Agents, Spectators, and Social Hope

Richard Rorty and American Intellectuals

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Rorty wrote his *Achieving Our Country* as a philosopher, intellectual, academic and citizen, and each of these perspectives lead to a different emphasis in reading his book, and to a different story (and 'storytelling' is one of the themes of the book). The emergent pictures vary: the philosopher tells a story of the growing isolation and cultural sterility of analytic philosophy in the United States of America after the Second World War; the intellectual tells a story of the political bareness and practical uselessness of (the majority of) American leftist intellectuals in the context of the emerging new global order at the turn of the 21st century; the academic tells the story about humanities' departments at American universities, especially departments of literature and cultural studies, and their students, and contrasts their possible future fate with the past fate of departments of analytical philosophy and their students; and, finally, the citizen tells a story about the nationhood, politics, patriotism, reformism (as well as the inherent dangers and opportunities of globalization). Rorty plays the four descriptions off against one another perfectly and *Achieving Our Country* represents him at his very best: Rorty is passionate, inspiring, uncompromising, biting and very relevant to current public debates. Owing to the intelligent combination of the above perspectives, the clarity and elegance of his prose, and (although not revealed directly) the wide philosophical background provided by his new pragmatism, the book differs from a dozen others written in the 1990s about the American academy and American intellectuals. It also sheds new and interesting light on Rorty's pragmatism, providing an excellent example of the application of his philosophical views. One has to note that, generally, it is almost impossible to think of any piece written by Rorty outside of the context of his philosophy, and *Achieving Our Country* is no exception to this rule.

There are a number of themes on which I want to focus my attention in the present paper. Most of them are interrelated, some are political and economic, some academic, and many merely philosoph-

ical. They include: the issue of patriotism, global citizenship and what I would call 'parallel' national/regional/global loyalties in the context of Rorty's view of loyalty to America as a nation state; the theme of 'telling stories', both in philosophy, history, and politics, by philosophers, intellectuals, historians, artists and novelists; the extremely harsh criticism of what he calls the 'cultural Left' or 'academic Left' in the context of his philosophical disagreement with postmodern French philosophy (especially with Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard) from which the American Left's overall intellectual strategies originated and which Rorty has discussed on many occasions in the past; the theme of social 'hope' (and optimism) as opposed to 'knowledge' (and pessimism) in the context of Rorty's romantic and heroic version of pragmatism; the issue of 'real politics' opposed to 'cultural politics' on the part of the academic Left in the context of the roles and tasks of the institution of the university, in modernity, and, increasingly in the global age; Rorty's resistance to 'theory' and scientific methods, both in philosophy and in political leftist reformism; and, finally, the transformations about to be brought by globalization to the functioning of the academic community and Rorty's view of the process. I find these themes crucial for understanding Rorty's sense of the public sphere today.

From a (specifically postmodern) French perspective, these issues could be seen as partly obsolete. And Rorty could be seen as a traditional metaphysician engaged in outdated, modern questions that should have been rejected as uninteresting a long time ago. In this context, let us merely think about the country and patriotism, the citizen and his/her national loyalty, the figure of the intellectual and his/her social responsibilities, as well as about the reformulation of Sartrean 'engagement' in the form of the opposition between 'agents' and 'spectators' of the public arena (or about, in very harsh terms, the Left's 'disengagement from practice [that] produces theoretical hallucinations' (Rorty 1998a: 94). In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty is in the midst of current public concerns – again, as a philosopher, intellectual, academic and citizen. I find that multi-faceted side of Rorty is very interesting and highly provocative – to philosophers, intellectuals, academics and citizens alike. He constantly reaches for new audiences and appears to be inspiring to new readers; that is partly where his genius comes from (see Hall 1994). The academic Left in Rorty's view is generally publicly and politically irrelevant in any direct way. Rorty's pragmatism and its applications contained in the book, on the other hand, are certainly not.

1

When reading *Achieving Our Country*, it is important to bear in mind that Rorty is American. Therefore, his view of the Left, of the intellectual, of the nation-state, patriotism, cosmopolitanism and globalization must be seen in this particular American context (the most obvious counter-example would be, in most general terms, peculiarly 'French' perceptions of all the above). I am in agreement with Rorty when, in the opening paragraph of the book, he says that '[e]motional involvement with one's country – feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of its history, and by various present-day national policies – is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive' (Rorty 1998a: 3). However, I would also be inclined to supplement the involvement to which Rorty refers with other involvements he rarely mentions: the emotional involvement with one's smaller or bigger region (for example, with Europe), or with the planet, which still sounds awkward, but for some people is increasingly important in describing their emotional identities and loyalties. Rorty's approach to America raises issues of parallel loyalties and parallel emotional involvement: global loyalties (and global concerns) are the best examples here.

The problem is how to balance parallel loyalties in a time of the (relative) decline of the nation state and its confrontation with new supranational and regional, political and economic entities. America, with its strong patriotic feelings, national consciousness and national pride, especially following 11 September 2001, is one of the world's few counter-examples to the general trends. Europe, on the contrary, is in the process of a deep-reaching social, political and economic integration. What counts to many in terms of their emotions and loyalties, are certainly their national 'countries', but also their 'regions', or their 'Europe', or, finally, their 'planet'. In other words, what is increasingly visible to many, with the advent of globalization and its technological and communication revolutions, is the global dimension. So the questions are: what does 'global citizenship' mean, both in the world and in the United States? What is the sense of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'patriotism' today? What is global democracy and global awareness among citizens of nation-states (see Held et al. 1999)? Rorty's book is clearly about America, and it is obviously not a good place to look for discussion of the above issues.

