstract theorizing amounts to political activity, is what Rorty calls a “spectatorial approach.” He writes, “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 its country” (Rorty 1998a, 94). By “spectatorial,” what Rorty has in mind is that many cultural Leftists stand back in abject horror of what America has done and been, and what it continues to do and be.<sup>9</sup> After standing back, all that

remains to such Leftists is to “theorize” America, prioritizing knowledge over hope: “Hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness” (37).

Thus, Rorty enjoins the cultural Left to abandon its spectatorial approach by abandoning theory. In so doing, Rorty thinks it must also thereby revive hope in what America can become. A reinvigorated Left would have to reclaim the sort of pride in America that animated the work of the reformist Left. He opens *Achieving Our Country* by writing,

National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can produce bellicosity and imperialism, just as excessive self-respect can produce arrogance. But just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely (Rorty 1998a, 3).

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Rorty’s political turn that is worth quoting at length. He writes, “Rorty claimed that we should render our language of progressive political deliberation banal by abandoning high-theoretical talk long past its sell-buy date. By this he meant talk, rooted in the 19th century, of bourgeois ideology, capitalism, class divisions, commodification of labour, alienation and the like. We should instead revive more basic, down-to-earth terms such as ‘greed’ and ‘selfishness’, and replace earnest projects of cultural criticism or *Ideologiekritik* – which he felt had begun to slip into self-parody anyway – with enthusiastic discussions of practical options to make a liberal democracy yield obviously better socioeconomic results within its existing institutional framework. These might include proposals to deal with excessively low wages and unemployment, provide wider access to better and cheaper healthcare, and improve job prospects along with social mobility. Though he did not often say it, Rorty recommended that our whole political vocabulary, not just that of the Left, be pragmatized.

In recommending this, Rorty was not simply making one more move in the dreary game of normal politics, a move that could be seen (and was) as a conservative, or even reactionary, retreat to, or excuse for, a minimalistic capitalist *status quo*. He was trying to do for politics what he tried to do for philosophy: reset its common language to a level where it could be recognised as first and foremost a practical tool, a level where extraneous layers of theory and associated jargon no longer clouded the prospects for tangibly improving people’s lives” (Malachowski, 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> The search for a “redemptive truth” guided much of Rorty’s own, early philosophical endeavors, but he later abandoned these efforts to hold “reality and justice in a single vision” (Rorty 1999, 12).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Malachowski provides an excellent account of

While philosophical theorizing about America is a symptom of hopelessness, engaging in debates about what America can do and become represents a hopeful attitude, and this hopeful attitude requires national pride.

Recall that the cultural Left is not just engaged in theorizing; the content of the theories that inform their work is of an irredeemable country that is fundamentally racist and sexist. Thus, the cultural Left has turned to an elucidation of the ways that America has and continues to perpetrate harms against marginalized groups. Some theorists, when faced with this evidence, have called for a “politics of difference” or a “politics of recognition” that, on Rorty’s reading, is about recommending a recognition of the inherent value of different cultures, including the cultures of historically marginalized groups, like women, African Americans, or the LGBTQ community.<sup>10</sup> However, Rorty worries that the cultural Left’s emphasis on “difference” and “recognition” is both overly theoretical and inconsistent with national pride. While pride in one’s identity is “an entirely reasonable response to the sadistic humiliation to which one has been subjected” (100), the problem is that this pride often “prevents someone from also taking pride in being an American citizen” (100). The politics of difference and of recognition is, at best, a waste of effort and, at worst, a distraction from and impediment to achieving Leftist progress. This isn’t to say that Rorty is opposed to movements that aim to better the lives of members of oppressed groups; indeed, he is anything but. But it is to say that he sees nothing distinct about such movements; they should not be seen as a “new sort of politics” (Rorty 1999, 235).<sup>11</sup> Rather, they “simply add further concrete-

ness to sketches of the good old egalitarian utopia” (235). Such movements do not give us reason to “revise, as opposed to supplement, our previous descriptions of utopia” (236). Liberalism (of the sort recommended by John Stuart Mill or John Dewey) is not itself altered by a politics of difference, he thinks; it is merely fleshed out in greater detail. Movements like feminism and gay liberation render visible forms of suffering that were not previously visible, thus expanding solidarity by seeing these sorts of suffering as worth ending and achieving a hoped-for America.

