Rorty's Post-Foundational Liberalism: Progress or the Status Quo?

Working paper; feedback welcome.

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Abstract: Richard Rorty's liberal utopia offers an interesting model for those who wish to explore the emancipatory potential of a post-foundational account of politics, specifically liberalism. What Rorty proposes is a form of liberalism that is divorced from its Kantian metaphysical foundations. This paper will focus on the gulf that appears between Rorty's liberal utopia in *theory*, the political form that it must ultimately manifest itself in, and the consequences this has for debates on pluralism, diversity, and identity, within liberal political thought.

The strength of Rorty's liberal utopia, in his analysis, lies in the fact that with the rejection of philosophy and metaphysics, we can simply get on with the job of reducing cruelty through experimental tinkering with the liberal political system. Instead of trying to develop intellectually sophisticated justifications for *why* we act, we should just act. Political action, for Rorty, does not require a philosophical or metaphysical justification. However, upon closer critical examination, we can see that whatever potential Rorty's liberal utopia may have in *theory*, this is negated by the fact that at the level of political praxis, his re-description of liberalism leaves us with a conception of liberalism that is essentially unchanged. Whilst Rorty has re-situated liberalism from the philosophical to the political, his solution fails to address any internal problems.

Keywords: Richard Rorty; pluralism; liberalism; Enlightenment liberalism; the political; conflict; feminism; post-foundationalism; public/private distinction

1. Introduction

The relationship between Richard Rorty and the realm of politics, especially his account of liberalism, is a contested one. His philosophical writings have been criticised for embracing post-modern relativism at the expense of universal values, whilst his political writings have been dismissed as being nothing more than an apology and uncritical defence of North American liberal democracy. However, it is my contention that Rorty's account of politics, especially liberalism, has been too readily dismissed, or at the very least, dismissed for the wrong reasons.

Accordingly, this paper will focus on aspects of Rorty's political thought, predominantly his re-interpretation and defence of liberalism. More specifically, however, this paper will examine Rorty's account of *post-foundational* liberalism, which is a form of political association that is explicitly severed from any metaphysical foundation, universal normative values, or *a priori* truth claims. To achieve this aim, I will examine Rorty's post-foundational liberalism through the lens of pluralism, diversity, and identity. To be exact, I will examine the extent to which Rorty's post-foundational liberalism is able to accommodate and support the demands of diversity and pluralism within the modern liberal democratic polity.

Whilst at first glance Rorty may have very little to offer with regards to issues of diversity and pluralism, I suggest that this is not the case. What I take from Rorty is the possibility of an approach to political association and justification that is explicitly divorced from metaphysics, irrespective of the arguments and values contained within such a metaphysical viewpoint. What Rorty offers us is a purely *political* form of political association. Rorty's rejection of metaphysics and philosophy is premised on his rejection of a Platonist or Kantian understanding of the world. For Rorty, this means "giving up the Kantian idea that there is something called 'the nature of human knowledge' or 'the scope and limits of human knowledge' or 'the human epistemic situation' for philosophers to study and describe" (Rorty 1999b, 34). For pragmatists, both classical and modern, there is a rejection of the belief that there is a way things 'really are'. Instead of this appearance/reality dichotomy, pragmatists such as Rorty want to use descriptions of the world and ourselves which are more useful than previous descriptions (Rorty 1999b, 27).

Metaphysics and philosophy, therefore, cannot refer to external *a priori* truths as these truths cannot exist outside the realm of human languages and values. Therefore, if one is to defend certain metaphysical or philosophical ideas, it must be done with recourse to the various values that communities hold, or wish to hold. By extension, it is erroneous for forms of political association, such as liberal democracy, to defend their legitimacy by recourse to metaphysics. Liberal democracy cannot be justified in

terms of Kantian metaphysics, but can, however, be defended in terms of the values that its members wish to propagate.

This pragmatist approach to metaphysics and philosophy, indeed to truth itself, ought not be misunderstood as a rejection of the fact that there exists a real environment outside of the realm of human languages, that this environment has a direct influence on us, and that we do interact with this environment. Indeed, as Rorty notes, "human belief cannot swing free of the nonhuman environment" (Rorty 1999b, 32). We can use language to describe objects and forces that are part of this real environment. However, the use of this language is not the same as describing the intrinsic nature of the world. Rorty, following Donald Davidson, argues that a truth theory for natural language (that is to say language which refers to and describes the objects and forces in the natural environment, such as biology and physics) is essentially nothing more than an "empirical explanation of the causal relations which hold between features of the environment" (Rorty, 1999b, 33).