Without getting into too much detail at this point, I would suggest that Rorty, in his explicitly 'American' book, is somehow stuck (and

rightly so) in the perspective of (Ulrich Beck's) 'first modernity' and he clearly underestimates the 'second modernity', i.e., he remains attached to the national rather than post-national framework of thinking.

It was Zygmunt Bauman who was the first to formulate the following advice (and he clearly had in mind sociologists when suggesting a 'sociology of postmodernity' rather than 'postmodern sociology'): 'the model of postmodernity, unlike the models of modernity, cannot be grounded in the realities of the nation state, by now clearly not a framework large enough to accommodate the decisive factors in the conduct of interaction and the dynamics of social life' (Bauman 1992: 65). Rorty's preoccupation with the American nation, patriotism, and the country clearly shows his public preferences: the United States in its local contexts (although he understands the global context very well and is simply not developing this aspect much further beyond his sketchy discussions about globalization). America is a special place and a special nation. More importantly though, it plays a special role in the theories and practices of globalization (Scholte 2000). Rorty tells us a different story – an important story, but still parallel to other possible stories grounded in new, possibly 'second', 'post-national', 'cosmopolitan' accounts of America, its Left and its intellectuals. It would be interesting to see how the told and untold (national and post-national) stories interrelate.

To sum up, it would be useless to look in Rorty for a perspective that would not be American, and especially for a global perspective. However, this is not surprising if we take into consideration his numerous declarations of the cultural and geographical determination of his new pragmatism and his frequent references, from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onwards, to 'us relatively leisured intellectuals, inhabiting a stable and prosperous part of the world', i.e., to American academics (Rorty 1980: 359).

2

Whenever Rorty, in many of his books and papers, uses the term 'intellectual' in all its ambivalence (of which he is perfectly aware) with respect to America, a feeling surfaces that the term does not fit his American usage. However, there is no other term of similar calibre in English. 'The intellectual' was born in Continental France a hundred years ago and what immediately comes to mind is the Zola-

to-Sartre (and perhaps to the 'middle' Foucault) sequence of generally leftist thinkers, writers, artists and academics (Reader 1987, Stoekl 1992). The word carries with it images of protests, rallies, declarations, marches, riots and petitions (see Sirinelli 1990). The intellectual, as Sartre put it in a memorable formula, is 'someone who meddles in what is not his business and claims to question both received truths and the accepted behavior inspired by them, in the name of a global conception of man and of society' (Sartre 1974: 230). This is also echoed in Edward Said's conception of the intellectual as 'disturber of the status quo' (Said 1994: x). In the past two decades, Rorty has repeatedly mentioned that the last American intellectual was Dewey. The word itself is unpopular, often sounds awkward and sometimes offensive (as Allan Stoekl put it in his *Agonies of the Intellectual)*: '[b]ut have we ever had a Zola, a Sartre, even a Foucault – let alone a Heidegger?' (Stoekl 1992: 2). It is very difficult to discuss the future of the Left in the context of modern intellectuals as their age may already have ended (in a modern and Continental sense of the term and in Continental francophone postmodern philosophy). At the same time, there is no other word to substitute for the one Rorty uses, either in Europe or in the United States.

The authority of the modern intellectual was founded upon the idea of history that is developing toward its 'natural' end – toward the emancipation of humanity from 'poverty, ignorance, superstition and lack of entertainment' (Lyotard 1988: 302). The intellectual was listened to as a 'spokesman of universality', a 'conscience of us all', says Foucault in turn (Foucault 1980: 126). Or, as Rorty puts it in a different way, philosophy since the times of the Enlightenment became for the intellectual a substitute for religion, became that part of culture in which one 'would find the vocabulary and the convictions which permitted one to explain and justify one's activity as an intellectual, and thus to discover the significance of one's life' (Rorty 1980: 4).

An intellectual par excellence was a writer speaking from the position of man, humanity, nation, proletariat etc.; describing and analyzing the current situation from the point of view of the above-mentioned entities, identifying himself with a subject endowed with a universal value and, in the name of it, advising what people should do in order for the progress to last. 'Responsibility of an intellectual is inseparable from a (shared) idea of a universal subject' (Lyotard 1984: 12). But that *idée d'un sujet universel*, just like the idea of unquestionable universality, belongs to the times from Zola to Sartre,

at least in France (see Ory 1990, Ory & Sirinelli 1986). These are the times of modern commitment legitimated by the metanarrative of emancipation (a part of a cultural 'project of modernity') that may already be over. What is perhaps the case is that the cultural fertility of a certain historical proposal has been exhausted, and thus the role of an intellectual legitimated within that project, and by that proposal, may have collapsed.

Rorty is very concrete in his thinking about 'intellectuals' – he generally speaks of the American intellectual of the end of the twentieth century as one who works at the university. On the other hand, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault write about the intellectual 'in general', basically by abstracting from the national situation in England, France or anywhere else (see Kwiek 1998b, 1997). Although Rorty often reminds us about the different situation of the intellectual in different countries, he clearly restricts his reflections to the American intellectual, both in his earlier writings and, certainly, as emphasized by the very subtitle – 'Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America' – in *Achieving Our Country*. He is very consistent about this in the book – a story about the American intellectual today seen in the context of his/her intellectual and political transformation in the twentieth century, as if a contemporary version of Julien Benda's 'betrayal of the intellectual'.

