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ETHNOCENTRISM, SOCIAL CONTRACT LIBERALISM AND  
POSITIVISTIC-CONSERVATISM: RORTY'S THREE THESES  
ON POLITICS

**ABSTRACT.** In this article I argue that Rorty has three separate arguments for liberalism. The pragmatic-ethnocentric argument for liberalism, as a system which works for 'us liberals', is rejected for entailing relativism. The social contract argument results in an extreme form of individualism. This renders politics redundant because there is no need for the (liberal) state to protect poetic individuals, who are capable of defending themselves. Even if the less able are harmed, the state could not prevent this, given Rorty's arguments about discursive enrichment within a language game. Finally, the positivistic-conservative argument legitimises liberal politics by fiat, and makes normative discussion about the status quo illegitimate. Here the argument is that politics is a matter of reactive technical piecemeal problem-solving, to restore the harmony of the status quo. As politics deals with 'facts', normative 'problematizations' of the functional status quo are illegitimate (in the public/political sphere). So, either anything goes, and politics is redundant, or discussion of politics is depoliticised and confined to the private sphere. Consequently, Rorty has no way to explore issues of power, or normative contestation. Therefore he is unable to address issues of social justice within liberal democracies, such as feminist arguments about an ascribed gender status limiting equality of opportunity.

**KEY WORDS:** equality of opportunity, gender, liberalism, pragmatic-ethnocentric argument, Rorty, social contract argument

INTRODUCTION: POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

Rawls' *A Theory Of Justice* changed the conceptual landscape of contemporary political philosophy;<sup>2</sup> but according to Rorty,<sup>3</sup> Rawls has been misread. The significance of Rawls' work, on the usual reading, lies in its advocacy of deontological liberalism, which ran counter to the then

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<sup>2</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1991] 1994), 175–96.



ruling paradigm of utilitarianism. With such deontological liberalism, right is held to be prior to the good, which means that a just society is one which does not presuppose any specific, substantive conception of the good. Rather, a society is just if it is in accord with right, which means allowing individuals the freedom to choose. For deontological liberalism, right is prior to the good because the self is prior to its ends. The self is a decision-maker that transcends its socio-historical location in a particular community, and it is this transcendental quality, rather than the attainment of specific ends, that defines justice.

Now although Rawls accepted the deontological position, he found its Kantian metaphysical aspect problematic. For Rawls, the reference to a (noumenal) self which transcended its community was too vague, and too far removed from substantive issues of distributive justice. It is not at all clear how a detached noumenal self can be connected to the phenomenal world of specific empirical issues, without the linkage being rather arbitrary. Rawls therefore sought to derive principles of justice from an hypothetical choice situation. In this situation people would have to decide on the principles of distributive justice without knowing what their social position would be. Without knowing whether one was to be rich or poor, etc., one would have to decide on the principles of distributive justice that would constitute the just society: the point here being that the principles of justice would not be defined in terms of substantive ends sought by individuals. Instead, the principles of justice would be derived from individuals' empirical knowledge of society coupled to an ignorance of their position in that society. So, Rawls sought to argue for an empirical deontological liberalism, rather than a deontological liberalism based on Kantian metaphysics.

This deontological liberalism provoked a critical rejoinder from communitarians, who argued that there is no self which is distinct from its social environment, and that liberalism cannot be justified, because its (deontological) philosophical presupposition is fallacious. Rawls' attempt to move beyond the rather vague and metaphysical Kantian notion of the self was rejected by communitarians, on the grounds that it still hankers after some notion of a universal essence for the self, when the self is definable only in terms of its socio-historical location within a community. Thus Sandel refers to Rawls' argument as "deontology with a Humean Face".<sup>4</sup> What this means is that Rawls tries to retain a 'revised deontology', which does away with the metaphysical notion of a transcendent self, but that it fails to avoid such an empty, abstract metaphysical conception of self-

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<sup>4</sup> M. J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1982] 1992), 13–14.

hood. For Sandel, Rawls' revised deontology simply replicates the Kantian attempt to use an asocial subject as the foundation for social justice.