Therefore, for Rorty, language does not describe objects and concepts external to these causal relationships, as these things do not exist. Metaphysics and philosophy cannot refer to external *a priori* truths, but instead are stories that we tell each other, and thus reflect values that various communities come to hold. Liberal democracy, therefore, cannot be justified by recourse to any Kantian metaphysical argument. Rather, for Rorty, we continue to use and defend liberal democracy because it is the best means we have for both reducing cruelty and promoting human flourishing.

My concern with Rorty, however, is not linked to the validity of his *philosophical* argument regarding whether or not truth exists. Rather, I focus on weaknesses within the *political* application of these views. More specifically, I argue that whilst Rorty's idea of a form of political association that is purely functional and not linked to any metaphysical or philosophical foundation has potential, in the form that it is presented to us, there is no room for the examination of important normative questions and considerations. Drawing on the critical analyses of Justin Cruickshank and Honi F. Haber, I argue that Rorty's post-foundational liberal utopia is actually *anti*-political. This has the detrimental effect of only allowing for what Rorty refers to as "experimental tinkering" (Rorty 1978, 565) within the already existing liberal democratic framework. I posit that Rorty's approach is not wrong *per se*, but rather, that it does not go far enough – it does not embrace *the political* where this is understood in terms of a clash of values.

2. Enlightenment Liberalism

Before Rorty's post-foundational approach to politics is critically examined, we first need to address the question as to *why* such a (non-traditional) approach to politics and political association may be beneficial, especially within the modern liberal democratic polity. What benefits are to be gained from a functional account of

politics which traditional accounts are unable to generate? As I have argued elsewhere, I suggest that the advantage of a functional account of politics - that is to say an account of politics that is explicitly severed from any normative or metaphysical foundation - is that it may be more capable of generating the assent of a diverse body of citizens than one that has distinct and overt normative or metaphysical overtones (Jones 2012).

The modern liberal democratic polity is not a homogenous entity; it is an increasingly diverse state that is characterised by forms of pluralism and multiculturalism. This diversity, in and of itself, is not problematical. Indeed, for many citizens of the modern liberal democratic polity, this diversity contributes to the richness of their lives and is a source of pride. However, within the post-9/11 political landscape, issues of difference and integration have re-emerged to dominate the political and social discourse. Questions regarding the extent to which the contemporary liberal democratic polity ought to accommodate and support the demands of multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity, are being asked, at times with increased hostility. These questions become increasingly problematic when they focus on the integration (or perceived lack thereof) of groups which are often considered to be "non-liberals" into the larger liberal democratic polity. Andrea Baumeister refers to this as the "politics of difference" (Baumeister 2000), and notes that "recently many liberal writers have become increasingly aware of the need to address the challenges and potential difficulties posed by the existence in most western-liberal democracies of diverse cultural groups, many of which do not share the values and beliefs typically associated with liberalism" (Baumeister 1998, 919). More recently, Baumeister has stated that:

> One of the most striking features of recent political discourse has been the rise of cultural pluralism and 'the politics of difference'. For liberalism this emphasis on difference and particularity has frequently been rather problematic. Indeed, since the onset of Romanticism, critics have rejected the liberal preoccupation with universalism as a failure to acknowledge the significance of those characteristics that distinguish one particular group from another (Baumeister 2000, vii).

Two recent events demonstrate very clearly how the demands of multiculturalism can clash with the values held by modern liberal democratic polities. These are the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005, and, more recently, moves by the French state in 2010 to ban any covering that obscures an individual's face. However, whilst these debates are often crudely reduced to a rather binary position of "the West versus Islam", or "us versus them" (Huntington 1997), it would be wrong to think that it is only Islam that clashes with certain aspects of liberalism. Indeed, running parallel with the emergence of liberal political thought from the Enlightenment onwards has been a growing body of diverse critical voices, ranging from the Romantics to the

communitarians, certain modes of feminist thought, to advocates of pluralism and multiculturalism. What unites this diverse body of critical voices is not a wholesale rejection of liberalism (although there certainly have been those who have made this call), but rather a critical examination of certain metaphysical and normative underpinnings contained within liberalism.

It is at this point that an important clarification needs to be made. It is wrong to suggest that liberalism is a singular and coherent body of thought. The target of these diverse critical voices is a form of liberalism that I, following Gerald Gaus, refer to as "Enlightenment liberalism" (Gaus 2003). What makes Enlightenment liberalism distinct from other forms of liberalism, such as Reformation liberalism, is its claim of the overriding metaphysical value of autonomy, and the belief in its universal authority. This distinction also mirrors that made by John Gray, who writes of the "two faces of liberalism", the first of which he traces to Kant with its focus on the autonomous individual and perfectionism, and the second to Locke with its focus on toleration and modus vivendi (Gray 2002). Thus, Enlightenment liberalism is a form of universal perfectionist liberalism.