Thus, rather than focusing on difference, Rorty wants to focus on commonality, in part for eminently practical reasons: “only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections” (Rorty 1998a, 101). Of course, American pride does not mean pride in what America *is*, but in what it *could be*. He argues,

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 a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual (101).

The dream country Rorty envisages – and the dream country that he thinks would best achieve the aims of those fighting for the recognition of marginalized groups – is one where differences of gender and race and sexuality (and so on) do not make a difference. It is one where “being American” is the only salient identity, and

like. This is what academics who work in such programs as Women’s Studies, African-American Studies, and Gay Studies do best. These programs are the academic arms of the new social movements - the movements which, as Judith Butler rightly says, have kept the left alive in the United States in recent years, years during which the rich have consistently had the best of it in the class struggle” (11). He adds that academics overestimate the “importance of their own expertise” in a desperate bid to see themselves as relevant to progressive politics, and as non-complicit with the suffering of marginalized groups. As he puts it, “academics are desperately eager to assure themselves that what they are doing is central, rather than marginal, to leftist politics” (13).

<sup>10</sup> Rorty has in mind the work of theorists like Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, and Nancy Fraser.

<sup>11</sup> In “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?,” Rorty suggests that the cultural Left’s emphasis on the recognition of cultural differences can be traced to “a specifically academic set of circumstances” (Rorty 2000, 11). He continues, “The only thing we academics can do, in our specifically professional capacities, to eliminate prejudice is to write women’s history, celebrate black artistic achievements, and the

where that identity signals membership in one moral community. Theory of the sort the cultural Left employs, as we've already seen, is not suited to this task. It supplies a philosophical metanarrative about what America is and has been; about the atrocities it has committed – including against its own marginalized groups, and indeed, its role in that marginalization – which are unforgivable. To take the place of the cultural Left's metanarrative, Rorty recommends historically contingent, hopeful narratives: "The appropriate intellectual background to political deliberation is historical narrative rather than philosophical or quasi-philosophical theory. More specifically, it is the kind of historical narrative which segues into a utopian scenario about how we can get from the present to a better future" (Rorty 1999, 231).<sup>12</sup>

Rorty's recommendations to put a moratorium on theory and to mobilize American pride are both directed to a further end, namely, the reengagement of the cultural Left with "real politics." A moratorium on theory and a mobilization of American pride are not ends in themselves; rather, they serve the further end of reinvigorating the Left by bringing together the various Lefts which were torn asunder by the contingent facts of America's cultural, political, and economic history. By putting a moratorium on theory, the cultural Left will become more pragmatic; they will stop seeing philosophy as necessary for – even definitional of – political engagement. They will abandon their spectatorial pulpit and get involved in the political tasks of changing laws and proposing policies. They will become agents rather than spectators (a distinction I return to below). By mobilizing American pride, those on the cultural Left will see that their goals are better achieved by working across differences to forge a national identity premised

on the hope that a utopian version of the country can be achieved. They will stop thinking of America as an experiment worth abandoning, and start thinking of it as a project worth engaging.

## II. The Role of Class Politics in Cultural Politics

The cultural Left, Rorty thinks, has become preoccupied with theoretical articulations of sadism, and it has failed to see how the forces of economic globalization have created an urgent need to focus on ending selfishness. Yet Rorty's call to return to class politics shouldn't be read as an admonishment to abandon questions of sadism, and it is a mistake to read *Achieving Our Country* this way. Rather, the two are connected in complex and mutually-reinforcing ways. A central reason Rorty wants us to talk more about class is because, without economic security, the solidarity he thinks is integral to a utopian liberal will suffer. I want to turn to a pair of Rorty's papers, "Who Are We? Moral Universalism and Economic Triage" (originally published in 1996) and "Justice as a Larger Loyalty" (originally published in 1997), to further explicate this point.

