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“Richard Rorty on the American Left in the Era of Trump”

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Abstract

This paper revisits some of the arguments in Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*, twenty years after the book first appeared. Not only are many of Rorty's diagnoses and predictions eerily prescient in the wake of the rise of Donald Trump to the US presidency, but there is also perceptive political advice in Rorty's book that I argue the contemporary American Left would do well to heed. While many post-election commentators have tended to read *Achieving Our Country* as an admonishment of so-called “identity politics” in favor of an “old Left” politics of redistribution and economic justice, I argue that the main distinction on which the analysis in *Achieving Our Country* hangs is between what Rorty calls “real politics” and “cultural politics”, a conclusion that is confirmed, I argue, by examining the three concrete suggestions for the American Left that together form the core positive argument in Rorty's book.

Keywords

Richard Rorty – Leftist Politics – Distributive Justice – American Politics – Donald Trump – Patriotism

Achieving Our Country is usually regarded as one of Richard Rorty's more minor works, but lately the book has been given new legs.¹ Thanks to a

¹ Rorty 1998a. References to this book throughout will be by parenthetical page number and

widely circulated passage from *Achieving Our Country*, discussed in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, interest in Rorty's book has increased dramatically since Donald Trump's election. In what follows I revisit some of the main arguments in *Achieving Our Country*, twenty years after the book first appeared. Not only are many of Rorty's diagnoses and predictions eerily prescient in the wake of the rise of Donald Trump to the U.S presidency, but there is also perceptive political advice in Rorty's book that I argue the contemporary American Left would do well to heed. More particularly, while 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, I argue that this reading is incorrect. Rather, the main distinction on which the analysis in *Achieving Our Country* hangs is between what Rorty calls "real politics" and "cultural politics", a conclusion that is confirmed, I argue, by examining the three concrete suggestions for the American Left that together form the core positive argument in Rorty's book.

"Something Will Crack"

Let me begin by quoting the "viral" passage from *Achieving Our Country* to which I alluded a moment ago.

[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else. At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.... [O]nce such a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will

the abbreviation AOC.

happen. One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words ‘nigger’ and ‘kike’ will once again be heard in the workplace. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. But such a renewal of sadism will not alter the effects of selfishness. For after my imagined strongman takes charge, he will quickly make his peace with the international super-rich, just as Hitler made his with the German industrialists...He will be a disaster for the country and the world. People will wonder why there was so little resistance to his evitable rise. Where, they will ask, was the American Left? Why was it only rightists...who spoke to the workers about the consequences of globalization? Why could not the Left channel the mounting rage of the newly dispossessed?

AOC, 89–91

These are stunningly prophetic words, written two decades before Donald Trump’s election. One of the claims advanced repeatedly in post-election commentary—a claim that Rorty’s analysis seems to support on first reading—is that the rise of Trump is *fundamentally* connected to the economic decline brought about by globalization. I emphasize the word “fundamentally” because the obvious racism, sexism and xenophobia with which the Trump candidacy was replete seems to be depicted in Rorty’s passage as the *upshot* of growing economic anxiety, rather than as a phenomenon which arose independently on its own steam, as it were.² Rorty’s suggestion seems to be that badly educated Americans will tolerate

² One of the central claims advanced in post-election punditry is that the “economic anxiety” of white working-class voters delivered decisive industrial states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan to Donald Trump. This kind of analysis seems plausible on its face, but I think we should be cautious about assigning too much explanatory power to any single variable. As Jacob Levy points out, “An 80,000 vote margin in a 137 million vote election, about .05%, is susceptible of almost endless plausible explanations. The number of different factors that might well have moved that many votes is very large. So there are a lot of different true *but-for* explanations: but for Clinton’s failure to campaign in Wisconsin, but for the Comey letter, but for stricter voter ID laws and reductions in the numbers of polling places, but for Jill Stein, and so on, *ad infinitum*. (Levy 2016).”

