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Ethnocentrism: Lessons from Richard Rorty to Randy David

This article engages Richard Rorty's controversial concept of ethnocentrism with the help of Randolph (Randy) S. David's writings. The first section defines Rorty's concept of ethnocentrism and responds to the general criticisms of relativism and divisiveness that have been made against it. The second section suggests a conceptual replacement for Rorty's notion of a vicious ethnocentrism: egotism. Egotism is a kind of cultural ethnocentrism that is resistant to openness, creativity, and social transformation. Inspired by David's work, the third and final section suggests how the concepts of ethnocentrism and egotism might be of some use as conceptual tools for articulating contemporary social issues in the Philippines.

Keywords: ethnocentrism; Richard Rorty; Randy David; Philippines; populism



The struggle spans generations (Photo by Carlo Gabuco)

INTRODUCTION

Ethnocentrism is a controversial concept in the writings of the American pragmatist Richard Rorty. Generally speaking, ethnocentrism is the view that individuals and societies are fashioned through their particular *ethnos* or culture. Briefly, the view is that all persons and groups are historically situated and acculturated products of contingency, language, and environment (Rorty 1991:2,13-14). This ethnocentric stance is seen to be at odds with the notion that there are objective and widely shared ideas and values across human cultures. It puts in doubt the philosophical capacity to make universal claims about the nature of persons and groups. It complicates the ability to formulate systematic and wide-reaching social and moral theories. It also calls into question the ability of cultures to engage in practices of social transformation and meaningful dialogue. Rorty's critics, as we shall see later on, judge the position of ethnocentrism as relativistic, divisive, and even silly. Rorty's retort is that it is even more silly to think that aiming for a unified theory of inquiry is the best way to go with any social or moral theory, let alone any theory. He has misgivings about using the objectivist-relativist binary as a tool for analyzing morality and culture ([1996] 1999:xix). He also finds it regressive to presume that unconditional moral and cultural universals exist (Rorty [1994] 1999). Rorty's ethnocentrism claims that societies simply work with whatever historical truths and moral realities they have developed so far. For Rorty, the most admirable persons and groups can fruitfully converse with each other despite their differences. He also thinks that the liberal *ethnos* exemplifies this culture of tolerance, open-mindedness, and cosmopolitanism at best.

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Randolf “Randy” S. David, a Filipino sociologist, journalist, and an influential public figure, shares Rorty’s view of the importance of pluralism, openness, and conversation in social life. Both envision inspiring versions of the United States and the Philippines in their roles as academics and public intellectuals (see Rorty 1998, 1999; David 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2006, 2016a). More than any other Filipino theorist, David has authoritatively shown how Rorty’s pragmatism can offer incisive and persuasive ways of unpacking contemporary social issues in the Philippines. In “An American Thinker” (2007), David credits Rorty with having had a big influence on his own research:

My encounter with the work of Rorty has led me to a radical rethinking of my own discipline—sociology. Today I approach my work in the same pragmatist spirit in which Rorty views all intellectual activity: “We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behavior is not inquiry, but simply wordplay.” (Rorty [1996] 1999:xxv)

In my view, David’s nuanced interpretations of Rorty can participate in addressing criticisms against Rorty’s ethnocentrism. In addition, a reworked version of Rorty’s ethnocentrism can be valuable in analyzing particular issues in the Philippines that David himself is concerned about at present. In the spirit of pragmatic inquiry, this article aims to spell out a clearer, more workable notion of Rorty’s ethnocentrism by drawing on David’s body of published work for contextualization. By connecting Rorty and David, the article will show the applied value of Rorty’s unpacked work on ethnocentrism in research on the Philippines.