Whilst Enlightenment liberalism is a specific term that I have borrowed from Gaus, I can find support for this conception of liberalism from other political philosophers, who, despite the fact that they use different labels, describe a very similar conception of liberalism. John Tomasi refers to an "ethical liberalism", which is characterized by the cultivation of autonomy or individuality within the citizen (Tomasi 2001, 12-13). David Owen writes of "philosophical liberalism", which is characterized by three distinct features: "a particular conception of the person, a form of asocial individualism and a commitment to universalism" (Owen 1995, 7). This conception of the person has a strong metaphysical grounding, and treats each individual as an "antecedently individuated subject" (Owen 1995, 7). That is to say that the individual exists prior to the state or society, as well as to its particular and contingent conception of the good. The individual is also characterized by the capacity for autonomous rational reflection and action. Furthermore, this capacity exists independently of any social role they may have. This particular conception of the individual receives political expression in the thesis of asocial individualism. Here, society is understood as a contract between the antecedently individuated subjects, and is given tangible expression as the state (Owen 1995, 7). Finally, this specific conception of liberalism is neither contingent nor particular. Rather, it is a conception of how political association *ought* to be. As Owen writes:

> The universalism of this conception of the relations between the individual and society and its expression in the liberal state flows from the metaphysical conception of the person, since what makes this conception 'metaphysical' is the claim that it applies universally to all human beings or, rather, defines what it is essentially to be a human being (Owen 1995, 7).

Whilst Gaus, Owen, and Tomasi, use different terms, it is my position that they are describing the same conception of liberalism.

In what capacity, then, does Rorty's form of post-foundational liberalism help us to eliminate some of the restrictive and exclusionary effects of Enlightenment liberalism? The strength of Rorty's liberal utopia, in his analysis, lies in the fact that he has disentangled politics from metaphysics, specifically liberal politics from Kantian metaphysics. Liberal politics and political institutions are not in need of *more* metaphysical, philosophical, or theoretical work regarding their justificatory basis or content. Instead, liberal politics should concentrate on how to improve the political institutions and values that already exist within liberal democratic societies. It is not that philosophical questions are not interesting or unimportant, but rather that they are a distraction (Bernstein 2003, 131). As Rorty argues:

> For the liberal ironist, there is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?" – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible. Nor is there an answer to the question "How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?" This question strikes liberal ironists as just as hopeless as the questions "Is it right to deliver n innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of $m \times n$ other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of n and m?" or the question "When may one favor members of one's family, or one's community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings?" Anyone who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities (Rorty 1989, xv).

Human cruelty is reduced, and flourishing is promoted, not through the metaphysical or theoretical work of liberal political theorists and legal scholars, but rather through the cultivation of solidarity. Solidarity is not achieved and sustained through metaphysics or rational analysis, but is instead *created*. As Rorty notes, "it is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would," or "there must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?"" (Rorty 1989, xvi). For Rorty, perhaps the most effective way of achieving and sustaining this sense of solidarity is not through theory, but rather through "genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel" (Rorty 1989, xvi). Here, in particular, we see Rorty promote Dickens, James, and Nabokov. Perhaps a more contemporary example that helps to illustrate this point is Michael Moore's 2007 documentary film *Sicko*. Despite the numerous

medical, legal, economic, and academic papers written on the benefits to be gained through the implementation of a non-profit universal health care system in America, this documentary was perhaps more effective in generating support through the cultivation of human solidarity via stories that we could relate to.

Returning to the focus of this paper, for Rorty, political action does not require metaphysical or philosophical justification; it does not require more theorizing. Instead of trying to develop intellectually sophisticated justifications for why or how we ought to act, we should just act. I posit that shifting the justificatory discourse of liberalism away from Kantian metaphysics (with its corresponding emphasis on autonomy) towards a *functional* account of liberalism will have the effect of removing normative considerations that are considered to be unnecessarily exclusive and restrictive. It is within this context that a critical examination of Rorty's post-foundational approach to politics and political association is warranted.

3. The Anti-Political Nature of Rorty's Liberal Utopia

Given the unique, and for some, no doubt unsettling nature of Rorty's liberal critique and subsequent post-foundational redescription, it is perhaps not surprising that his views – both philosophical and political – have been challenged. However, without dismissing the validity of these critiques, I do not wish my critical voice to be interpreted as nothing more than a broad survey of these criticisms. Rather, I wish to address the extent to which Rorty's philosophical and political views are adequately coherent and deep enough to deal with the issues associated with pluralism, diversity, and identity.