Rorty agrees with the communitarian rejection of a transcendental self, but he thinks that communitarians such as Sandel have nonetheless misread Rawls. Rorty argues that for Rawls, the self is an historical contingency, and that the reference point for political discussions concerning justice will be derived from social conventions, rather than from reference to a transcendental self. So, when Rawls "speaks of an 'Archimedean point', he does not mean a point outside history, but simply the kind of settled social habits that allow much latitude for further choices".<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on the community may make Rorty seem like a communitarian. However, Rorty argues that communitarianism is wrong to move from rejecting deontological justifications for liberalism to rejecting liberal political institutions. Reference to some fixed human essence may be wrong, but this is not to say that liberalism is wrong. For Rorty, politics can exist without philosophical foundations (whether deontological or otherwise). Indeed Rorty turns the tables on the communitarians, by arguing that the communitarian conception of the situated self is better suited to liberal democracy than the Enlightenment notion of a transcendental self.<sup>6</sup> This is because, instead of having individuals who are detached from society, we have people who are socialised into being liberal democrats. In this case, the danger of fanaticism over ultimate values is much reduced, as people take a pragmatic approach to politics, by not forcing onto others their value judgements concerning the good life. As Rorty puts it, given our history, we "put liberty ahead of perfection".<sup>7</sup> To be sure, this may remove passion from the public sphere, but it is worth it. Against the communitarian criticism that liberalism produces rather sterile, bland individuals, Rorty replies that "even if the typical character types of liberal democracy *are* bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic, the prevalence of such people may be a reasonable price to pay for political freedom".<sup>8</sup>

So for Rorty, we must reject both deontological liberalism and the communitarian rejection of liberalism, in order to embrace a pragmatic acceptance of liberalism as a system which works, for us, by protecting our freedom. However, Rorty's pragmatic emphasis on political practices which work, for us, is untenable. Rorty's 'ethnocentrism' holds that the self and 'truth' are contingent upon prevailing socio-historical norms (the

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<sup>5</sup> Rorty, *op. cit.*, 186–7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

first thesis) and this results in epistemic and normative relativism.<sup>9</sup> This problem, though, is overcome when Rorty tacitly imports an essence for the self, moving from an ethnocentric pragmatism, concerned with our practices working for us, to a social contract justification of liberalism (the second thesis). Unfortunately though, this individualism makes politics redundant and indeed illegitimate. Finally, when Rorty turns his attention from a social contract political philosophy to the actual functioning of liberal democracies, he seeks to legitimise them by *fiat*. Here a positivistic-conservatism (the third thesis) is used to justify the status quo. This is similar to the pragmatism of the first thesis, for it holds that ‘our system works for us’. However, it does so by replacing the pragmatist argument for epistemic contingency with epistemic and normative certainty (the *fiat*). In short, what starts out as a pragmatic ethnocentric defence of liberal democracies becomes a philosophical justification of liberalism based on an essentialist theory of a transcendental self, and a positivist conception of social reality as being constituted by discrete ‘facts’, about which there can be very little (legitimate) space for normative contestation.

#### FROM CERTAINTY TO CONTINGENCY: RORTY’S PRAGMATISM AND THE FIRST THESIS

For Rorty, we have been beguiled by the modernist conceit, which presumed that we could wash away our socially contingent perspectives in order to achieve certainty in knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Against this, Rorty wants to make us disillusioned with the spectacle of beliefs being able to picture or represent reality as it ‘really is’. Thus, the idea put forward by the foundationalist philosophies of mind, that by falling into the mind we could gain knowledge by setting the terms of intellectual enquiry in terms of the (metaphysical) properties of the mind, is rejected by Rorty as “methodological solipsism”.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Rorty rejects the correspondence theory of truth, arguing that we cannot step outside our beliefs to see if they correspond with reality.<sup>12</sup>

Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is a rejection not just of foundationalist epistemology, but of epistemology *per se*. This is because, for Rorty,

<sup>9</sup> See M. Billig, “Nationalism and Richard Rorty: the Text as a Flag for Pax Americana”, *New Left Review* 202 (1993), 69–83, for an interpretation of Rorty as being ethnocentric in the sense of espousing American nationalism.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., 1–110. See also R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, [1980] 1994).

<sup>11</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., 191–2.

<sup>12</sup> *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., 22–4.

there is no distinction to be made between a theory of knowledge and the notion that knowledge is to be defined in terms of epistemic certainty. Any reference to knowledge or truth turns on what Rorty refers to as the representationalist problematic, whereby beliefs are classed as knowledge because they represent reality in a non-perspectival way. Therefore knowledge is based upon certainty, because the manifest truth is recognised as such. Once we reject this concern with beliefs representing reality, we can, as some may say, ‘get on with our lives’, by shifting our attention from abstract and specious epistemological concerns to practices for coping with reality. In other words, we should shift our attention from the representationalist to the anti-representationalist problematic.<sup>13</sup> Hence Rorty counsels us to look for ‘toeholds’, rather than search for some form of epistemic ‘skyhook’, to pull us out of our socially contingent practices.<sup>14</sup> Instead of seeking epistemic certainty, we have to embrace the contingency of practices, and to seek better practices which help us cope with reality. This is not to deny any reference to beliefs, but rather the point is that we should be concerned with how to ‘go on’, rather than how to know that we know. In sum, we should reject epistemology for a pragmatism which switches the emphasis from beliefs and ‘knowing’ to practices.