“having their manners dictated to them by college graduates” only to the extent that their economic expectations remain positive, as if a modicum of economic security is a necessary condition for basic decency.

A corresponding view which has been circulating within liberal and progressive circles in the wake of the election is that the American Left lost its way, over the course of several decades, by focusing increasingly on so-called “identity politics” and decreasingly on a politics of class and economic redistribution.³ The divide between a politics of identity and a politics of economic class is coarse and imprecise, but it nevertheless loosely traces the shift in priorities taken by left political movements in the 1960’s, from (in Nancy Fraser’s words) a left focused primarily on socio-economic “redistribution,” “class interest” and “exploitation” on the one hand, and one focused primarily on “recognition,” “group identity” and “cultural domination” on the other. (Fraser 1997, 11) This is a very rough historical narrative, to be sure, but its broad contours are widely corroborated.

It is natural to read *Achieving Our Country* as advancing something in the neighborhood of this rough argument.⁴ For Rorty takes pains to point out that, at the same time as economic inequality had steadily deepened since the 1960’s, what he calls the “cultural Left” (the academic offspring of the 1960’s New Left) enjoyed “extraordinary success” in helping to bring about a more tolerant and egalitarian culture, in which acceptance of diversity and difference has increasingly become the norm. In a telling passage about how the post-Sixties cultural Left has reshaped American universities, Rorty writes:

In addition to being centers of genuinely original scholarship, the new academic programs [“women’s history, black history, gay studies, Hispanic-American studies, and migrant studies”] have done what they were, semi-consciously, designed to do: they have decreased the amount of sadism in our society. Especially among college graduates, the casual infliction of humiliation is much less socially acceptable than

³ See for instance Mark Lilla’s repudiation in the *New York Times* of what he calls “identity liberalism”. (Lilla 2016).

⁴ Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers agree with what they take Rorty’s central argument in *Achieving Our Country* to be: that “a shift in focus from identity politics to economic justice is long overdue.” (Cohen and Rogers 1998). See also James Livingston’s argument that Rorty “reinstates the priority of class as the irreplaceable principle of social organization ... and political struggle.” (Livingston 2000, 188).

it was during the first two-thirds of the century. The tone in which educated men talk about women, and educated whites about blacks, is very different from what it was before the Sixties. Life for homosexual Americans, beleaguered and dangerous as it still is, is better than it was before Stonewall. The adoption of attitudes which the Right sneers at as ‘politically correct’ has made America a far more civilized society than it was thirty years ago...Nevertheless, there is a dark side to the success story I have been telling about the post-Sixties cultural Left. During the same period in which socially accepted sadism has steadily diminished, economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased. 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.

AOC, 80–3

These observations have been taken to suggest that people on the Left would do well to refocus their energies on economic-distributive initiatives. This is not because, to put the point in Rorty’s terminology, combating “selfishness” is in the end more important than combatting “sadism.” It is simply because, given the contingent political trajectory of the last four or five decades, selfishness and economic inequality may be the more urgent political aims of the current moment. Or so the now increasingly common argument tends to go.

I do not believe that this is the right way to characterize the central argument in *Achieving Our Country*, however. For while Rorty’s distinction between “selfishness” and “sadism” loosely maps onto a distinction between class and identity politics, I am confident that he would have regarded the latter distinction as crude and overblown. Rorty is clearly tepid about “identity politics” insofar as that phrase refers to a genre of scholarship, pervasive in the American academy, which makes identity and cultural *otherness* its focus. But that does not mean that there is any tepidity in his support for the real-world political mobilizations carried out by marginalized identity groups—for women’s suffrage, for gay, civil, and indigenous rights. To equivocate on these different senses of the term “identity politics” (between the sense in which it picks out a series of real-world political mobilizations and the sense in which it names an academic sub-discipline) is

precisely to ignore the difference between real politics and cultural politics, which, if my argument here is correct, is the crucial distinction on which Rorty's vision for the American Left hangs.⁵