As I will demonstrate in the following sections, it is my contention that Rorty's philosophical and political project does not offer anything particularly useful for those who wish to escape from a narrow conception of Kantian metaphysics, and yet desire a strong conception of the *political*. Despite Rorty's (admittedly very eloquent) redescription of liberalism and its foundations, what he leaves us with is a conception of liberalism that is essentially unchanged. Whilst Rorty has resituated liberalism from the philosophical to the political, from the metaphysical to the functional, many of the problems associated with Enlightenment liberalism, such as the continued focus on autonomy, remain. In order to defend this argument, I will draw on the exposition and analyses of both Justin Cruickshank (2000, 1-23) and Honi Haber (1994, 43-72; 1993a, 61-74).[1] Whilst the foci of their work differ, they come to similar conclusions regarding the suitability of Rorty's liberal utopia for addressing issues of pluralism and the political.

3.1. Liberalism by Fiat

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[1] For a critical response to Haber's argument, see Martin (1993, 75-81). Haber's reply to Martin can be found in (1993b, 83-84).

The aim of Cruickshank's article is to examine three separate arguments that he believes Rorty proposes in order to solidify and justify the link between pragmatism and liberalism. These are: (1) the "pragmatist-ethnocentric argument" for liberalism; (2) the "social contract argument"; and (3) the "positivistic-conservatism argument". Cruickshank finds that ultimately none of these three arguments can provide a sufficiently robust argument linking pragmatism to liberalism. The "pragmatist-ethnocentric argument" for this link fails because it ultimately collapses back towards relativism (Cruickshank, 4-10); and the social contact argument is unsuccessful because it results in an extreme form of individualism, and a liberal state that cannot provide any justification for intervention to protect its population of poets (Cruickshank, 10-17). It is, however, Cruickshank's third argument that is directly relevant to this paper. The crux of this argument is that the positivistic-conservative approach can only justify liberalism by fiat, and in doing so remove any space for the examination of normative issues, either metaphysical or political, that question and challenge the status quo. That is to say, Rorty's liberal utopia is devoid of any substantive *political* content, where politics is conceived as being a clash of beliefs and opinions, as opposed to mere administration, or, to use Rorty's phrase, "experimental tinkering" (Rorty 1987, 565).

For Rorty, the strength of his liberal utopia lies in the fact that we are no longer burdened with the need either to conceive of coherent and rational metaphysical grounds for liberalism, or to construct theoretical critiques (of liberalism). This desire is immature, and once it is removed we can (to misappropriate Kant) overcome our self-imposed immaturity. With the need for metaphysical justifications rejected, we can simply "get on" with the *practical* political matters that we face within the modern liberal democratic polity. Metaphysics is a fetish to which we need to break our addiction.

This rejection of metaphysical discourse, with its reliance on a discovered truth of the world "as it really is", may suggest that Rorty is sympathetic to the claims of the post-structuralists. But this is not the case, for Rorty believes that the post-structuralists are guilty of the same immature fetishization of metaphysics and grand narratives as Enlightenment and modernist philosophers. In Rorty's analysis, the post-structuralists have simply replaced one discourse with another; one form of ideology critique with another. Concepts such as metaphysics, grand narratives, and the correspondence theory of truth, have been jettisoned in favour of new concepts such as "language" or "discourses", around which the post-structuralists can weave their "fantasies" (Rorty 1998, 242). Rorty is just as dismissive of those who espouse the "idiot jargon" (Rorty 1987, 570) of the new left as he is of those who demand a central place for metaphysics in the contemporary political discourse:

Belief in the utility of this genre [post-structuralism] has persuaded a whole generation of idealists in the First World that they are contributing to the cause of

human freedom by, for example, exposing the imperialistic presuppositions of Marvel Comics, or campaigning against the prevalence of "binary oppositions." This belief has helped produce the idiot jargon that Frederick Crews has recently satirized as "Leftspeak" – a dreadful, pompous, useless mishmash of Marx, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan (Rorty 1987, 569-570).

Similarly, in a reaction to what he views as the detrimental growth of "identity politics", Rorty laments that:

Nowadays…we are getting a lot of political and social philosophy which takes its starting point not from a historical narrative but rather from philosophy of language, or from psychoanalysis, or from discussion of the traditional philosophical *topoi* as 'identity' and 'difference', 'self' and 'subject', 'truth' and 'reason'. This seems to me the result of a loss of hope – or, more specifically, of an inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress (Rorty 1999a, 232).

Whilst this "new left" may have redescribed the nature of philosophy and philosophical analysis, all they have succeeded in doing is replacing one fantasy with another.