In "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," Rorty's ultimate goal is to rid us of the traditional view that loyalty and justice have different sources; whereas loyalty is based on sentiment, justice has its roots in reason. Thus, on the traditional view, hard choices between preferring one's family and friends over strangers is a choice between sentiment and reason. On Rorty's view, however, both loyalty and justice are matters of sentiment. Loyalty and justice are therefore not differences of kind, but of degree. Justice simply names the loyalty we might have to the largest community we can imagine: all of humankind, perhaps, or maybe just our own religious community, or, more problematically, those of our own race.

Since the moral community is a matter of sentiment rather than reason, rational insight into God's Will or Human Nature cannot determine who belongs or does not belong to our moral community. Instead, the basis upon which solidarity is built is contingent; it involves

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<sup>12</sup> He continues, "A turn away from narration and utopian dreams toward philosophy seems to me a gesture of despair... [W]e are now in a situation in which resentment and frustration have taken the place of hope among politically concerned intellectuals, and ... the replacement of narrative by philosophy is a symptom of this unhappy situation" (Rorty 1999, 232).

coming to see others as “like us” in the ways required for those others to be members of our moral community. Solidarity is created through the hard work of training our sympathies rather than through the recognition of antecedent criteria that stipulates what we have in common. We train our sympathies, Rorty thinks, by exposing ourselves to other ways of living and other forms of suffering. A liberal democratic culture is a culture that is “constantly enlarging its sympathies” and thereby expanding solidarity (Rorty 1991, 204).

The task of achieving solidarity is, for Rorty, divided up between agents of love (or guardians of diversity) and agents of justice (or guardians of universality). These two agential roles are presented together in “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz” (originally published in 1986). There, Rorty writes,

The moral tasks of a liberal democracy are divided between the agents of love and the agents of justice. In other words, such a democracy employs and empowers both connoisseurs of diversity and guardians of universality. The former insist that there are people out there whom society has failed to notice. They make these candidates for admission visible by showing how to explain their odd behavior in terms of a coherent, if unfamiliar, set of beliefs and desires – as opposed to explaining this behavior with terms like stupidity, madness, baseness or sin. The latter, the guardians of universality, make sure that once these people are admitted as citizens, once they have been shepherded into the light by the connoisseurs of diversity, they are treated just like all the rest of us (Rorty 1991, 206).

Agents of love are engaged in what Rorty calls “cultural politics,” which plays an important role in achieving greater solidarity and involves “arguments about what words to use” (Rorty 2007, 3). Cultural politics incorporates both positive and negative projects. On the negative side, it includes “debates about hate speech,” but also “projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse” (Rorty 2007, 3). Abandoning those terms and topics that block our ability to sympathize with others helps us achieve solidarity: changing our linguistic practices can increase “the degree of tolerance that cer-

tain groups of people have for one another” (2007, 3). On the positive side, cultural politics includes the development of new metaphors and new descriptions to expand logical space. New ways of speaking help “us” see that members of marginalized groups are not so different after all; in all the ways that count, these new ways of speaking help us see, members of these groups are “just like us,” and therefore deserve to be part of our moral community.<sup>13</sup> Cultural politics thus involves imagining and articulating utopian visions. It involves forging solidarity around a new moral identity, where folks previously thought of as “them” become part of “us” instead. The task of cultural politics falls naturally to the Left, Rorty thinks, which is, “by definition, the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved” (Rorty 1998, 14).

Agents of justice play a complementary role to agents of love; they are responsible for securing the gains made by the connoisseurs of diversity. When expansions (or contractions) of everyday, normal discourse are achieved, one of the tasks of the guardians of universality is to preserve those expansions (or contractions). Agents of justice (or guardians of universality), are responsible for ensuring that, when members of marginalized groups are recognized as suffering in particular ways that the “rest of us” haven’t seen or have ignored, then agents of justice ensure that those forms of suffering are prevented. Agents of justice include judges and courts who “tell the politicians and the voters to start noticing that there are people who have been told to wait for ever until a consensus emerges – a consensus within a political community from which these people are effectively excluded” (Rorty 1999, 98). Thus, Rorty reads court decisions as saying, for example, that “like it or not, black children are children too” (Brown) and “like it or not, women get to make hard decisions too” (Roe) and “like it or not, gays are grown-ups too” (Bowers v. Hardwick, in a future reversal) (99).