Real politics on Rorty's view are "short term" and require a "banal moral vocabulary." (Rorty 1991, 196) Cultural politics in contrast are "long term" and encourage imaginative "play upon the possibilities of a utopian future." (Rorty 1999, 239) "Amending the Constitution so as to give women the vote and shoving the Civil Rights Act through Congress" are famous examples of "real" or "power" politics. "Changing the terminologies in which straights describe gays and those in which white Americans describe African-Americans" are useful examples of cultural politics. Whereas real politics, in constitutional democracies, is a matter of "who should be elected, what legislation should be passed, how much of the GNP should be redistributed, and similar matters," cultural politics involves long-term attempts "to get future generations, when engaged in political deliberation, to use different words than those deployed by their ancestors." (Rorty 2010, 104) Whereas real politics is "transparent" and "workaday" cultural politics is, or may be, as far-reaching and transformative as spinners of new imaginary descriptions will make it. Real politics and cultural politics need not be at odds with each other on Rorty's view. But neither should the two be conflated.⁶

⁵ It might be objected that "identity politics" (in the sense of the term Rorty disparages), is really the political-philosophical thesis that notions like "cultural recognition" or "the recognition of difference" are indispensable for leftist politics. Rorty is clearly skeptical about that thesis. On his view, we still need "an explanation of why cultural recognition is thought so important." (Rorty 2000a, 11) I think the dispute between "Old" Leftists (like Rorty) and theorists of recognition (like Nancy Fraser)—about, roughly, whether it is sufficient to affirm our common humanity or whether we need to "recognize cultural difference" and assign "positive value" to minority cultures—is itself a question internal to the academic, cultural Left and should therefore be distinguished from the majoritarian aims of "real politics".

⁶ I think Rorty would have conceded that the divide between "real" and "cultural" politics is fairly porous. After all, changes in law and policy can sometimes, over time, instigate changes in culture, and conversely, changes in culture can sometimes instigate changes in law and policy. More, many social movements that are clearly engaged in "real politics" are often explicit about having something of a broad "cultural" agenda in addition to their "real-politics" agenda, and most people on the "cultural Left" approve (albeit, as Rorty says, "in a rather distant and lofty way") of the initiatives typical of the real-politics Left. (AOC, 78) Despite the porousness of the divide, I think Rorty is right to insist on the usefulness of a distinction between leftist political activity which is short-term, anti-selfishness, and

Understood as different manifestations of real politics, the distinction between identity and class politics is clearly untenable. For one thing, it obscures the prevailing *white* identity politics around which much of the welfare state consensus that Rorty so commends emerged. It can be tempting to think of an old Left agenda of public investment and economic redistribution in neutral political terms—as happily indifferent to considerations of race, gender and identity—but this overlooks the extent to which, for example, Roosevelt’s ability to bring the New Deal into existence depended on active complicity with Southern white identity politics.⁷ As Rorty himself notes, “The Democratic Party depended on the Solid South, and ... [FDR] had no intention of alienating Southern white voters in order to help blacks.” (AOC, 75) Perhaps Rorty underestimates the extent to which the redistributive policies of the old Left were premised on a kind of white identity politics, which is not to say that he is unalive to this fact. But the larger issue is that the choice between a politics of identity and a politics of economic class (both understood, again, in terms of *real* politics) is a false dilemma. These two kinds of initiatives can and must go together, as different but complementary components of a struggle for increasing freedom, equality and justice. Jacob Levy sums up the point crisply when he says, “If Black Lives Matter is ‘identity politics,’ then identity politics has provided one of the most significant political mobilizations in defense of freedom in the United States in my lifetime.” (Levy 2016)

Three Suggestions for the American Left

Rorty’s core positive argument in *Achieving Our Country* consists of three suggestions for the American Left. The first suggestion is that the Left should abandon the ideological purity characteristic of Marxist revolutionaries, and adopt in its place a pragmatic, piecemeal, reformist attitude. The second suggestion is that the Left should “put a moratorium on theory. It should try to kick its philosophy habit.” (AOC, 91) The third suggestion is that the Left should “wrap itself in the flag.” It should try to mobilize what remains of American national pride. (Rorty 2002, 16)

majoritarian on the one hand, versus leftist political activity which is long-term, anti-sadism, and utopian on the other.