In order to transcend this self-imposed immaturity, Rorty argues that metaphysical, philosophical, and political *theorizing* must be replaced by political *practice* with regards to the public sphere. However, in order to achieve this demand, Cruickshank suggests, Rorty requires that we "have to accept the [existing] liberal political order as a functioning and legitimate 'given'" (Cruickshank 2000, 18-19). Thus, I suggest, following Cruickshank, that Rorty's liberal utopia is a form of liberal political practice that favours the status quo, and has very little room for political analysis and change. Therefore, theoretical concepts that problematize and examine the political status quo and its power relations – such as using feminism to criticize ascribed gender relations, or the politics of exclusion to examine how certain political minorities are excluded from the political process – are simply not allowed. Problem solving within the Rortyian liberal utopia must confine itself to dealing with tangible facts that are neither theoretical nor normative. Politics has been reduced to mere administration. As Cruickshank argues:

Instead of theories being used to question the status quo, or to conceptualise problems recognised by all (such as economic recessions) from different perspectives, we have a positivism which holds that politics deals with 'facts', which are practical, non-normative and a-perspectival. The 'facts speak for themselves' and require no theoretical elucidation (Cruickshank 2000, 19).

Cruickshank provides the reader with an example of how Rorty's "facts only" approach to political problem solving can run aground when challenged by theoretical and/or normative issues. The positivistic-conservative approach that Rorty favours would limit us to "tinkering" with the problem at hand, and restricting ourselves only to the facts. When discussing the failures of centralized governmental planning, and the need to find "an economic setup that satisfactorily balances decency and efficiency" (Rorty 1987, 565), Rorty notes that "there is nothing sacred about either the free market or about central planning; the proper balance between the two is a matter of experimental tinkering" (Rorty 1987, 565).[2]

But the reality is that economic policy and problem solving are complex issues, and are influenced as much by normative theory as they are by mere "facts". Indeed, the very concept of what a successful economy may resemble is a highly normative and contested issue. Even if I limit this discussion to competing economic views *within* liberalism (and thus exclude myriad anarchist, socialist, and Marxist views), we can see substantial differences. For those who are influenced by Locke, Hayek, or Nozick, a successful economy would recognize the right to private property acquisition and disposal, minimal taxation, and a laissez-faire marketplace. Conversely, there are those, such as Rawls, who believe that a redistribution of resources is just if it helps to improve the wealth and life of those who, through no fault of their own, are less well off. Similarly, competing solutions proposed for the ongoing Global Financial Crisis suggest that, given the "facts", we need either increased governmental regulation or increased deregulation and market liberalization.

This is only a brief sketch of the complex issues involved in economic policy. But what Cruickshank does demonstrate successfully is that very often what are considered to be raw facts are, in fact, influenced by normative values. Whilst Rorty may suggest that his approach is superior -because we have moved away from simply *thinking* about problems (and running the risk of producing more questions via philosophy) to actually *solving* them - it actually hinges upon a rather one-dimensional interpretation of what facts are. As Cruickshank concludes, "Rorty's views of politics may be useful for getting the trains to run on time, but it cannot deal with politics as a sphere for legitimate problematization of the given and for normative contestation" (Cruickshank 2000, 19).

The strength of Rorty's liberal utopia lies in the fact that his politics do not require a metaphysical or philosophical justification. However, it is the lack of space for philosophical *content* and *questioning*, as opposed to philosophical *justification*,

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[2] In David Cameron's recent speech on the proposed reforms for the 'modern public service', the Prime Minister spoke in a way that mimicked Rorty's 'facts only' approach to political problem solving. Cameron argued explicitly that the proposed reforms were not linked to political theory or ideology, but were a matter of problem solving. In the words of the Prime Minister, "These reforms aren't theory or ideology – they are about people's lives" (Cameron 2011).

which is at the heart of Cruickshank's critique. This argument can be bolstered by incorporating a line of critique against Rorty developed by Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe does not dismiss Rorty's politics outright; indeed, she believes that Rortyian pragmatism (along with Derridean deconstructionism) "could contribute to the elaboration of a non-foundationalist thinking about democracy" (Mouffe 1996, 2). For Mouffe, the strength of Rorty's work can be located in his critical views relating to "the pretentions of Kantian-inspired philosophers…who want to find a viewpoint standing above politics from which one could guarantee the superiority of democracy" (Mouffe 1996, 4). The crux of Mouffe's dispute with Rorty is not his relevance for politics, but rather the form in which his conception of politics manifests itself. In demanding a strong separation between the public and private spheres in his liberal utopia, Rorty's view of politics is driven by pragmatic and short-term solutions, and ultimately promotes piecemeal type social engineering. Mouffe's fear is that Rorty's liberal utopia is incapable of doing justice to the "multiplicity of struggles which call for a radicalization of the democratic ideal" (Mouffe 1996, 3).