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first section, I provide a preview of Rorty’s ethnocentrism. I reveal and respond to areas in which Rorty’s concept of ethnocentrism is vulnerable to the criticism of relativism and divisiveness. In the second section, I take up the task of offering a more well-defined conception of Rorty’s ethnocentrism. I argue that the ethnocentrism that Rorty’s critics are afraid of (or should be afraid of) is the *egotistic* version of it—a kind of cultural ethnocentrism that is

resistant to openness, creativity, and social transformation. Egotism, in other words, can serve as the conceptual replacement to Rorty's notion of a vicious form of ethnocentrism. Finally, in the third and final section, I suggest how ethnocentrism and egotism might be of some use as conceptual tools for articulating the social situation in the Philippines. An unpacked version of Rorty's work, in my view, can help us rethink populism, egotistic local cultures, and the challenge of articulating a national identity or *ethnos* in Philippine research.

ETHNOCENTRISM

In the introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty (1991:15) admits that what aroused hostility and suspicion among his critics in the 1980s was his ambiguous use of the term in his various essays (see Bernstein 1987, Norris 1986, Comay 1986, Fraser 1989, Lentricchia 1983a, 1983b, and Fisk 1985). To clarify his position, Rorty argues that the concept of ethnocentrism should be understood in two senses: the general and the local. Ethnocentrism in the first sense can be interpreted as "an inescapable condition," a definition that is in line with the general reality of "human finitude." For Rorty, all persons and communities are as culture-dependent as they are finite and contingent. Bound within the limits of his or her particular community, Rorty contends that a person's *ethnos* only "comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible" ([1985] 1991:30). This ethnocentric exclusivity means that privileging one's own group comes naturally, and that there can be no non-circular justification for this preference (1985:29). It also means that the community is the arbiter of its own ethics: it supplies the legitimation for what is or is not morally reprehensible in the culture. As David (2006b) correctly says of Rorty's thinking:

To the extent that they are skills or tools of survival in a changing environment, cultures may be simple or complex, effective or ineffective in solving problems. But there is nothing in the world, said the philosopher Richard Rorty, that can tell us "what culture it would be best to belong to." I take this to mean that cultures cannot be measured or evaluated except on their own terms or in relation to the purposes they define for their adherents. They are, in short, incommensurable.

Ethnocentrism in the second sense can be interpreted as referring to one's loyalty to a specific *ethnos* or local culture. Rorty's cultural *ethnos* is unapologetically Western-centric and liberal. His *ethnos*, in his own words, refers to a kind of "loyalty to the socio-political culture" of what the Marxists used to call "bourgeois democracies" and what Roberto Unger calls, more neutrally, "the rich North Atlantic democracies" (Rorty 1991:15). To the ire of his critics, he often employs this we-syntax in a way that authoritatively speaks on behalf of the group identities he identifies with; examples include "we liberals," "we pragmatists," "we Americans," and the like. Sardonicly, Bernstein (1987:554) notes that "sometimes it seems as if what Rorty means by 'we' are 'all those who agree with me.'"

Rorty's general and local distinctions of ethnocentrism have both been met with reproach. The general claim that ethnocentrism is an "inescapable condition" has connections to the charge of relativism, which in turn gives rise to the view that all cultures are morally equal and all values are morally on par. If cultures define what they do and do not do, and if individuals are answerable to the network of communities they belong to, on what basis can cultural practices then be criticized and challenged? Put more specifically, how can cultural wrongs be justified and corrected? In his critique of Rorty, Will Kymlicka points out how an ethnocentric perspective can give rise to the relativist problem of moral justification: "When a Muslim woman in Egypt says 'Sexual discrimination is wrong', she does not mean 'We don't do that around here.' On the contrary, she is saying this precisely because it is done around there, and has always been done, and is very firmly embedded in all the myths, symbols, and institutions of their history and society" (1989:65-66). In this case, there must be something more authoritative that she should be able to appeal to—typically, a transcendent value or a universal moral ideal—in order to justify her claim that sexual discrimination is a form of injustice. If left solely to her culture, she would find no strong empirical validation to justify her assertion.