<sup>13</sup> I have written elsewhere in greater detail about how the work of agents of love proceeds. See, for example, Dieleman 2011; 2012; and especially 2017.

One of the roles of a liberal education, Rorty thinks, is to preserve the solidarity that has been achieved, and to strive to extend it as far as possible. This shouldn't be read as a return to the academic Left that Rorty criticizes in *Achieving Our Country*, but rather to an education system that helps develop the liberal virtues.<sup>14</sup> As William M. Curtis puts it, Rorty's version of moral education includes "teaching stories that show how good things can be if people are more generous, tolerant, and sensitive, and also stories about 'the pain endured by people who seem quite strange to us, the humiliation and agony they suffer when we treat them as badly as we are often tempted to treat them'" (Curtis 2015, 160). These are the narratives (rather than metanarratives) that articulate a hopeful account of what American has been and could become. These narratives are used to nudge proceeding generations of students in the direction of greater solidarity. Rorty writes, "Producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students ... in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed, *all* that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia" (Rorty 1998b, 179-180).

So, the size of our moral community – the community to which we are loyal, with which we will feel solidarity – will depend on our ability to see "others" as like "us." But notice that Rorty also mentions that the students we train must be "well-off" and "secure" in addition to being "nice" and "other-respecting." This is because Rorty thinks that the community to which we feel loyalty will vary in accordance with our economic circumstances. When things get tough – when economic circumstances are such that we are forced to choose between feeding our families and feeding strangers – the community to which one is loyal will contract. As Rorty puts it,

Our loyalty to ... larger groups will, however, weaken, or even vanish altogether, when things

get really tough. Then people whom we once thought of as like ourselves will be excluded. Sharing food with impoverished people down the street is natural and right in normal times, but perhaps not in a famine, when doing so amounts to disloyalty to one's family. The tougher things get, the more ties of loyalty to those near at hand tighten, and the more those to everyone else slacken (Rorty 2007, 42).

Rorty thinks the sorts of moral dilemmas these cases present are not dilemmas between sentiment-based loyalty and reason-based justice, but rather felt conflicts "between alternative selves, alternative self-descriptions, alternative ways of giving a meaning to one's life" (45). Do I see myself as an American first, or as a citizen of the world? Am I the type of person who prioritizes family over strangers? Are non-human animals part of my moral community, or will they always be subordinate to human members of my moral community?

One's ability to identify with a larger moral community – to see oneself as a citizen of the world rather than as just an American, for example, or to see oneself as part of a diverse metropolitan city rather than as just a community member in one's affluent suburb – depends on one's economic circumstances. To say that someone is a member of one's moral community is to see that person as a conversation-partner, as someone who shares enough of one's "final vocabulary" to make meaningful conversation with them possible. Our moral communities increase in size when the work of agents of love is successful, when the differences between "us" and "them" are rendered inconsequential, and our similarities become consequential. Moreover, solidarity with the members of our moral community entails coming to their aid when required. Following the pragmatist insight that beliefs are habits of action, Rorty contends that to hold a belief simply means that one is inclined to act in certain ways and not in others. Thus, "to believe that someone is 'one of us,' a member of our moral community, is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they are in need" (13). This is because "Moral identification is empty when it is no longer tied to habits of action" (Rorty 1996, 14).

<sup>14</sup> See also Rorty 1992, where Rorty discusses the role of the cultural Left in relation to education.