3

We come now to the issue of modern thought, postmodern thought, and the global age. The question is to what extent even postmodern thought (post-Nietzschean, non-foundational, postmetaphysical, interpretive rather than legislative etc., referring to various sets of descriptions by various thinkers) must take into account recent social, cultural (and economic) changes brought about by globalization? What does globalization mean for the new pragmatism in this particular case? What is philosophically – from the pragmatist's point of view – more significant to the society or to the state (with some notable geographical exceptions): the demise of the cultural and philosophical project of modernity, or the dawn of the global age, with its hardly acceptable but omnipresent priority of economy and market, to democracy and the state (which is Rorty's 'money' perspective, mentioned several times in *Achieving Our Country* as the one totally absent among the academic Left)? Sociology keeps

trying to develop its new post-national 'framework of reference' with the works of Giddens, Bauman and Beck who are afraid of their discipline becoming obsolete and irrelevant in an increasingly postnational and globalizing world. What about philosophy? What can Rorty's new pragmatism do vis-a-vis the social and human challenges of globalization?

These are very serious challenges, but it was Rorty who suggested that some questions die with their epochs, and it is uninteresting to ask others when a new epoch is just round the corner. The questions of democracy, to give an example, seem to require a brand new context today, perhaps a brand new language on the part of social sciences (the best arguments in favour of it were provided recently by Ulrich Beck, and David Held with his collaborators).

Rorty's excellently pessimistic contemplation of the world of globalization testifies to his understanding that quite soon some problems raised in *Achieving Our Country* may indeed become obsolete. It is very hard to align his explicit pessimism about future developments in society and the economy related to globalization processes with the 'hopeful' and 'future-oriented' brand of philosophizing presented thus far. (The pragmatist theme of 'hope', Rorty's trademark, will be discussed separately in more detail below). Somehow Rorty's 'possible world', reminiscent of Orwell's *1984* and seen as a potentiality of globalization (and developed not so much as a 'possible world' anymore in inter alia 'Globalization, the Politics of Identity, and Social Hope' from his recent *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999)) is as gloomy as Foucault's studies of the omnipresence and omnipotence of power from the 1970s. It is useful to give an example of Rorty's perception of the dark side of globalization here (with which I am, I must hasten to add, in full agreement):

> Globalization is producing a world economy in which an attempt by any one country to prevent the immiserization of its workers may result only in depriving them of employment. The world economy will soon be owned by a cosmopolitan upper class which has no more sense of community with any workers anywhere than the great American capitalists of the year 1900 had with the immigrants who manned their enterprises … This frightening economic cosmopolitanism has, as a by-product, an agreeable cultural cosmopolitanism … If the formation of hereditary castes continues unimpeded, and if the pressures of globalization create such castes not only in the United States but in all the old democracies, we shall end up in an Orwellian world … The aim will be to keep the minds of the proles elsewhere – to keep the bottom 75 per cent of Amer-

> icans and the bottom 95 per cent of the world's population busy with ethnic and religious hostilities, and with debates about sexual mores. (Rorty 1998a: 85-88)

It is interesting to note the consistently philosophical dimension of Rorty's suggestion to American intellectuals to 'tell inspiring stories' in the opening paragraphs of *Achieving Our Country*:

> Those who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. *They must tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past* – episodes and figures to which the country should remain true. Nations rely on artists and intellectuals to create images of, and to tell stories about, the national past. Competition for political leadership is in part a *competition between differing stories* about a nation's self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness. (1998a: 3-4, emphases mine)

'Telling stories' is exactly what (pragmatist) philosophers should do. As Rorty explains in 'Texts and Lumps' (reprinted in *Philosophical Papers,* Volume 1), 'the pragmatist philosopher *has a story to tell about his favourite, and least favoured, books* – the texts of, for example, Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Dewey and Russell. He would like other people to have stories to tell about other sequences of texts, other genres – stories which fit together with his' (Rorty 1991: 81, emphasis mine).

'Telling stories' is one of the strongest and most visible themes in Rorty's philosophical writings generally. It marks his passage from (grand) theories to narratives, from telling the truth to maintaining the conversation of humankind, present already in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and criticized strongly ever since. However, there is a crucial difference between telling stories about past philosophers and their books and telling (inspiring) stories about a nation's past: philosophers write about past books, intellectuals *qua* intellectuals write about past events. Both do so while thinking about the future. But the competition between them in both philosophy and in public life is similar, and here comes another set of Rortyan themes: that of persuasion, rhetoric and pragmatic effectiveness (Kwiek 1996). The most persuasive stories about past philosophy win (and hence our changing view of what counts and what does not count, or what is still useful and what is dead, and who our intellectual predecessors are in philosophy and who are not – all of which form our very personal philosophical

identity, as do, apparently, the most persuasive accounts of our national pasts). Just as 'interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis' and usually it is a 'contest' (Rorty 1989: 9) between an old and a new vocabulary (vision, metaphor, utopia), so public life should be a competition of 'differing stories' about a nation's past, leading to the inspirational belief in its future.