The argument about the contingency of beliefs and practices is complemented by an argument for the contingency of selfhood. To reject the foundationalist philosophy of mind is, obviously, to reject the accompanying notion that the individual (which was to become ‘the self’) could be regarded as an entity definable in terms of universalistic features that transcended the social environment. If we cannot have knowledge by turning to the resources of the lone mind, which is simultaneously to turn away from the corrupting influence of society, then the need to conceptualise humanity in terms of universalistic epistemic features becomes redundant. Instead of the universal rationalist individual, with its self-contained epistemic sovereignty over reality, there is the self, which is a social and historical contingency. The self is a web, spun from the beliefs which constitute its social environment, but with no transcendent spinner.<sup>15</sup> This social environment is conceptualised discursively, as a language game, and the identity which the self fashions for itself is called by Rorty its “final vocabulary”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1–17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 123, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1989] 1992), 73.

This emphasis on contingency may be taken to imply that Rorty's project is a form of nihilism, which has as its sole function the denial of any positive claim. Truth claims could be 'deconstructed' in order to unmask their social contingency, and the self could be conceptualised as an epiphenomenon of a discursive disciplinary power regime, where no self-overcoming was possible. Rorty, however, takes a different view. Having rejected the modernist conceit, he wants to make us shift our attention to practices for coping with reality, rather than urging that we content ourselves with making negative claims. This brings us to the next aspect of Rorty's pragmatism, which is to shift our attention to politics, and to argue for the justification of liberal democracy.

Rorty cannot make truth claims about a defining human essence in order to defend liberal democracy, and so he turns to what he calls 'ethnocentrism'.<sup>17</sup> This argument for ethnocentrism is his first thesis on politics. What ethnocentrism means here is that, given the lack of any transcendent human nature, we can justify political systems only in a circular way, by saying that our practices are good for us because they are our practices. In other words, we judge our political system by standards which are – and which can only be – relative to our society. This may, *ceteris paribus*, justify liberal democracy to those who live in liberal democracies, but it may also appear to prevent any form of communication, as every community would be unable to understand, let alone judge, other societies, because they had different standards. In other words, the lack of some universal norm would seem to result in hermetically sealed communities.

This view, though, is not accepted by Rorty. He argues against Lyotard's contention that once we drop the notion of meta-languages, then either there is no interaction between different societies, or else force is used by one group to impose its will. Lyotard misread Wittgenstein, according to Rorty, because he mistook the impossibility of translation for the impossibility of understanding. So, whilst one may lack any meta-perspective with which to compare different languages in order to translate one language's representations into another language's representations, we can still have practical knowledge about how to go on. As Rorty puts it, "if one sees language-learning as the acquisition of a skill, one will not be tempted to ask what metaskill permits such acquisition. One will assume that curiosity, tolerance, patience, luck, and hard work are all that is needed."<sup>18</sup> So, whilst we cannot "leap out of our western social democratic skins" we can still get some understanding of others.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., 1–17, and 211–13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

The problem, though, is that this argument does collapse into epistemic and normative relativism. Rorty notes that relativism is self-refuting, and he argues that as he does not have a theory of truth, he cannot have a relativist theory of truth.<sup>20</sup> However, the latter point indicates why Rorty is a relativist, his denial notwithstanding: for in replacing truth by socially contingent beliefs, one is reducing truth to social norms. Relativism is an *anti*-epistemology (rather than a *non*-epistemology) since rather than argue for a theory of truth or knowledge, which is held to be *relative* to social norms, truth and knowledge are *reduced* to social norms; they are identical with the prevailing norms. Rorty's rejection of epistemology for contingency performs exactly the same manoeuvre by holding that instead of having true beliefs, we just have beliefs which are contingent upon their social environment.

The upshot of this is, as Geras argues, that if we lose truth, then we lose the notion of injustice, which means that as regards morality and politics, 'anything goes'.<sup>21</sup> Or to put it another way, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'; and, we may add, 'whatever that happens to be'. For if we cannot make truth claims, then instead of appealing to some notion of "rights", or "justice", which are not necessarily reducible to the contingent prevailing social norms, then all we can do is turn to rhetorical manoeuvring. Instead of criticising racism, for instance, by saying that racism is false (because reality does not support this belief) or criticising the use of torture by saying that it violates universal human rights, we can 'criticise' by seeking to offer an alternative way of going on. Criticism that is, would not turn on truth claims, but on trying to make an alternative course of action appear better. One would try and change the subject, using poetic redescription, and hope that others prefer the poetic reworking of the language game, because this is the only way to get an alternative course of action to look better. Such poetic redescriptions may be in favour of universal human rights (which would be local and contingent norms for 'us' liberal democrats) but they may, alternatively, be in favour of racism and fascism.