⁷ This argument is made clearly and brilliantly in Katznelson 2005.

Before discussing these three suggestions in detail, it will be useful to get some terminology straight. For there are several “Lefts” that are distinguished in *Achieving Our Country* and it is occasionally unclear to which of them Rorty is directing his advice.⁸ Chronologically first in Rorty’s story is the “old” (pre-1960’s) Left. Rorty himself does not much like the term “old Left”; he recommends that it be dropped in favor of what he calls the “reformist Left”. “Reformist Left” is a term that covers those Americans who, “between 1900 and 1964 struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong.” (AOC, 43) If this description sounds vague and imprecise, that is quite intentional on Rorty’s part. For in introducing the term “reformist Left” Rorty tells us is that he is attempting to “smudge the line” which the Marxists tried to draw between leftists and liberals. (AOC, 44) The point of such smudging is to challenge the moral and ideological purity endemic among radical, particularly Marxist, leftists—the sort of purity that makes it impossible to see shades of political grey, to admit that good people sometimes make honest mistakes.⁹ It is the sort of purity that draws a sharp line between unbending, morally pure radicals on the one hand, and compromising, morally dubious liberals on the other. In Rorty’s “smudged” sense of the term, then,

Woodrow Wilson—the president who kept Eugene Debs in jail but appointed Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court—counts as a part-time leftist. So does FDR—the president who created the rudiments of a welfare state and urged workers to join labor unions, while obdurately turning his back on African-Americans. So does Lyndon Johnson, who permitted the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese children, but also did more for poor children in the United States than any previous president ... If we look for people who made no mistakes, who were always on the right side, who never apologized for tyrants or

⁸ I say that it is *occasionally* unclear since most of the advice in *Achieving Our Country* is unambiguously aimed in the direction of what Rorty calls the “cultural Left”. So it is that Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (1998) accuse Rorty’s arguments of failing to “reach beyond the ranks of tenured humanities professors”. It is an accusation to which Rorty happily pleads guilty. In reply to the charge that he is “just talking to Humanities teachers” Rorty admits: “Of course I am! ... Who did they [Cohen and Rogers] think I was talking to? Humanities teachers are people, too.” (Rorty 2002, 39).

⁹ See “Honest Mistakes” (in Rorty 2007) for more on Rorty’s impatience with this kind of moral purity.

unjust wars, we shall have few heroes and heroines.¹⁰

AOC, 43–45

If the Old Left was broadly “reformist” on Rorty’s story, the New Left—a term that covers those people, most of whom were students, who decided sometime around 1964, “that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system.” (AOC, 43)—was decidedly anti-reformist. While members of the Old Left took for granted that the United States could gradually be made a better country by enacting the right laws and policies, members of the New Left believed that America was fundamentally rotten at its core, and that plodding, incremental reform would never bring about the needed changes. The main quarrel between the Old and New Left on Rorty’s story, then, is a difference of opinion about reformism versus revolution: about whether it is possible to use the institutions of liberal democracy to increase freedom and equality, so to speak, or whether a whole new system needs to be envisaged.¹¹