There is a distinct shift away from an approach that advocates more normative analysis in favour of one that finds its solution to political problems in the expansion of liberalism. Mouffe characterizes Rorty's solution in the following way:

> What 'we liberals' should aim at is to create the largest possible consensus among people about the worth of liberal institutions. What is needed is a bigger dose of liberalism – which he [Rorty] defines in terms of encouraging tolerance and minimizing suffering – and a growing number of liberal societies. Democratic politics is only a matter of letting an increasing number of people count as members of our moral and conversational 'we' (Mouffe 1996, 6).

Using the analysis of both Cruickshank and Mouffe to support my argument, I propose that Rorty's liberal utopia is actually anti-political, in that it negates the *political* in its antagonistic form. In believing that a harmonization and consensus of values is possible within the public sphere, Rorty is denying the thesis of value pluralism and its political implications. Rorty does not accept, as Isaiah Berlin does (Crowder 2002; 2004), that conflicts between fundamental values, such as liberty and equality, can never be resolved. Any conception of liberal and democratic politics necessarily entails a particular understanding of the conflicted nature of politics, and this is something that Rorty's conception is unable to provide. Whilst Rorty has provided us with a form of liberal politics that is not hindered by restrictive metaphysical claims, it is nevertheless a form of politics that is unable to cope adequately with the demands of pluralism, diversity, and identity (Mouffe 1996, 7; 2005, 88, 89).

3.2. Solidarity and the Public/Private Dichotomy

The second line of critique that I draw against Rorty calls upon the insightful analysis of Haber, and her text *Beyond Postmodern Politics*. Much of her text is directed at determining whether postmodern politics can sustain a "politics of difference". Specifically, "can postmodernism remain true to the ideals of radical pluralism it borrows from the poststructuralist critique of language and the self and at the same time accommodate such pluralism with a new political program?" (Haber 1994, 43). Concluding her line of enquiry, Haber determines that, ultimately, Rorty's liberal utopia is unsuitable as a philosophical or political model for allowing radical pluralism. In order for any philosophical or political model to be used for such a purpose, it must not only be "able to accommodate a sense of self-identity…[but] self-identity in turn requires identity with others" (Haber 1994, 43). Solidarity, in Haber's analysis, requires that we are able to see parts of our story in those told by others, and when enough of us do, we are able to form a vocabulary from which we can voice our oppression. This is not to argue that significant points of difference ought to be ignored – indeed, identity can be a powerful source of strength – but rather it is only from this position of solidarity that points of resistance can be constructed and maintained (Haber 1994, 43). Thus, solidarity may be considered the political expression of empathy. Accordingly, pluralism requires a form of solidarity that is more than just a political expression of toleration. In this context, Haber is arguing against the liberal neutralism of Locke and the later Rawls.

However, the degree of commonality that is required to support and sustain this solidarity cannot be achieved by Rorty's liberal utopia. The primary source of this shortcoming lies in Rorty's continued insistence on the strict separation of the public and private spheres. For Rorty, not only is each sphere important in its own right, but so too is the separation of one from the other. The public sphere ought to be dedicated to social justice, whilst the private sphere is the space for self-creation and perfection. Not only do the demands for social justice conflict with the drive for self-creation, but, more importantly, what the poet or philosopher may have to offer public life can be dangerous or detrimental to the public sphere. In order to prevent this potentially detrimental overflow, Rorty solidifies the public/private dichotomy. He posits that it is necessary that we make "a firm distinction between the private and the public" (Rorty 1989, 83). Indeed, so important is this dichotomy that Rorty believes it may be the last *conceptual* revolution that Western political and social thought needs: "J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word" (Rorty 1989, 63).

For Rorty, this separation is a source of strength, as it allows us to take what is best from both spheres whilst eliminating the possibility of detrimental overflow of the private into the public. The separation between theory and practice, which both Cruickshank and Mouffe have already criticized, is necessary for Rorty's liberal utopia. But what Rorty sees as a necessary separation is, for Haber, the source of his

failing. For Haber, it is precisely this separation that "does not allow for the fluidity of the public space" that is needed for the development and nurturing of solidarity (Haber 1994, 50; Tambornino 1997, 76).

In Haber's analysis, those who inhabit Rorty's liberal utopia ought to be interpreted as autonomous and self-created individuals, as can be seen in his continued praise of Nietzsche (Rorty 1989, 23-43). But it is at this point that it becomes obvious that Rorty is still situated within the Anglo-American tradition. For Haber, this is a philosophical and political approach that "sees the self as being fully human only to the extent that he or she is a participant in the public realm, but the presupposition of that participation is the independent and autonomous citizen" (Haber 1994, 61). This conception of the autonomous agent is inexorably linked to the Enlightenment tradition, and has been criticized by the Romantics, communitarians, and feminists (Jones 2012). It appears as though Rorty has fallen into the same trap as many Enlightenment thinkers, in that he *assumes* that the private autonomous individual already exists, and that their existence is completely separate from their public one. That is to say, for Haber, Rorty either neglects or intentionally ignores the social and political origins and influences of the self (Haber 1994, 61).