But Rorty's general view of ethnocentrism can be clarified by distinguishing two separate claims. While he agrees that values and practices are relative to culture, it would be a mistake to think that he regards all values and practices as morally equal. As he states in "Postmodernist

Bourgeois Liberalism” ([1983] 1991), we can separate the claim that “every community is as good as every other” and the view that “we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify” (Rorty 1983:202). Following Rorty, the Muslim woman need not look for a universal and transhistorical justification to defend the claim that sexual discrimination is wrong. She can appeal to the practices of other cultures and to the vision of a shared egalitarian future. As Rorty (1990:57) argues, to indicate

...that we need meta-narratives, and universalistic philosophical theories, as a platform to condemn, e.g., patriarchy, suggests that such meta-narratives or such theories have some intrinsic appeal—some appeal part from those aspects of some community’s practice off against other parts, rather than of comparing the practice as a whole with an idea which is currently reflected by no practices. The slow and partial progress which women have made toward being thought of as persons by males has, it seems to me, been achieved by playing off internal tensions within patriarchal practice against one another, rather than opening the eyes of the patriarch to truths unreflected in practice. So I think that as long as we philosophers persist in thinking that our skill is in detecting universals, rather than simply in winking at tensions, we shall be less useful than we might otherwise be.

David is sensitive to this crucial Rortyan insight. In “Asian Values and Global Standards,” David explains Rorty’s view, saying that while we do not have a metaphysical and transcultural basis for criticizing other cultures, we do have a social and political basis for doing so: “One can avoid being chauvinistic about one’s culture or condescending to other cultures, but retain the capacity for moral indignation when one’s own values are violated” (2006b). The fact of ethnocentrism is therefore not a reason for the paralysis of cultural criticism; rather, it is the standpoint from which reflection and criticism could begin.

Meanwhile, Rorty’s local ethnocentrism—one characterized by his impassioned vindication of a Western-centric and liberal *ethnos*—is often perceived by critics as a divisive stance. Marianne Janack (1998:10) points out that Rorty is prone to speaking from “the equally exalted and privileged position of the conquering and dominant (socially,

politically, economically, and culturally) group.” She argues that feminists and minorities, while part of Rorty’s own liberal communities, may not necessarily share his interpretation of equal and just practices. In a similar but more derisive vein, Jenny Teichman (1998:60) rebukes Rorty’s constant reference to his *ethnos*:

The we-talk so typical of this author... appears now and then, as when he insists (thump, thump, thump) that “we no longer believe in God.” Who is this “we”? one asks. Well plainly it is he, Rorty—and come to that it is also me most of the time. At this point, however, a list of real, contemporary, living-and-breathing, God-believing philosophers, physicists, biologists, academic lawyers—and even a few professors of theology—appear before the mind’s eye. Rorty must be living a pretty hermetic kind of life if he has never heard of these other we’s. And what about the teeming Hindu millions of India and Nepal and Sri Lanka? What about the Jews who keep the Sabbath in every country in the world? What about all those Catholics in South America? What about the Irish? What about Islam? Perhaps, for Rorty, these people are not we. Perhaps they are only them.

In short, Rorty seems to be guilty of perpetuating a divisive approach. This charge can be responded to in at least two ways. The first response is to recognize that Rorty finds nothing wrong about being Western-centric and liberal because the option to be non-ethnocentric does not exist; to repeat, Rorty’s primary thesis is that ethnocentrism is an *inescapable* condition. Hence, his political identity is a product of contingency and choice, being raised in the United States and deciding to commit to a social character that embodies the particular system of values that he admires. David understands this Rortyan argument well: “Whatever they are, the specific values we pursue are not entirely self-chosen. They are mainly determined for us by the community and the times into which we are born, as well as by the particular gifts with which we are endowed. They are ‘contingent’ in the sense that they could have been other than what they are” (David 2013). Hence, for Rorty, an effective conversation between differing cultures is not a matter of standing up for what is universal and righteous for all. Instead, it is a matter of persuading the listener that one’s set of contingencies in terms of values and practices is

preferable and admirable over others. For instance, he suggests that moral claims can be better justified if people were more “frankly ethnocentric” than if they insist that their views were universal and rational: “It would be better to say: here is what we in the West look like as a result of ceasing to hold slaves, beginning to educate women, separating church and state, and so on. Here is what happened after we started treating certain distinctions between people as arbitrary rather than fraught with moral significance” (Rorty [1997] 2010:443).