¹⁰ This kind of “smudging” obviously does not muffle all differences between leftists and liberals. Deep disputes about the attractiveness of a capitalist economy, for example, remain completely untouched. Rorty himself admits that he “should love to suggest ways of reconciling market economies with social justice, but all [he] can come up with is the standard European-model welfare state.” (Rorty 1991c, 100) He cites approvingly Alan Ryan’s assessment according to which the only reasonable form of economic arrangements left after the implosion of Soviet communism is “a kind of welfare-capitalism-with-a-human-face, not easy to distinguish from a ‘socialism’ with a big role for private capital and individual entrepreneurs.” (Ryan 1990, 442; quoted in Rorty 1998b, 228–9) For Rorty, as for Habermas and many others, “we are stuck with market economies—which means with private property for the foreseeable future.” (Rorty 1991c, 100) I do not have the space to address this deep and complicated question here, but I think that there is a certain irony in the fact that while figures with a self-described Marxian orientation like Phillip Van Parijs and John Roemer have carefully articulated elegant economic experiments in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism, Rorty—the self-described pragmatist experimentalist—has nothing to suggest beyond the Swedish welfare state. For more on his *Unconditional Basic Income* proposal, see Van Parijs 1991 and 1995. For details on his “Coupon Socialism” scheme, see Roemer 1993 and 1996.

¹¹ Christopher Lasch, one of the leading voices of the New Left in the 1960’s, praises the New Left’s struggle “not merely for equality and justice but for a new culture, absorbing but transcending the old.” (Lasch 1966, 212) On Lasch’s view, “The New Left’s chief contribution to American politics...is that together with the war in Vietnam, it...moved many liberals

The second piece of advice Rorty offers the American Left is that it should “put a moratorium on theory.” This advice is clearly aimed at what Rorty calls the “cultural Left”. The cultural Left was established by the heirs of the 1960’s New Left and thrives mainly in humanities departments. “Many members of this Left,” Rorty explains, “specialize in what they call the ‘politics of difference’ or ‘of identity’ or ‘of recognition’”. This cultural Left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed.” (AOC, 76–77) Despite its laudable success in helping to make the United States a less sadistic country than it had been previously, Rorty is critical of this academic, cultural Left. His main complaint is that it spends too much time thinking about culture and stigma and too little thinking about what laws might be passed or what policies enacted. As a result, this Left does not spend much time asking,

whether Americans are undertaxed, or how much of the welfare state the country can afford, or whether the United States should back out of the North American Free Trade Agreement ... It thinks that the system, and not just the laws, must be changed. Reformism is not good enough. Because the very vocabulary of liberal politics is infected with dubious presuppositions which need to be exposed, the first task of the Left must be, just as Confucius said, the rectification of names ... The cultural Left’s principal enemy is a mind-set...which is, supposedly, at the root of both selfishness and sadism. This way of thinking is sometimes called ‘Cold War ideology,’ sometimes ‘technocratic rationality,’ and sometimes ‘phallogocentrism’ (the cultural Left comes up with fresh sobriquets every year).

AOC, 79; 78

The cultural Left on Rorty’s view is incapable of awe and incapable of hope. As a result, it fosters a “spirit of detached spectatorship” and a corresponding “inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action.” (AOC, 11) Since this Left regards the United States as both unforgivable and unachievable, it offers no proposals about how the country might, by passing certain laws and enacting certain policies, be improved. Instead, it trades in gloomy “resentment” and “knowing theorization.” (AOC, 127) Some of the

several degrees leftward.” (Lasch 1966, 188).

adjectives Rorty uses to describe this Left are “spectatorial,” “retrospective,” “disgusted,” “blasé” and “mocking”. (AOC, 35)

Rorty’s third piece of advice is that the Left should mobilize what remains of national pride. National pride tends to be regarded as something militaristic and chauvinistic in leftist, academic circles.¹² But, as Rorty says in the very first sentence of *Achieving Our Country*, “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement...Emotional 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.” (AOC, 3)