Rorty presents in his writings a very clear 'division of labour' between philosophers on the one hand, and artists, novelists and intellectuals on the other. Increasingly, in Rorty's account, ironist philosophy becomes publicly useless at best, dangerous at worst; it becomes 'more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task' (Rorty 1989: 94). On the other hand, to achieve more human solidarity and less human suffering, it is ethnography, journalism, the movie, and, especially, the novel that are more useful than 'the sermon and the treatise' (Rorty 1989: xvi), i.e., more useful than traditional theology and philosophy. Surprisingly enough, artists and novelists in Rorty are located on the public side of life (and that of solidarity), while philosophers, especially ironists opposed to metaphysicians, are located on the private side (and that of self-creation). What actually leads in Rorty to moral change and human progress is the novel rather than philosophy (see Kwiek 1998b).

One of the serious mistakes of the followers of postmodern French philosophy in America (from whom the members of the academic Left predominantly recruit themselves) be it (some) admirers of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan or, finally, Paul de Man, is the belief that philosophy can be applied directly to politics. The crucial passage (from Rorty's 'Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?') draws an important distinction between a 'private writer' and a 'writer with a public mission':

> The quarrel about whether Derrida has arguments thus gets linked to a quarrel about whether he is *a private writer* – writing for the delight of us insiders who share his background, who find the same rather esoteric things as funny or beautiful or moving as he does – or rather *a writer with a public mission*, someone who gives us weapons with which to subvert 'institutionalized knowledge' and thus social institutions. (Rorty 1991a: 120, emphases mine)

Philosophers with 'a public mission' are dangerous, and politics is not exactly attacking social institutions from the inside of the academy with (theoretical) 'weapons' provided by deconstructionism, feminism, or Foucauldianism in their various manifestations.

Rorty's criticism of the academic Left and academic politics did not start with *Achieving Our Country.* It goes back (at least) as far as 1989 when he delivered the Romanell Lectures at the University of Virginia (reprinted as 'De Man and the Academic Cultural Left' in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*), as well as to his 'Two Cheers for the Cultural Left' and his entry about 'Deconstruction' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* in the mid-1990s. It is crucial to see Rorty's criticism in *Achieving Our Country* in the context provided by his earlier philosophical writings about the academic Left and his pragmatic criticism of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and De Man. Otherwise it is relatively easy to misunderstand the philosophical motives behind his harsh criticism. Let me recall just a few ideas from 'De Man and the American Cultural Left', already expressed in 1989:

> The American Cultural Left, however, influenced by Foucault as well as De Man, sees the contemporary democratic states, including our own, as either imperialist powers or disciplinary societies or both … Just as the Marxists in the 1930s thought of Dewey as 'the philosopher of American imperialism', so the contemporary Cultural Left views us pragmatists as at best socially irresponsible and at worst apologists for a repressive ideology. (Rorty 1991a: 133)

The cultural Left in that older description, much intensified in *Achieving Our Country* a decade later, wants the 'special talents and competencies' (of philosophers, historians or literary critics) 'to be directly applicable to political purposes', wants its specialized skills to be 'politically relevant' (Rorty 1991a: 133). Or in still another description, the academic Left, as does Hillis Miller, 'takes both literature and philosophy far too seriously' (Rorty 1991a: 136). If, for reading *Achieving Our Country,* we needed Rorty's single previous para-definition of the 'cultural Left', it would be (following Henry Gates) a '"Rainbow Coalition" of deconstructionists, feminists, people working in gay and ethnic studies, and so on. Members of the cultural Left typically believe that we have recently acquired a radically new understanding of the nature of language and of literature' and they are deploying 'new philosophic-literary weapons' to 'reinvigorate leftist social criticism' (Rorty 1991a: 129). Foucault, Derrida and De Man play, for today's radicals of the Left, the role that Marx, Lenin and Trotsky played fifty years ago, in Rorty's description in 'Deconstruction'. At the same time Rorty is well aware that deconstructionist literary criticism is merely one of the symptoms of a much deeper change of, and distrust towards, the self-image of the Western intellectual.

That is the picture of the academic Left that reappears in many of Rorty's texts from the 1990s onwards, and it is crucial to understand this context while reading Rorty's bashing of the Left in his book on intellectuals. Rorty's academic Left in more philosophical terms is represented by those who took melancholic and pessimistic postmodern French philosophy (combined with Nietzsche in French interpretations of Deleuze, Klossowski or Derrida) 'far too seriously' and who believed they had found a 'method' for reading the social fabric that was subversive, revolutionary and, primarily, 'scientific'. Rorty, on the other hand, is optimistic, future-oriented, reformist and clearly 'methodophobic' (against theory, against method, giving priority to democracy above philosophy; priority to literary culture above philosophical and scientific culture). At the same time the academic Left represents for Rorty an 'unfortunate regression to the Marxist obsession with scientific rigour' (Rorty 1998a: 37).

Thus there are serious philosophical reasons, apart from clearly public and political ones, why Rorty cannot agree with the academic Left: the distrust of a scientific method, an ironic stance towards the public; the sharing of 'hope' as opposed to gaining access to 'knowledge' and, at the forefront, a disbelief in the usefulness of 'theory' in solving social problems and advancing revolutions.

4

Let us recall now the serious charges leveled against the Left in *Achieving Our Country* and discuss them in more detail. Firstly, the difference between the current academic Left (with the reservations outlined above about the scope of the term used) and the Left of the 1930s is that between 'agents' and 'spectators'.