Haber's fear is that by arguing that the self is antecedent to society, Rorty ignores the influences that the political and social dimension can have on the formation of the self. By ignoring or denying that the individual is, at least in part, culturally and socially constructed, Rorty is blind to the fact that the social and the cultural are themselves constructed with a discourse of power relations (Haber 1994, 61). This point is illustrated by Nancy Fraser:

Workers' movements, for example, especially as clarified by Marxist theory, have taught us that the economic is the political. Likewise, women's movements, as illustrated by feminist theory, have taught us that the domestic and the personal are political….Finally, a whole range of New Left social movements, as illuminated by Gramscian, Foucauldian…even by Althusserian theory, have taught us that the cultural, the medical, the educational – everything that Hannah Arendt called "the social," as distinct from the private and the public – that all this too is political (Fraser 1989, 102, quoted in Haber 1994, 61-62).

Despite what Haber may fear, Rorty is not entirely blind to the role of the public sphere and the social with regards to the formation of the individual's sense of identity. As Rorty notes, "Foucault helped us see, or at least reminded us, that our own descriptions of ourselves, and thus our own self-knowledge, is dependent on the linguistic resources available in our environment" (Rorty 1999a, 232). However, this acknowledgement that the self is, to some degree, socially and politically constructed, does not mean that identity politics and the politics of difference is something that Rorty believes to hold, or believes ought to hold, persuasive force with regards to

highlighting and reducing forms of cruelty, be they institutional or social. This form of analysis "cannot reveal the philosophical weaknesses of the bourgeois liberalism common to Mill and Dewy; they can only reveal its blind spots, its failures to perceive forms of suffering which it should have perceived" (Rorty 1999a, 236). Rorty explicitly rejects, for example, William Connelly's argument that liberal individualism ignores various forms of suffering because it does not acknowledge that the individual is socially constructed. Similarly, Rorty does not accept Iris Marion Young's argument that liberalism is essentially a project of the homogenization of difference (Rorty 1999a, 237).

Rather, Rorty sees liberalism, especially the liberalism of Mill and Dewey, as supportive of pluralism. Pluralism, in this context, however, equates to increasing the options for individual variation, and group variation, insofar as this can help individuals to recreate themselves. More specifically, Rorty does not see "the politics of difference as differing in any interesting way from the ordinary interest-group politics which has been familiar throughout the history of parliamentary democracies" (Rorty 1999a, 237). Even though Rorty, through his praise of Foucault, acknowledges the potentially negative effect that social and political forces may have on the formation of the individual in the private sphere, pluralism, diversity, and identity, are all reduced to the normative and atomistic liberal individual. All forms of 'otherness' are restricted to the private sphere, and even here they are couched in terms of individual identity, or that which is conducive to individual identity, as opposed to any form of collective identity.

Rorty appears to be defending a form of liberalism that, even though it has been shorn of its traditional metaphysical foundations, still entrenches a strict separation between the two spheres of human life. Furthermore, Rorty is still hesitant to admit that the social and political origins of the self require any form of critique of power relations other than that proposed by thinkers such as Foucault. This is evident, for example, in his discussion of feminism and ideological critique (Rorty 2010a, 103-112).[3] Despite what I believe to be the valid and necessary critique on the part of Cruickshank and Haber, Rorty is adamant that philosophy (in the form of ideological critique) is only of very limited value insofar as it can be used as a tool for progressive political changes, such as those demanded by feminism:

> Neither philosophy in general, nor deconstructionism in particular, should be thought of as a pioneering, path-breaking, tool for feminist politics….When philosophy has finished showing that everything is a social construct, it does not help us decide which social constructs to retain and which to replace (Rorty 2010a, 103).

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[3] For more on this issue specifically, see (Fraser 19996, 303-321) and (Janack 2010). However, Rorty argues that contrary to the concerns of many feminists, pragmatism is in fact capable of sustaining a feminist agenda (Rorty 2010b, 19-45).

Rorty holds that pragmatism, rather than critique for example, is the tool that is best suited to delivering these positive changes. Rorty's defence of pragmatism in this context hinges upon the terms of the feminist discourse and critique, their relationship to reality, and therefore their ultimate usefulness. In Rorty's analysis, there is a disjuncture between the philosophical views about "truth, knowledge, and objectivity", held by most "contemporary feminist intellectuals", and the objects to which they purport to refer (Rorty 2010a, 106). Rorty contends that these feminists argue that the "masculinist ideology" *distorts* reality, and thus also distorts what many women, and indeed men, are led to believe. The result of this distortion is that what are considered to be the "innate" and "inevitable" differences between the sexes, are in fact a perversion of "the truth".