Raymond Geuss’s reaction to Rorty’s approbation of American national pride is typical of leftist intellectuals. Geuss confesses that he originally took Rorty’s “forays into the world of ‘patriotism’ as one of his little ironic jokes...When I realized he was serious,” he continues, “I was first perplexed, and then appalled.” This might seem like a severe overreaction, but Geuss raises an important point when he insists that, while “decorating the house with pictures of shamrocks is innocuous, preaching nationalism of any kind to a country armed to the teeth with every possible weapon, hyperaggressive, resentful in the face of its incipient economic and political decline, and prone to paranoia is very dangerous indeed.” (Geuss 2010, 162) Yet Geuss’s main complaint with what he calls Rorty’s “ultra-nationalism” is that it describes the world incorrectly. The United States is not exceptional; Rorty simply gets things wrong. As Geuss writes, “The very idea that the United States was ‘special’ has always seemed to me patently absurd, and the idea that in its present, any of its past, or any of its likely future configurations it was in any way exemplary, a form of gross narcissistic self-deception.” (Geuss

¹² Rorty would not have denied that national pride may sometimes take these more noxious forms. However, as he also points out, “The sort of pride Whitman and Dewey urged Americans to feel is compatible with remembering that we expanded our boundaries by massacring the tribes which blocked our way, that we broke the word we had pledged in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and that we caused the death of a million Vietnamese out of sheer macho arrogance...[T]here are many things that should chasten and temper such pride, but nothing a nation has done should make it impossible for a constitutional democracy to regain self-respect. To say that certain acts *do* make this impossible is to abandon the secular, antiauthoritarian vocabulary of shared social hope in favor of the vocabulary which Whitman and Dewey abhorred: a vocabulary built around the notion of sin.” (AOC, 32).

2010, 159) I think Geuss's criticism misses its mark. For Rorty's claim in *Achieving Our Country* was certainly not that the United States was special, in any interesting philosophical sense of "special". Rorty was not engaged in an attempt to locate the moral-political essence of the United States (there is no such thing on his view) but rather to commend a practical identity.

Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity. The argument between Left and Right about which episodes in our history we Americans should pride ourselves on will never be a contest between a true and false account of our country's history and its identity. It is better described as an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo.¹³

AOC, 13–14

Rorty was not the only major left-wing philosopher of his generation to acclaim a brand of American patriotism, but he was one of very few. If, as Rorty claims, "wrapping yourself in the flag when you did leftist politics was as natural as breathing" before the 1960's, doing so nowadays is decidedly unnatural. (Rorty 2002, 16) This is especially so at the intersection where leftist politics and continental or "postmodern" philosophy meet. As Rorty explains:

most people who admire Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida as much as I do—most of the people who either classify themselves as 'postmodernist' or (like me) find themselves thus classified willy-nilly—participate in what Jonathan Yardley has called the 'America Sucks

¹³ Matthew Festenstein correctly says that *Achieving Our Country* "exemplifies the attempt to yoke a narrative to the reformation of practical identity." It offers a "sentimental narrative redescribing twentieth-century American leftist thought in the service of Rorty's conception of social hope." (Festenstein 2001, 206–7) Rorty responded that he would have been "very happy indeed" if readers read his book in the way that Festenstein suggests. (Rorty 2001, 219) It is easy to quibble with some of the specifics in Rorty's sentimental narrative, of course. Rorty himself admits that the story in *Achieving Our Country* is in certain respects "amateurish," "over-simplified and even distorted" and that with regard to a number of his claims he is, "quite properly, rebuked by the [intellectual-historical] professionals". (Rorty 2000b, 207; 210).

Sweepstakes’. Participants in this event compete to find better, bitterer ways of describing the United States. They see our country as ... what Foucault called a ‘disciplinary society’, dominated by an odious ethos of ‘liberal individualism’, an ethos which produces racism, sexism, consumerism and Republican presidents. By contrast, I see America pretty much as Whitman and Dewey did, as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas. I think that our country—despite its past and present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing eagerness to elect fools and knaves to high office—is a good example of the best kind of society so far invented.