Paradoxically enough, Rorty seems to agree with the diagnosis provided by Allan Bloom in his *Closing of the American Mind* that 'the spirit of detached spectatorship … may already have entered such a student's soul' (Rorty 1998a: 9, 11). Incidentally, for both it is Nietzsche who is to be held responsible for the degeneration of the American academy (Bloom's story was distinctly about 'how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students' (Bloom: 1988)). Because the current academic Left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it therefore 'ceases to be a Left' (Rorty 1998a: 14). Furthermore, it has 'no projects to propose' and 'no vision of a country to be achieved' (15). It is a 'spectatorial,

disgusted, mocking Left' (35). It prefers to 'theorize' (36) and to have 'knowledge' rather than to share 'hope' (36). It represents 'a retreat from practice to theory' (37) and lacks 'national pride' (38).

Rorty uses formulations that go to the very heart of the disciplines the Left especially likes to cultivate, the books it tends to write, the lessons it tends to teach its students, and to the heart of its current public status. The formulations are devastating and it is certainly hard to forget the most biting of them, especially for those who have not yet realized the depth of the dividing line between French postmodern philosophy in its various versions (and in different American appropriations) and Rorty's new pragmatism (see Kwiek 1996). Rorty uses the power of his rhetoric to denounce publicly the cultural pessimism of the Left in sentences like 'hopelessness has become fashionable in the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness' (Rorty 1998a: 37), or to denounce its social utility when he states that 'it exaggerates the importance of philosophy to politics, and wastes its energy on sophisticated theoretical analyses of the significance of current events' (37), which reminds us of Vincent Descombes' criticism of contemporary French thought in his reflections on 'philosophy of current events', as well as Rorty's leading theme of the 'priority of democracy to philosophy'.

The Left in Rorty's view provides no clues for reading the world, and for passing from theory to practice. As he put it in a memorable criticism of Frederick Jameson: '[A]fter reading Jameson, you have views on practically everything except what needs to be done' (Rorty 1998a: 78). The thinking of the Left is too abstract, 'too high to encourage any particular political initiative' (78). Not only do Leftist scholars produce 'many thousands of books which present scholastic philosophizing at its worst' but they also offer 'the most abstract and barren explanations imaginable' (93). Finally, their 'spectatorial approach' to the problems of the country and its 'disengagement from practice' produces 'theoretical hallucinations' (94). These are harsh words indeed, clearly resulting from Rorty's public passion and backed by philosophical assumptions of his new pragmatism.

The academic Left, in Rorty's reading, retreats from secularism and revives ineffability. 'We are told over and over again that Lacan has shown human desire to be inherently unsatisfiable, that Derrida has shown meaning to be undecidable, that Lyotard has shown commensuration between oppressed and oppressors to be impossible and that events such as the Holocaust or the massacre of the original Americans are unrepresentable' (36-37). At the same time the Left is

unable to 'engage in national politics'. If globalization is the single most important social challenge to America at the turn of the century, Rorty's denouncement of the Left as having nothing to say about it sounds like a serious charge. There is admittedly a challenge, but 'it is not the sort of Left which can be asked to deal with the consequences of globalization' (91).

One line of criticism about Rorty's account of globalization and its effects concerns his optimistic belief that 'we intellectuals, who are mostly academics, are ourselves quite well insulated, at least in the short run, from the effects of globalization' (Rorty 1998a: 89). I cannot agree with Rorty here. This paper is not an appropriate forum in which to develop the theme of 'the university and globalization' but it is certainly true that the world of economy and of the market is knocking at what have thus far been the closed doors of the academy (see Kwiek 2003, 2001b). The literature about market forces invading the university, 'the entrepreneurial university', 'academic capitalism', 'leasing the ivory tower', as well as about the end of collegiality, the introduction of economic rationality and corporate governance in higher education, threats to academic freedom and increasing market orientation abound worldwide. The countries affected most strongly are, for example, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, as well as those countries, mainly in Latin America, which are reforming their higher education systems under the influence of the World Bank. It is a crucial topic in thinking about intellectuals if intellectuals, as Rorty rightly claims in the case of America, are mostly academics. The transformations pertaining to academics pertain at the same time to intellectuals – and it is not a cultural-philosophical version of French theorists (the collapse of the figure of the intellectual associated with the end of modernity as a cultural project, the end of the Enlightenment ideals of the power/knowledge etc.), but a very practical version described by numerous anglophone sociologists and higher education scholars in recent decades (see Kwiek 2001a).

5

Rorty's hotly debated proposal to 'put a moratorium on theory' (1998a: 91) is hardly surprising in the context of his new pragmatism. It is fully understandable in the case of the philosopher for whom it is clear that America does not need further political revolutions, but merely small steps in the spirit of reformism. The theory of social

democracy is not needed for reforms in laws or regulations or for step-by-step piecemeal changes. Big theories are useful for major political revolutions but do not seem to come in handy in small revisions of what is already achieved. Additionally, it is also useful to see the proposal in a strictly American sense where 'theory' (in academic circles) simply means any French-inspired postmodern way of thinking (as in a once famous collection of essays, *Against Theory,* or in Paul de Man's *Resistance to Theory*). It would be tempting to limit Rorty's proposal to 'postmodern theory' but clearly it is wider and concerns abstract social theorizing instead of concrete engagement for a particular cause on the part of the academic Left.