If we are unwilling to come to the aid of certain people, because they are members of a certain racial or ethnic group for example, then we would be lying if we said that group is part of our moral community, that its members are “one of us.” However – and this is a feature of Rorty’s work that has so far been overlooked – Rorty thinks that this unwillingness can be motivated by the belief that we are *unable* to help such people. That is, the moral community with which we identify depends on our ability to see generosity and sympathy as *feasible*. If we believe that such assistance is infeasible, triage is performed in the same way that nurses and doctors perform triage when there are not enough resources available to help victims of some catastrophe. If there are not enough resources – or even if we just believe that there are not enough resources – then we absolve ourselves, rightly or wrongly, from the obligation to render aid. To claim that a group is part of our moral community, but to fail to render assistance when that group requires it, renders our claim that they’re part of our moral community “empty” (Rorty 1996, 13). Rorty concludes by asserting that “thinking of other people as part of the same ‘we,’ depends not only on willingness to help those people but on belief that one is *able* to help them” (15). Thus “[A]n answer to the question ‘who are we?’ which is to have any moral significance, has to be one which takes money into account” (14).

This suggests that selfishness and sadism can work together to serve the function of “othering,” where “othering” is understood as the process of shrinking the moral community, of reducing the number of people to whom we have a moral responsibility. Solidarity is at risk when folks have to choose between looking after themselves and looking after others. Or, more accurately, solidarity is at risk when folks *believe* they have to make this choice. Thus, “selfishness,” for Rorty, can be best understood rather simply and straightforwardly as an unwillingness to help others.

For some people in America, the belief that they are unable to help others will be well-founded: the economic position they find themselves in really does

involve looking after themselves and their families because they simply do not have the means to also look after others. So sometimes, selfishness is justified given the situation that folks find themselves in. Surely it would be unreasonable to demand of those who cannot put food on their own table that they think about how they should be helping their broader community or country. And it would be wrong to hold them morally blameworthy for their failure to feel solidarity (in this more robust sense where it includes rendering aid) with a larger community. Such folks are responding in the same way any person in similar circumstances would respond, by looking after “their own” when times get tough and loyalty cannot extend beyond one’s closest communities. For others, even though they have the means to look after others as well as their own, they nonetheless believe that they do not. Indeed, a perverse outcome of a society that is characterized by vast economic inequality is that selfishness becomes seen as necessary. When there is not enough to go around, folks in the middle and upper classes look after their own: they secure a future for their own children by investing in private schools, and tutors, and elite colleges, without worrying about the educational opportunities of others. Economic inequality further entrenches selfishness, even among those who are less justified in their unwillingness to help others because they have the means to do so. Thus, Rorty’s admonishment of the American Left, I suggest, is an admonishment to think more carefully about how economic inequality threatens solidarity, and to develop concrete proposals for alleviating this economic inequality so that the unwillingness of some Americans to help others becomes unthinkable.

Of course, one might argue that Rorty gets the problem exactly backwards. That the super-rich are (usually) white men who are unwilling to come to the aid of women and people of color is no coincidence. It is not selfishness, but sadism, that has created the racial and gendered nature of economic inequality in America; women and people of color are not members of the moral community of white liberalism in America. I don’t

think Rorty would disagree, at least not entirely, with this way of seeing things. He admits that the reformist Left was shortsighted in thinking that “ending selfishness would eliminate sadism,” and that it was a valuable insight to realize that sadism has “deeper roots than economic security” (Rorty 1998a, 76). The problem with focusing on sadism comes when it ignores selfishness altogether, and when it disavows American identity as worthless. Prioritizing one way of othering – sadism or selfishness – at the expense of the other misses half the picture, and renders efforts to achieve a liberal democratic utopia less likely to meet with success. Ending sadism has been a good thing for America, and the fight against sadism has brought us closer to achieving our country. But Rorty worries that the project of creating an American moral community – a community that “can plausibly and without qualification identify itself as ‘we, the people of the United States’” – is a project that “is losing ground” because “the gap between rich and poor Americans is widening steadily, and the latter are increasingly bereft of hope for their children’s future” (Rorty 1996, 11).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rorty writes, “We all want to facilitate alliances between the victims of the Republicans’ soak-the-poor legislation and people who are stigmatised, or deprived, for reasons other than poverty. The two groups overlap, but are not identical, and the Republicans are getting good at playing them off against each other” (Rorty 2000, 18). In *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*, Rorty echoes this view, writing, “My feeling is that there’s be a tacit collaboration between right and left in changing the subject from money to culture. If I were the Republican oligarchy, I would want a left which spent all its time thinking about group identity, rather than about wages and hours” (Rorty, Nystrom, and Puckett 2000, 32).