RORTY 1999, 4

Against what he dubs the “unpatriotic academy” Rorty confesses that, “We Deweyans are sentimentally patriotic about America—willing to grant that it could slide into fascism at any time, but proud of its past and guardedly hopeful about its future.” (Rorty 1999, 17)

How are Rorty’s three proposals for the American Left best understood? And what is the broader vision of leftist politics to which they lend support? I am claiming that Rorty’s core argument in *Achieving Our Country* is that the American Left should spend less time on cultural politics and more time on real politics, and that this is the conclusion to which Rorty’s three concrete suggestions most naturally point. Rorty’s wager is that, unless the Left (a) overcomes its moral purity, (b) cuts back on obscure theorizing, and (c) tries to mobilize a sense of national pride, it does not have a chance of practicing real, majoritarian politics. (Rorty 2002, 16) A Left that ignores these suggestions will become increasingly “isolated and ineffective” and eventually Rorty thinks, an object of contempt. (Rorty 1999, 254) In at least one place in *Achieving Our Country* Rorty makes this explicit. “Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate. The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms.” (AOC, 14–15)

Leftist Politics and Contestations over Culture

A few years before he wrote *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty noted that there were two “cultural wars” being waged in the United States. One of these wars

is not very important. It is a “tiny” and “upmarket” dispute internal to the academic Left: between those who see modern liberal democracy as fatally flawed and typical left-wing Democrat professors like Rorty himself, “people who see ours as a society in which technology and democratic institutions can, with luck, collaborate to increase equality and decrease suffering.” (Rorty 1999, 17) This is exactly the issue, recall, on which the Old and New Left diverged: between those who think gradual reform can deliver, over time, a more just and decent society and those who think that liberal democracy is unsalvageable. Rorty himself was a reformist. He thought that liberal society “already contains the institutions for its own improvement,” but he was also confident that very little, practically speaking, hangs on this dispute. (Rorty 1989, 63)

The other cultural war involves a series of familiar divides between what James Davison Hunter (1991) calls the “orthodox” and the “progressivists”. The opposing sides in this cultural war divide—imperfectly but reliably enough—along a series of issues like abortion, gay marriage, and funding for public schools, “food-stamps” and *Planned Parenthood*. They disagree about whether taxing the suburbs to rescue the inner cities is just and appropriate, and about whether gays and lesbians ought to be able to serve openly in the military. This second cultural war is extremely important, Rorty thinks. Its outcome will decide to a significant extent the future trajectory of American society.

It will decide whether our country continues along the trajectory defined by the Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction Amendments, the building of the land-grant colleges, female suffrage, the New Deal, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the building of the community colleges, Lyndon Johnson’s civil rights legislation, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. Continuing along this trajectory would mean that America might continue to set an example of increasing tolerance and increasing equality. But it may be that this trajectory could be continued only while Americans’ average real income continued to rise. So 1973 may have been the beginning of the end: the end both of rising economic expectations and of the political consensus that emerged from the New Deal...I feel no need to be judicious and balanced in my attitude toward the two sides in this ... culture war. I see the ‘orthodox’ (the people who think that hounding gays out of the military promotes traditional family values) as the same honest, decent, blinkered, disastrous people who voted for Hitler in 1933. I see the ‘progressivists’ as defining the only America I care about.

RORTY, 1999,16–17

Notice that the “trajectory” Rorty sketches here crisscrosses so-called “identity-politics” and Old Left redistributive initiatives. It blends together, correctly in my view, movements for female suffrage and gay rights on the one hand, with the New Deal and the building of the land-grant colleges on the other. Such crisscrossing adds substance to the main conclusion for which I have been arguing. My argument is that, contrary to a now popular reading of him, Rorty was not defending a distributive or economic agenda for the Left at the expense or to the exclusion of an agenda that organizes around identity. Rorty’s argument was a pluralist one. It is that leftist politics, properly conceived of, is fundamentally multifaceted. A plausible agenda for the Left will combine both anti-sadism and anti-selfishness initiatives, neither of which enjoys an intrinsic normative primacy over the other. But a plausible agenda for the Left must not merely take the form of spectatorial criticism. Nor can it consist primarily in long term attempts to change the culture, vital as such cultural change may be. An energized, effective Left must contribute to the “workaday” business of real, majoritarian politics. So, when Rorty complains in *Achieving Our Country* that “sadism rather than selfishness has become the principal target of the Left” (AOC, 76), this should not be read as a claim about the insignificance or triviality of sadism. The point is that sadism is combatted with long-term attempts to change the