The academic Left seems to play the tunes of scholarship and citizenship at the same time: those of professors of prestigious universities and those of devastating critics of the system and unmaskers of its dirty political tricks. For them 'reformism is not good enough' (Rorty 1998a: 78), but at the same time they have nothing to say about an alternative system. As Rorty puts it:

> '[T]he system' is sometimes identified as 'late capitalism', but the cultural Left does not think much about what the alternatives to a market economy might be, or about how to combine political freedom with centralized economic decision making. Nor does it spend time asking whether Americans are undertaxed, or how much of a welfare state the country can afford, or whether the United States should back out of the North American Free Trade Agreement. When the Right proclaims that socialism has failed, and that capitalism is the only alternative, the cultural Left has little to say in reply. For it prefers not to talk about money. Its principal enemy is a mind-set rather than a set of economic arrangements … (Rorty 1998a: 78-79)

It is useful to remember, at the same time, that the registers of scholarship and leftist (or civic) engagement are different. The academic Left should not be criticized by Rorty for the thousands of intelligent or naïve books they wrote, as they come as part and parcel of the academic enterprise and we would be arriving at a very difficult question about which books, in the long run, are intelligent and which are not (let us think of Hegel or Nietzsche in this context, and their extremely difficult prose, hardly readable to their own German contemporaries). It is not the books and the theories per se that beg criticism; it is the lack of their public and social relevance, accompanied by explicit pretensions of taking part in a social revolution. Rorty's criticism of all books and theories presented by the academic Left *qua*

scholars is misguided. On the other hand, his criticism of books and theories that are declared 'weapons' in political struggles with 'the system', political, subversive acts of resistance, seems absolutely right. (Thinking of Sartre in this context, let us recall his famous statement in 'What is Literature': '[a] day comes when the pen is forced to stop, and the writer must then take up arms'.) I am in agreement with Rorty when he criticizes the cultural Left for being haunted by 'ubiquitous spectres' (1998a: 94), especially by 'power' in a Foucauldian sense. However, it would certainly be much more useful in political terms if the Left saw the power as described in current globalization debates – the power as analyzed in political science, political economics and some sections of sociology. I refer to the power of, for example, transnational corporations, transnational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, to power in the context of the changing relations between the market and the state, or the economy and politics, and the whole complex of issues associated with these global shifts which are analyzed in contemporary globalization studies. Certainly, Rorty is right when he argues that the academic Left cannot be asked to deal with the consequences of globalization (including Zygmunt Bauman's 'human consequences' of it).

With reference to Rorty's persuasive rhetoric, it is interesting to note his mocking observation that it is only humiliations for reasons other than economic status that count for the Left: 'nobody is setting up a program in unemployed studies, homeless studies, or trailer-park studies, because the unemployed, the homeless, and residents of trailer parks are not "others" in the relevant sense' (Rorty 1998a: 80). Rorty is indeed correct here, but it would be hard to avoid 'real politics' (and keep substituting it with 'cultural politics') if the Left began 'talking about money'. Under globalization pressures, talking seriously about almost anything politically relevant without clear reference to 'economy' (and market) looks misguided. It is one of the most pervading themes of the global age – the replacement of 'politics' with 'economy', the addition of an economic dimension to all social discussions, in various parts of the world and with different intensity (see Beck 2000, Bauman 1998).

I am very hesitant about Rorty's dismissive attitude towards 'taking the long view' and 'looking beyond nationhood to a global polity' and his view of both as 'useless' (Rorty 1998a: 98). Rorty is correct if he means future philosophical visions of 'the theory', or of the generally French philosophy-inspired humanities. Philosophy, and especially postmodern French philosophy, may even be an obstacle in

carrying out useful publicly relevant long-term analyses. But forward-looking scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, David Held, Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells and very many others seem to be producing inspiring ideas while taking long views (although it is true that none of them is a philosopher). Looking forward towards the global age is publicly useful in the long run *and* it may be useless in both the short and long run for the current politics of the Left. It is often the level of abstraction that is an obstacle in political work. Theoretical language, although necessary, is generally useless in politics, including leftist politics. Again, it is useful to bear in mind the scholarship/politics split in this context.

So what, according to Rorty, is the Left to do? – 'To start proposing changes in the laws of a real country, inhabited by real people who are enduring unnecessary suffering, much of which can be cured by governmental action' (Rorty 1998a: 99). The problem is that the Left Rorty analyzes is an academic Left and is very weak in the outside world. The Left is to speak of 'specific social practices and specific changes in these practices' (103). For the time being it is loud but powerless, engaged but abstract, committed but theoretical, revolutionary and hallucinatory in books but hopeless in deeds. Rorty's critical attitude is reinforced by pretences the Left makes, through its revolutionary rhetoric combined with its inability to see the outside world. The main problem is how to combine being an academic and being a leftist activist, a part of the political movement. Rorty is an academic but he never sees his books as revolutionary acts of engaged politics, and his philosophical theories as subversive 'tools' to be used to change 'the system'. Scholarly books are scholarly books, we could try to generalize, and politics is politics. 'Piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy' (105) – Rorty's scope of actions for the Left today – is far away from revolutionary visions of the post-metaphysical and non-phallogocentric total revolution.

6

It is interesting to think of Rorty's criticism of the 'academic Left' (often referred to as the 'Foucauldian' Left) in the context of his overall view of Michel Foucault. Foucault, in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), is an ironist unwilling to be a liberal. One can see some incoherence here, for the liberal is someone for whom – according to the definition by Judith Skhlar often referred to in this

book – 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'. Foucault's philosophy is filled with images, descriptions and analyses of cruelty over the recent centuries. And yet what is crucial for Rorty's new pragmatism is social 'hope', rather than descriptions and analyses of cruelty: 'liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own *hope* that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease' (Rorty 1989: xv, emphasis mine).