However, Rorty argues this view *presupposes* that there are, in fact, such things as truth, knowledge, and objectivity. But, if the pragmatist analysis is correct, then this particular line of feminist ideology critique (against the masculinist ideology) collapses: if everything is a social and/or linguistic construction, then there is no truth or objective reality that the masculinist ideology distorts. The only assistance that philosophy can offer feminism is not at the level of uncovering the cause of this distortion, but rather to show us that any given masculinist description, practice, or object (such as the innate sexual division of labour, or even what constitutes "man" and "woman") is a social construct. Rorty doubts that beyond this level philosophy can be of any use (Rorty 2010a, 107-108).

This is not to suggest that, for Rorty, there can be no remedy to female oppression. Rather, the terms in which the solutions are to be couched have changed: instead of "natural" remedies, we ought to think in terms of "cultural" or "societal" ones (Rorty 2010a, 106). In this sense, feminism ought to view itself as a reformist movement rather than one seeking ideological revolution. Rorty suggests that "political goals are fairly concrete and not difficult to envisage being achieved; these goals are argued for by appeals to widespread moral intuitions about fairness" (Rorty 2010a, 105). Here Rorty believes that feminism is analogous to the eighteenth century abolition movement, rather than to nineteenth century Communism, in the sense that its goals are specific political reforms, not ideological revolution (Rorty 2010a, 105).

However, by confining the goals of feminism to political reform, Rorty not only solidifies the public/private separation, but also denies that what happens in the political sphere can have negative consequences in the private sphere. Owing to the fact that Rorty institutionalizes the public/private dichotomy, he also institutionalizes marginalization and oppression. As correctly identified by Cruickshank and Haber, the issues that Rorty has confined to the private sphere need to be brought into the open so that they can be made the focus of political critique and debate. Those who argue that "the personal is the political", such as feminists, should be troubled by Rorty's liberal utopia. Opening the private sphere to political critique and debate

would have the effect of opening the larger public sphere to modifications and changes in directions which would allow for the participation of those who had been previously marginalized and excluded. But Rorty's liberal utopia is unable to engender this form of solidarity as it is not capable, I conclude, of offering a critique of power relations, especially as they affect the public/private dichotomy.

4. Conclusion

At the level of theory, Rorty's post-foundational interpretation of liberalism holds potential as a less exclusionary form of social and political association. This is because he intentionally distances himself from the discourse of metaphysics (even going so far as to reject the tag of relativism). Instead, Rorty is concerned primarily with determining what 'works' for 'us' as citizens of Western liberal democratic states. However, the post-foundational reformulation of liberalism that Rorty presents is still essentially a closed and reductionist account of social and political association.

The problem is not that Rorty's liberalism is devoid of any metaphysical content. Indeed, I think this is potentially a rich vein for political philosophers to explore. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that the form that it does ultimately take is essentially an unchanged form of Enlightenment liberalism. It closes off all spaces that would allow not only for the discussion, but also for the contestation, of important normative issues. Rorty's critique of liberalism simply does not go far enough: whilst he examines and rejects the need for metaphysical justifications of liberalism, he leaves its political form essentially untouched. Rorty refuses to acknowledge that many of the issues he restricts to the private sphere do in fact possess a distinct *political* element, with power-laden overtones. By privatizing philosophy, he has ensured that the political discourse of pluralism has been rendered ineffective. The dominant political paradigm, indeed the *only* political paradigm within Rorty's liberal utopia, is that of the "bourgeois liberal", which amounts merely to Enlightenment liberalism by a different name. As Haber argues, "anyone who speaks with a voice of the 'other' is only allowed [to do so] in the private sphere" (Haber 1994, 62).

The crux of my critique against Rorty, which I have made through the voices of Cruickshank and Haber, is that Rorty's liberal utopia, which is his final word regarding the reconciliation of pluralism and politics, is simply not equipped to serve those who have been marginalized or excluded by the traditional Enlightenment liberal process and its underlying universal and metaphysical assumptions. In order for a form of politics that is capable of accommodating the demands of pluralism, diversity, and identity, to be viable, it must be able to bring into the political and social arena those who have been traditionally marginalized or excluded, as well as to allow for the critique of previously normative considerations. In order to be able to do this, Rorty would need to politicize what he has confined to the poet and the

philosopher. Issues such as class, sex, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity, need to be included in the public sphere *in addition to* the private sphere, and it is clear that Rorty does not allow for this. Rorty needs to acknowledge something that has been at the forefront of feminist thought since at least the second-wave feminists: that the personal *is* the political.

Acknowledgments

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