culture by changing the way we speak and think. Combatting selfishness, by contrast, requires vigorous participation in real, majoritarian politics. It is not the sort of thing that is achieved by reading sufficient amounts of Deleuze or Lacan. We should be wary of the suggestion that the sort of thing that happens in university seminar rooms is somehow the central locus of Leftist political activity; that people who spend their time reading and writing about “theory” are in some sense the vanguard of leftist political struggle.¹⁴ On the contrary, the American Left needs to think more about the laws that need to be passed than about a culture that needs to be changed. (AOC, 78)

¹⁴ Rorty was certainly not against “theory” as such. He spent a lot of time reading and writing about this kind of work, after all, and would not have denied that much of it is interesting and edifying. The crucial question from the point of view of leftist politics, however, is whether such work abets concrete action in real politics. For instance, in *Achieving Our Country* Rorty commends Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson 1991) as a “brilliant book”. Nevertheless, it “operates on a level of abstraction too high to encourage any particular political initiative...After reading Jameson, you have views on practically everything except what needs to be done.” (AOC 78) A similar sentiment is expressed in a 2006 interview: “I think that the most effective criticism of traditions and institutions is to say ‘We don’t have to do it that way. Here is an alternative. Let’s try doing it this way.’ *Theories are useful only to the extent that they move people to see the present set-up as one alternative among many, and thus are inspired to dream up new options.*” (Rorty 2006, 58. Emphasis added) It is an interesting question why Rorty tended to disparage broadly “continental” or “post-modern” theory more sharply than broadly “analytic” political philosophy. I think there are at least two reasons for this. First, many Anglophone political philosophers tend to work at a less remote level of abstraction, so that the “generating ideas about what might be done” criterion is usually more proximate and visible. Second, Anglophone “analytic” political philosophers do not typically see themselves, or the kind political philosophy of which they are practitioners, as occupying an important locus of leftist political activity, as do some of their counterparts in the academic, cultural Left. Figures like John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, or G.A. Cohen would have never equated their *philosophical* work with a kind of political struggle.

For purposes of thinking about how to achieve our country, we do not need to worry about the correspondence theory of truth, the grounds of normativity, the impossibility of justice, or the infinite distance which separates us from the other. For those purposes, we can give both religion and philosophy a pass. We can just get on with trying to solve what Dewey called ‘the problems of men.’

AOC, 97

What Rorty calls “cultural politics” is an excellent model for philosophy, but a bad model for leftist politics.¹⁵ Leftist political struggle should concentrate around attempts to forge majoritarian consensus on the need for specific reforms, on passing laws and enacting policies, on mobilizing, petitioning, lobbying, demonstrating, on taking to the streets and exerting pressure. Combatting social sadism by reading books written by university professors, while valuable in its own way, can safely take a back seat to these efforts.

To sum up, Rorty is urging that we leftist intellectuals join forces with what remains of the “reformist Left”. This residual Left consist mainly of “labor lawyers and labor organizers, congressional staffers, low-level bureaucrats hoping to rescue the welfare state from the Republicans, journalists, social workers and people who work for foundations.” (AOC, 77) This Left does not think too much about culture. It has limited interest in political theory, is broadly (if guardedly) patriotic about its country, and still regards the United States as “achievable”.

I believe that there is great wisdom in Rorty’s vision for the American Left, and that the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency is an apt moment to begin working to bring it about.

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¹⁵ Recall that Rorty’s final volume of papers (Rorty 2007) bore the title, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.

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