This idea that the Republicans are good at playing poor white people off against groups marginalized for other reasons is echoed in a recent *Atlantic* piece by Joan C. Williams. That piece opens with a quote from Steve Bannon, President Trump’s former strategist, from an interview with *Prospect Magazine*, where he says: “The Democrats, the longer they talk about identity politics, I got ‘em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats” (Kuttner 2017). Williams suggests that many of Trump’s “carefully timed injections of racism” were aimed at the Left, “in an effort to keep liberals’ attention

Of course, just because the well-off have the means to render aid to more people, and therefore have less of an excuse for being selfish, this doesn’t mean they *will* render aid. Ought implies can, but it does not imply will. Having money is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, for enlarging one’s moral community. This means that the American Left has to fight selfishness – fight the inclination among some Americans to be unwilling to offer help – for multiple reasons and on multiple fronts. The challenge for the Left is to make the belief that one is unable to help others unbelievable. For some, this will involve changing the economic circumstances they find themselves in so that they are not forced into a position where they have to choose between their families and strangers. For others, this will involve regulating behavior through law and policy. In both cases, these changes are the sorts of changes we pursue when we engage in class politics. They will likely involve all the usual sorts of measures Leftist thinkers and activists typically advocate, such as strengthening unions and ending precarious labor, alleviating student debt, strengthening the social safety net, universal health care, regulating big business, and introducing tax schemes that help the poor rather than the rich. At the same time, of course, it will also involve cultural politics so that identity-based stigmas do not impose arbitrary limits on who is counted as part of the moral community and thus is deserving of help.

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focused on race rather than class. If Democrats were to focus more attention on economic issues, they just might be able to win back the non-elite white voters they’ve been bleeding for half a century. People like Bannon seem to realize this” (Williams 2018).

Nancy Fraser also remarks on the tendency of the Left to fall into the trap of pitting race against class. She writes, “Some resisters [to Trump’s presidency] are proposing to reorient Democratic Party politics around opposition to white supremacy, focusing efforts on winning support from blacks and Latinos. Others defend a class-centered strategy, aimed at winning back white working-class communities that defected to Trump. Both views are problematic to the extent that they treat attention to class and race as inherently antithetical, a zero-sum game. In reality, both of those axes of injustice can be attacked in tandem, as indeed they must be. Neither can be overcome while the other flourishes” (Fraser 2017, n.p.).

The importance of economic security for achieving solidarity helps explain why Rorty finds globalization such a vexing topic: it puts pressures on the ability of any nation to achieve the liberal utopia his heroes, like Whitman and Dewey, envisioned. Solidarity depends on economic security, but economic security is such that we (Western liberals) have to make a choice about the community to which we are loyal. In "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," for example, he writes,

Consider now the plausible hypothesis that democratic institutions and freedoms are viable only when supported by an economic affluence that is achievable regionally but impossible globally. If this hypothesis is correct, democracy and freedom in the First World will not be able to survive a thoroughgoing globalization of the labor market. So the rich democracies face a choice between perpetuating their own democratic institutions and traditions and dealing justly with the Third World (Rorty 2007, 43).

If the task of liberalism to extend beyond the nation to a global polity is to be achieved, then globalization presents a very real challenge. Rorty asks,

Do you save the working classes of the advanced old democracies by protectionism, or do you give up protectionism for the sake of the Third World? Do you try to keep the standard of living in the old democracies up in order to prevent a right-wing populist, fascist movement in the USA, or do you try to re-distribute the wealth across national borders? You probably can't do both. I wish I knew how to resolve the dilemma, but I don't" (Rorty 2002, 39-40).