The theme of 'hope' appears in many of Rorty's texts, including titles such as 'Method, Social Science, and Social Hope' from *Consequences of Pragmatism* and 'Private Irony and Liberal Hope' from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and 'The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope' from *Truth and Progress*. Finally, his recent Penguin collection of essays is entitled *Philosophy and Social Hope* and has an entire section entitled 'Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism' and also includes such texts as 'Failed Prophesies, Glorious Hopes' or 'Globalization, the Politics of Identity and Social Hope'. I take 'hope' to be one of the most important themes in Rorty's philosophy. To put it in broad terms, that part of French philosophy which followed Heidegger and Nietzsche (often having previously abandoned Marx and Hegel) does not seem to leave much social hope for the future, being a disillusioned discourse about reality rather than a hopeful proposal for the future (Descombes 1980). That is exactly what Rorty, as a liberal and democrat, is unable to accept.

The two poles – hope/hopelessness and the present/future (connected with a different attitude towards utopias in the two traditions) – can be seen as determining significant differences between Rorty and the majority of French postmodern philosophers. It also marks the difference between Rorty and the 'academic Left' in *Achieving Our Country*. To quote Rorty again: 'hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness' (Rorty 1998a: 37). The two poles also include: optimism versus melancholy; belief in the salutary power of democracy versus nostalgia for a revolution; and certainty versus permanent doubts. Philosophy in America and France has been the intellectual product of two different cultures; one was fed by the utopia of unlimited freedom and unlimited possibilities; the other was plagued by the spectres of nationalisms, totalitarianisms, and hence was seduced by faith in the emancipation of humanity, to put it in very general terms (see Furet 1999, Judt 1992). In Rorty's image of the past, America had the feeling that it was 'the country of the future' (Rorty in Borradori 1994: 109). There was no such feeling in the

Europe of the twentieth century generally speaking, with the exception of the 'new' Italy, Germany or Soviet Russia (see Lévy 1995). Therefore, it is difficult to speak of any social 'hope' in today's French postmodern philosophy in any sense Rorty gives to the term.

In Rorty, the belief in the role of 'hope' in philosophy and social criticism is considerable and allows him to distance himself from Foucault and Lyotard, for example. In politics, 'hope should replace the sort of knowledge which philosophers have usually tried to attain'. Besides, the most important distinction for the American pragmatists was that between the past and the future and which 'can substitute for all the old philosophical distinctions' (Rorty 1999: 24). It is useful to sketch a brief overall comparison of Rorty's criticism of (mainly postmodern) French philosophy with his criticism of the academic Left in *Achieving Our Country*. Criticism of the latter combined with the former is even more devastating as it is based on Rorty's strong philosophical beliefs. It is not accidental that the words 'academic' and 'Foucauldian' with reference to the Left are often interchangeable.

Rorty claims in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that Foucault is excluded from the circle of his beloved 'liberal ironists' by virtue of a lack of 'hope' for a change for the better in the present and a lack of chances given to the future. The liberal ironist in Rorty's account should combine two projects: his private project of self-creation and his public project of expanding the range of consciousness of the common 'we' (Rorty 1989: 64). It does not suffice to recognize evil in Rorty's view; one also has to participate in the development of a moral consciousness that would fight that evil in the future. Thus hope must be present – the hope that evil and cruelty *can* be overcome, the hope that is apparently absent in Foucault. According to Rorty, Foucault does not provide us with reasons to choose a social direction in the potential development of society. Rorty sees Foucault as a stoic, 'a dispassionate observer of the present social order, rather than its concerned critic' (Rorty 1991a: 173). He lacks the 'rhetoric of emancipation' and his work can be characterized by 'extraordinary dryness' produced through a lack of identification with any social context on his part (174). By saying that he would like to write so as 'to have no face' (a memorable expression from *Archeology of Knowledge*) Foucault excludes himself from membership of Rorty's utopia. As Rorty says about Foucault in 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity':

> He forbids himself the tone of the liberal sort of thinker who says to his fellow-citizens: '*We* know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together'. There is no 'we' to be found in Foucault's

> writings, nor in those of many of his French contemporaries. (Rorty 1991a: 174)

In the same text there is a memorable and indeed very unfair argument that Foucault writes 'from a point of view light-years away from the problems of contemporary society'. Let us remember, however, that pragmatism is the philosophy of 'solidarity' rather than that of 'despair' (Rorty 1991: 33) and the criteria applied to other thinkers are well-grounded in Rorty's philosophy. Hence Rorty's harsh treatment of the major part of contemporary French philosophy in the 1990s. (When Michel Foucault takes hope away from his thinking, he becomes dangerous. As Rorty puts it in an interview: 'Foucault has been the most influential figure on the culture of the American Left, but his influence has been dangerous. The result has been the 'disengagement' of intellectuals' (Rorty in Borradori 1994: 111).