The second response is that Rorty’s use of “we” has strategic and rhetorical value. Rondel (2009) suggests that Rorty is not alone in employing this strategy to strengthen the force of their argument: “We pragmatists,” or “We postmodern bourgeois liberals” are no more problematic locutions than Nietzsche’s “We moderns,” “We fearless ones,” or “We good Europeans.” It is not that Nietzsche or Rorty are trying to gesture at some clearly distinguishable group of persons, they are issuing a rally-call (Rondel 2009:65). Baruchello and Weber (2014:204) point out that the rhetorical aim of Rorty’s “we” could be persuasion, communion, and identification. In their view, Rorty’s style of writing is designed to convince others of the advantages that come with his democratic, tolerant, and free *ethnos*.

EGOTISM

I have so far presented the responses to the general criticisms against Rorty’s view. But even if ethnocentrism could be adequately defended from the charges of groundless relativism and unwarranted divisiveness, there still remains something discomfiting about the use of the term. In my view, the tension lies in the self- or culture-centeredness that this concept connotes, one that is keen to distinguish between members and outsiders, one that fundamentally separates the “us” from the “them” as Teichman harps in her critique of Rorty’s work. Rorty is aware of the controversial character of ethnocentrism; in fact, he admits that if he could come up with a better replacement, he would abandon the term altogether (Rorty 2001b:111). Since we cannot discard the utility of the concept of ethnocentrism, Rorty states that as good pragmatists, “We should use it—should play off our preferred ethnic against others, rather than comparing them all with something that is not a set of actual, or at least

concretely imagined, human practices” (1990:58). However, it should be borne in mind that Rorty has been clear from the start that he endorses a particularly outward-looking kind of ethnocentrism. The contextual and historical ethnocentrism of the liberal community he champions opposes any kind of culture that banks on its self- and culture-centeredness. The culture of liberalism is designed to expand its membership rather than to close its borders, at least in Rorty’s view. A “bourgeois” (a description which Rorty later disavowed) liberal culture prides itself best on a culture of tolerance, open-mindedness, and cosmopolitanism:

It is a culture which prides itself on constantly adding more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies. It is a form of life which is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity. The heroes it apotheosizes include those who have enlarged its capacity for sympathy and tolerance. Among the enemies it diabolizes are people who attempt to diminish this capacity, the vicious ethnocentrists. (Rorty [1986] 1991:204)

Rorty thus differentiates his own outward-oriented and self-enlarging liberal *ethnos* against ethnocentrism of the vicious kind. The challenge now is to find a way to slough off the contentious character of ethnocentrism in order to distinguish Rorty’s culture-expanding message in a more effective way. In my view, it is possible to delineate the idea of a vicious form of ethnocentrism by employing a concept that appears in his later writings. The term for this concept is egotism (Rorty 2001a; [2004] 2010).

Egotism, for Rorty, is a position of militant self-confidence in one’s views, beliefs, and associations. An egotistic perspective is self-righteous and often inconsiderate of other human needs, values, and purposes (for a more thorough treatment of Rorty’s egotism, see Llanera 2016). Egotism is manifested in various forms, and in the following discussion I point out two ways in which egotistic behavior is socially encouraged. First, it should be acknowledged that the dominant political and cultural forms of authority in a specific society often fuel egotistic belief and behavior. Dogmatic claims originating from these disciplines and institutions could impose a tone of finality to any conversation and discourage self-questioning and meaningful discourse. In “Religion in the Public Square:

A Reconsideration,” Rorty points out the widespread and systematized egotism that institutional religion propagates. He states that “Catholic bishops, the Mormon General Authorities, the televangelists, and all the other religious professionals who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout” remain influential (Rorty [2003] 2010:456). Often demanding pure adherence from its followers, their positions are prone to stand against the important democratic goals of pluralism and social cooperation, according to Rorty. In Philippine politics in particular, David points out that religion has this kind of effect and that people in power make claims based on their religious beliefs unreflectively. Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno’s act of referencing her 2012 appointment to the Supreme Court as the result of God’s will serves as a good example. In “God, law, psychology, and [Chief Justice] Sereno,” David (2012) notes that this act is a form of a “conversation stopper,” pointing out that “it is one thing to be guided by one’s faith in everything one does, and quite another to lace one’s daily speech with effusive references to God... People at the receiving end of this form of communication find themselves unable to decide whether to take the speaker seriously and engage her, or to just change the topic.”

Second, egotism is encouraged by membership in groups that valorize a particular social identity. A strong association with a particular community, for instance, requires a level of likeness from its members—e.g., correspondence in faith, race, or social purpose—in order for a person to *properly* belong. Outsiders who fail to meet this expectation are not attributed the same level of attention and importance, and at times they are perceived as unworthy of respect. In this way, exclusivity and inclusion in groups can breed egotism, for members are habituated to feel at best with people they perceive as their equals or as part of their kin. A person’s sense of religious, intellectual, or ethical superiority over others thus serves as the source of feelings of indifference, intolerance, and hate. In other words, egotism restricts the ability to empathize with outsiders. As Rorty ([1993] 2001:359) illustrates: “The problem is the gallant and honorable Serb who sees Muslims as circumcised dogs. It is the brave soldier and good comrade who loves and is loved by his mates, but who thinks of women as dangerous, malevolent whores and bitches.”

As a counterpoint to egotism, we can utilize David's description of the virtues of tolerance and solidarity in "Ten Virtues for a New World" to characterize what it means for a culture to be non-egotistic. David defines tolerance as "the capacity to accept difference and not to feel threatened by it. Its opposite is bigotry, the tendency to judge others by one's own unexamined beliefs" and describes solidarity as "the capacity to feel the pain of others by an imaginative identification with their situation... Its opposite is selfishness and self-absorption, the tendency to think that life is all about getting ahead and looking after oneself or one's kin" (David 2000a). Tolerance and solidarity could be framed as underdeveloped virtues in intolerant and inward-looking groups. Egotistic communities, roughly put, often have insufficient impetus within their network to change their perspectives and behavior since their biases and prejudices are entrenched. While they behave with respect and decency toward people they care for, they are often unable to stretch their empathy toward those outside their circle, and are even taught to be suspicious of them. If applied to Rorty's work, these egotistic cultures would represent the vicious and close-minded ethnocentrism that his own tolerant, cosmopolitan, and democratic liberal culture opposes (Rorty [1986] 1991:204). The challenge, in this case, is to find a way of ungluing the motivational inward-looking grip of social egotism over its members and having them adopt a more outward-looking *ethnos*.

CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

With the help of David's writings, I have presented how Rorty's concept of ethnocentrism could be distinguished from ethnocentrism's deplorable form: Egotism. The former serves as an umbrella concept that refers to the particular and historical character of each culture or community. Meanwhile, the latter refers to a specifically "vicious" ethnocentrism—one that is maliciously relativist and unapologetically divisive (Rorty [1986] 1991:204). It must be noted that the term "ethnocentrism" could still not be dispensed with as Rorty had previously hoped. However, this article has at least attended to the task of clarifying Rorty's controversial idea of ethnocentrism with the introduction of a targeted and possibly more functional concept in political and social theory (see Rorty 2001b:111; 1990:58). Egotism is the enemy of Rorty's liberal *ethnos* that

his sympathizers and critics alike should fight against. Cultures seeped in egotism represent an ethnocentrism that is resistant to openness, creativity, and social transformation. By way of conclusion, I now make three simple suggestions to show how Rorty's notions of ethnocentrism and egotism might be of some use as conceptual tools for articulating the contemporary social situation in the Philippines.