Though Rorty thinks that appealing to "humanity as such" to ground justice is wrongheaded because it aims to identify what is essential about human beings that creates moral obligation, he nonetheless aims to weave solidarity out of the recognition of many, small similarities, and these similarities will not be limited to national borders. Rather, recognizing what we have in common with others pushes us toward a cosmopolitan moral outlook.

The difficulty arises when a cosmopolitan moral outlook cannot be economically supported – or, if it can

be economically supported, it currently is unclear how that might look. As Rorty notes, it's a risky business to focus on the forms of suffering experienced outside national borders. Part of the problem is that the cultural Left, in recent decades, has been "more interested in the workers of the developing world than in the fate of our fellow citizens" (Rorty 1998a, 89). The resulting economic insecurity experienced by a large number of Americans led them to support someone promised to protect their economic interests. This is Rorty's "strongman" that received so much press attention after the 2016 American election. This is why the Left must engage in both cultural politics and class politics; they must work to end both sadism and selfishness. When selfishness is ignored, the size of the moral community contracts, and it is no surprise that sadism again rears its ugly head.

### III. Conclusion: On Redistribution and Recognition

This reading of Rorty, where sadism and selfishness are interlocking forces that put solidarity at risk, blunts the edges of one of the disagreements between Rorty and Nancy Fraser, who typically is one of his more insightful interlocutors. This disagreement is part of a larger debate about redistribution and recognition – two mutually exclusive alternative understandings of the nature of and remedies for injustice – where Rorty sees Fraser as taking up the "recognition" side of the debate, and Fraser sees Rorty as taking up the "redistribution" side of the debate. As noted above, Rorty finds Fraser's emphasis on "cultural recognition" to be misguided because he thinks she is trying to offer a new sort of politics – one that sees political value in emphasizing difference – where all he sees it doing is fleshing out the details of a less sadistic liberal democracy. For her part, Fraser worries that Rorty places too much emphasis on selfishness and not enough on sadism (to use Rorty's terms), or too much emphasis on redistribution over recognition (to use Fraser's terms). According to Fraser, Rorty – especially in *Achieving Our*

*Country* and “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Notion for Leftist Politics?” – takes up the redistribution side of the debate: he “insist[s] that identity politics is a counter-productive diversion from the real economic issues, one that balkanizes groups and rejects universalist moral norms” (Fraser 2003, 15).<sup>16</sup> She argues that, for Rorty, “the sole proper object of political struggle is the economy” (15).<sup>17</sup>

It’s clear that neither Rorty’s characterization of Fraser’s position, nor Fraser’s characterization of Rorty’s position, is quite accurate. I hope I have shown in the preceding sections that Rorty’s account challenges the American Left to consider both maldistribution (arising out of selfishness) and misrecognition (arising out of sadism). Political struggle, for Rorty, involves both class politics and cultural politics. Similarly, Fraser thinks that the opposition between redistribution and recognition is a “false antithesis” and that subordinated groups regularly suffer both maldistribution and misrecognition. Thus, her goal, in “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation,” is to develop “an integrated approach that can encompass, and harmonize, both dimensions of social justice” (Fraser 2003, 26). In other words, any adequate theory of justice, as well as remedies for injustice, will be two-dimensional because they require attending to both redistribution and recognition.<sup>18</sup> I also want to suggest that Fraser’s recent

work commenting on American politics lays bare a number of similarities between her own work and Rorty’s.

In a 2017 piece for *American Affairs* entitled “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond,” Fraser borrows Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” to understand today’s “widespread rejection of politics as usual” (Fraser 2017, n.p.). All hegemonies, she claims, are constructed out of two essential normative components: distribution and recognition. Through the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American voters were forced to choose between two prevailing, opposed hegemonic blocs that were similar in terms of distribution, but differed in terms of recognition. Democratic Party politics represented a neoliberal politics of distribution and a progressive politics of recognition, whereas Republican Party politics represented a neoliberal politics of distribution and a reactionary politics of recognition (see table below). While voters could choose between a progressive and a reactionary form of neoliberalism, they were stuck with neoliberalism either way, and this neoliberalism left a “gap in the American political universe” because there was “no force to oppose the decimation of working-class and middle-class standards of living” (Fraser 2017, n.p.). Republican neoliberalism and Democratic neoliberalism left working-class people without a political voice, thereby leaving a gap in the prevailing hegemony that a counterhegemony – one that gave a political voice to working-class people – could occupy.