The difference between Rortyan pragmatists and the philosophers from the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Foucault line (whom the 'academic Left' in Rorty's descriptions took to heart) consists also in the fact that they did not share optimism about the future of liberal, democratic societies. Thus, for Rorty's new pragmatism, 'hope' has priority over 'knowledge', 'tomorrow' over 'yesterday', and finally, 'democracy' over 'philosophy'. It is crucial to remember, while reading his criticism of the Left in *Achieving Our Country*, that the choices Rorty makes in his prioritizing are very well-grounded in his way of thinking about philosophy and philosophy's role in culture and, consequently, in his account of intellectuals in society.

It is also important to bear in mind while reading *Achieving Our Country* that the intellectuals from the (academic, cultural, Foucauldian, etc.) Left do not have much in common with Rorty's 'liberal ironists'. Constructing the figure of the 'liberal ironist', Rorty notes his own differences with 'an ironist who is unwilling to be a liberal' and with 'a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist': with Michel Foucault and with Jürgen Habermas (Rorty 1989: 61). Neither of them fit into his utopia sketched in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, although for different reasons. According to Rorty, 'the citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists – … people who *combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment*' (Rorty 1989: 61, emphasis mine). Under such conditions, Foucault is not allowed into Rorty's utopia because he

lacks commitment in the specific Rortyan sense of sharing the 'hope' mentioned above, while Habermas is committed and full of the social hope in question, but does not have a sense of the contingency of his own vocabulary of moral reflection. Certainly, considerable parts of Rorty's arguments against Foucault can be employed against the 'academic' Left more generally.

As in the Foucault-Habermas story, Rorty's disagreement with the Left is both philosophical and political. Rorty had no doubts (contrary, for example, to Habermas) about possible 'we's': according to the idea of the 'priority of democracy to philosophy', the 'we' of liberals is quite satisfactory and there is no need to look for another 'we'. Therefore Rorty's differences with Foucault are 'political', as opposed to his 'merely philosophical' differences with Habermas (Rorty 1989: 67). It is also interesting to contrast Rorty's and Habermas's belief in the significance of philosophy in culture. Rorty does not accept '*radical* social *theory*', choosing instead (at best) 'continual social *criticism*' (in a typescript entitled 'Habermas, Derrida and the Functions of Philosophy'). That is to say, he prefers criticism as provided by journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, novelists, and movie-makers as they are able to show pain and humiliation in their tiniest details. What then would guard Rorty's utopia against pain and humiliation? Only 'particular descriptions' that would force reforms. 'Only particular descriptions of injury and concrete suggestions about ways of avoiding injury' (17).

Rorty is more dubious than Habermas about the social utility of philosophy. Instead, he advises that most of one's liberal hopes for the relief of unnecessary, socially-countenanced pain and humiliation be put into novels, articles and reports that make specific kinds of them visible, and in proposals for changes to social arrangements, such as laws, company regulations, administrative procedures or educational practices (Rorty 1989: 21). The tone used in *Achieving Our Country* is very similar indeed to that already employed in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: we have enough theory (including 'theory' which is mainly of postmodern French inspiration) on the Left; we now need concrete proposals for changes in laws and regulations.

In his social thinking, Rorty is clearly in favour of the concrete rather than the universal and his choice is motivated by a political judgement of rich North Atlantic constitutional democracies, which do not need 'unmasking' any more and in which 'communication' is already 'undistorted' (to refer to Foucault and Habermas). Although such a political choice may be risky, and perhaps mistaken, it would

be shown only by 'trial and error' rather than by (Habermas's) strong theoretical strategies.

Rorty leads his discussion with Lyotard, in turn, towards 'our different notions of how politically conscious intellectuals should spend their time' (Rorty 1991: 222). As to whether one should 'bear witness' (to differends, truth, or the past) this is a question about the intellectual's self-image. Reformism or revolution, progress through utopian fantasies or through bloodshed – that is the choice; Rorty has no hesitations about his pragmatist choice regarding what to do and what to suggest to others:

> [W]e Deweyans have a story to tell about the progress of our species, a story whose later episodes emphasize how things have been getting better in the West during the last few centuries, and which concludes with some suggestions about how they might become better still in the next few. (212)

The difference is the difference in seeing their own tasks, different traditions and different obligations. Perhaps in broader terms, Lyotard's inclination to look toward the past, against any utopia and utopianism, fearing violence and totalitarianism, in a 'future-oriented' (Rorty) America may sound strange. French philosophers are haunted by spectres of the bloody past, a *mémoire du crime*, while American philosophers do not seem haunted by any historical event with a similar degree of intensity. The French look with fear to the past and wonder what to do so that the past never returns; Americans look forward and are bold in inventing social utopias.

7

Rorty returns to the above philosophical ideals in *Achieving Our Country* once again: there are few new themes present there, but it is their new presentation and new application for new, non-philosophical audiences that makes this book special and appealing. It makes use of the full array of Rorty's pragmatist ideals, with very scarce reference to his utopia of 'liberal ironists' and to his prolonged critical debates with postmodern French philosophy and the Left inspired by it. Rorty's criticism of the 'academic Left' seems to be a small part of a much wider challenge that this version of philosophy has been for American social thought over the past two decades. The book reaffirms Rorty's firm stance toward the relationship between philosophy

and politics, expressed many times during the past decade or so and is best summarized in his own words in 'Truth Without Correspondence to Reality' (1994):

> It is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be. In particular, people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will tend itself only to good causes. But there never will be such a view; any philosophical view is a tool, which can be used by many different hands. (Rorty 1999:23)

This is one of the most manifest differences between Rorty and the academic Left, and yet another underlying philosophical theme of *Achieving Our Country*.

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