First, David's "Public Lives" column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* is a good start. His current writings are informed by a keen interest in interpreting the state of the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration (see David 2016b, 2017a, 2017b). In these works, David deals with the concepts of populism and global public opinion to contextualize his analysis of a new kind of world, one in which "the triumph of Trump, the emergence of Duterte, and, not least, the recuperation of the memory of Ferdinand Marcos, the ultimate strongman, are all symptoms of a populist backlash against a complex globalized world in which ordinary people find no security" (David 2016b). Populism, following Pierre-André Taguieff's definition, is a kind of politics involving "direct appeals to the people, rejection of mediation, and criticism of established elites. This also includes the promise of change, a rhetorical gesture that populist leaders have in common with all modern political leaders. But they differ from the latter by featuring a charismatic authority, which explains the fact that they are either admired or hated with equal intensity" (2017a). Framing this definition in relation to Rorty's framework enables one to recast old questions about populism afresh as well as invite new and more creative answers. My hunch is that Rorty's writings on egotism and ethnocentrism could supply researchers with a social and political vocabulary that is already comfortable in dealing with the problems of relativism and divisiveness and the realities of contingency and change. An advantage of Rorty's pragmatism is that it dissuades people from appealing to objective maxims and universals, a strategy that has often served as conversation-stoppers in discourses on populism (for instance, the problem of defending human rights on metaphysical grounds in David 2016c). Questions can range from the simple to the ambitious: Are Filipino populists egotists in the Rortyan sense? If so, what conditions constitute their social egotism? What does succumbing to populism say about the Filipino *ethnos*? What are the

common motivations between local and global forms of populism? What can be done to curb the spread of populist egotism?

The second way of engaging ethnocentrism and egotism is by identifying what could be considered as egotistic subcultures within contemporary Filipino society. Given Rorty's broad characterization, Filipino egotists can range from Catholic biblical literalists to science freethinkers to hardcore Duterte supporters. Often flanked by resistance and opposition, it would be worth interrogating the nature of these various groups' egotisms. This analysis would help unmask the drive behind their egotism and, more productively, hypothesize how their particular version of egotism could be overcome. For instance, Nicole Curato's "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power" (2016) offers a good examination of the much demeaned and pathologized "egotistic" subculture of the *Dutertards*. Her work investigates the all-too-reasonable motivations behind Duterte's public appeal and concludes that support for the notorious leader is undergirded by the public's "seemingly opposing, yet mutually reinforcing, logics of the politics of fear and the politics of hope" (Curato 2016:106). By identifying the conceptual, political, and social conditions that have made their egotism rife in the first place, analyzing a particular group's egotism could then serve as a preliminary step toward attending to these underlying issues.

This leads me to the third and final suggestion—one that pertains to the task of imagining the future of the Filipino nation and its democratic hopes. If Filipino sociologists and intellectuals were to envision an edifying conception of the Filipino *ethnos*, Rorty's work could serve as a reminder that this process should aim for a non-egotistic version of it. Fortunately, David has had a head start: The quest for a non-egotistic sense of a Filipino *ethnos* is already a radical democratic hope that inspires his work. As he beautifully writes, in closing:

When the philosopher Richard Rorty wrote about the quest for social solidarity in our time, he was referring not to the ritualistic charities that define our futile attempts at redressing inequality, but to our gradual awakening as human beings to the reality of our own unwitting participation in the oppression and exploitation of others. Such an awakening shifts our attention

from the limited mortals that we are to the kind of society we have created for ourselves. To be able to watch ourselves collectively as a nation—that is the mark of a modern society. But to be able to revise our notions of who we are and what we can be—that is the quality of a great people. (David 2008)

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