While the election of Barack Obama and the Occupy Wall Street movement presented two opportunities to fill this hegemonic gap, it wasn’t until Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump faced off in the 2015/2016 campaign that

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<sup>16</sup> According to Fraser, others who take up the redistributionist side of the debate include Brian Barry and Todd Gitlin. See Fraser 2003, 15.

<sup>17</sup> She places thinkers like Iris Marion Young on the other side of the debate, as proponents of recognition over redistribution.

<sup>18</sup> In the 1995 paper Rorty cites when he expresses confusion about “cultural recognition,” Fraser suggests that the remedy for cultural injustice “could involve upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups. It could also involve recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity. More radically still, it could involve the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change *everybody’s* sense of self” (Fraser 1995, 73; emphasis in original). However, in later work on the same topic, Fraser argues that whether

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justice requires recognizing what is *distinctive* about individuals or groups, or whether it requires recognizing our *common humanity*, is something that can only be determined pragmatically (Fraser 1996; Fraser 2003). She writes, “everything depends on precisely what currently misrecognized people need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life” (Fraser 2003, 47). It’s not clear what motivates this change in her approach, but it’s clear that the latter is more amenable to Rorty’s own position.

viable populist options, which gave a political voice to the working class, were presented. One option embraced a progressive politics of recognition and the other option a reactionary politics of recognition (see table below).

		DISTRIBUTIVE ELEMENT	
		NEOLIBERAL	POPULIST
RECOGNITION ELEMENT	PROGRESSIVE	<i>progressive neoliberalism (Democratic Party)</i>	<i>progressive populism (Sanders)</i>
	REACTIONARY	<i>reactionary neoliberalism (Republican Party)</i>	<i>reactionary populism (candidate Trump)</i>

After winning the election, Fraser notes, Trump abandoned his populist politics of distribution in favor of a neoliberal politics of distribution, and doubled down on his reactionary politics of recognition. As a result, Trump’s presidency represents a hyper-reactionary neoliberalism that is “chaotic, unstable, and fragile,” leaving the working class still without a political voice as the working class (Fraser, 2017, n.p.). Of course, this bears a remarkable similarity to Rorty’s prediction that the strongman elected as a result of American dissatisfaction with their economic situation would bring sadism back into style, but would do little to “alter the effects of selfishness” after making peace with the international super-rich (Rorty 1998a, 90-91).

Moreover, Fraser, like Rorty, claims that the economic inequality and insecurity created by a neoliberal politics of distribution leads to a breakdown in solidarity. She suggests that when working-class people are denied a political voice, when they are subject to a neoliberal politics of distribution that ignores and exploits their needs, they are condemned to “mounting stress and declining health, to ballooning debt and overwork, to class apartheid and social insecurity” (Fraser 2017, n.p.). These problems – problems that result from economic insecurity – are expressed in various symptoms, including “in

hatreds born of resentment and expressed in scapegoating, in outbreaks of violence followed by bouts of repression, in a vicious dog-eat-dog world where *solidarities contract to the vanishing point*” (Fraser 2017, n.p.; emphasis added). In short, the failure to address the economic insecurity that is produced by a neoliberal politics of distribution will continue to result in failures of solidarity. Economic insecurity breeds selfishness and selfishness breeds sadism. Thus, for both Fraser and Rorty, the American Left must address both class politics and cultural politics. In recent decades, the former has received greater attention than the latter, leading to failures of both distribution (manifesting in an increase of selfishness) and recognition (manifesting in an increase of sadism). It’s time for the American Left to seek a balance between class politics and cultural politics, so that a hoped-for America can seem both worthwhile and feasible.

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