Furthermore, if the self is decentred then there is no self to transcend its environment, which means that the self would be a passive epiphenomenon of the language game. To make the self totally contingent is to endorse a form of behaviouristic determinism, as the rules of the language game would simply 'programme' the individual. The rules of the language game, that is, would provide positive and negative reinforcement stimuli, which

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>21</sup> N. Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: the Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty* (London: Verso, 1995), 107–46.

determined the behaviour of the individual automaton. In which case, the citizens or subjects of every political order would find that order *necessarily* legitimate. The very notion of poetically redescribing a language game (i.e. engaging in putative political – normative critique) would not be possible. For such redescription would be premised upon the idea that the self was more than a mere contingency, because it would have the reflexive ability to ‘stand back’ from the prevailing norms, and the poetic ability (or essence) to rework such norms. So, in addition to the epistemic relativism that results from the contingency of truth argument leading to normative relativism, the contingency of selfhood argument also leads to normative relativism.

#### LIBERALISM AND PRAGMATISM

Given what has been said so far, it would seem as though Rorty’s pragmatic ethnocentrism could not offer any defence of liberal democracy, because the arguments for the contingency of truth and selfhood result only in relativism. Having said this though, we should pause briefly, to note that there is in fact something of an affinity between pragmatism and liberalism. Liberalism can be presented as a practical non-doctrinaire political system, which is based on a public – private distinction that is intended to protect the individual’s property and liberty. Instead of trying to base a political system on an interpretation of some special political or religious texts, politics is based simply on some practical precepts which afford individuals freedom and protection from having their property illegitimately alienated by force or fraud. Thus liberalism and pragmatism would seem to complement one another, as they are both concerned with practical issues concerning concrete interactions between individuals, in terms of their material efficacy and utility, rather than with the imposition of prescriptive schemes based on some ‘special texts’. Liberalism would be ‘pragmatic’ therefore, in the sense that it allowed individuals the freedom to go on, and to try and develop their abilities.

It would be more accurate, though, to say that the pragmatic aspect of liberalism pertained only to what may be called reformist liberalism, which is premised on practical improvements rather than on (overtly) ideologically-driven prescriptions for, say, ‘free’ markets.<sup>22</sup> Such reformism would be concerned with altering the remit of the state, and enabling individuals, who are otherwise disadvantaged, to achieve equality of opportunity. All of which means that the public-private boundary is contin-

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<sup>22</sup> These notions of pragmatism and reformist liberalism are ideal types.



gent upon policies generated to empower individuals who would otherwise be constrained in a way deemed unacceptable by the social context within which they existed. So, for example, the state may introduce some form of 'positive discrimination' policies, in order to help women and/or those from ethnic minorities to overcome a relatively embedded culture of sexism and racism. Such pragmatic liberalism therefore regards the exact remit of the state as something of a contingency, because the state simply 'tinkers' to improve equality of opportunity.

The notion of the public-private boundary being relatively contingent would be antithetical to the classical social contract arguments of Hobbes and Locke, which essentialise the public-private distinction.<sup>23</sup> For the social contract theorists, political society replaces the state of nature when individuals restrict their freedom by setting up a state: this means that the private sphere, which is created by the social contract, sets up the boundary of the public sphere of state regulation. Given this atomistic individualism, the state would simply exist as an 'umpire' regulating competition between individuals in the market, and the exact boundary of the state's remit could be clearly defined in terms of overseeing the 'rules of the game'. The problem, though, is that such a position essentialises the public-private boundary by refusing to recognise that the said boundary is a moveable feast, the result of interaction between various groups (such as religious, working class or monied interests, pressing for state regulation in certain areas). In universalising capitalist social relations into a theory of human nature (expressed in the state of nature) the social contract arguments empty the public-private distinction of any social or historical content, by simply presenting politics as a fixed set of rules to regulate the expression of competitive human nature. In other words, given a fixed model of human nature as materially acquisitive, politics is simply presented as a fixed set of rules to regulate competition. Obviously this can be explained in terms of the historical context, with such authors seeking to justify liberalism as a nascent political philosophy, rather than analysing the specific policies generated by the state. Nevertheless, such a minimalist conception of politics, as a fixed set of formal rules which limit freedom, cannot but turn on an essentialism which abstracts politics from fluid relationships, in order to universalise some fixed principle.

In addition to the fluidity of the public-private distinction, the minimalist definition of politics cannot account for the way that the private and public spheres are mutually implicated. That is, in abstracting politics from change, by turning it into a fixed set of rules – which have a strictly

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<sup>23</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, E. Curley, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994); J. Locke, *Two Treatises Of Government*, P. Laslett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

delimited application, concerning contractual interaction and the protection of material property between atomistic individuals – no sense could be made of how public social relations effect private conduct, and how private conduct may have ramifications for the public sphere. In other words, the emphasis on material interactions in the market, regulated by positive law, prevents an understanding of social relations linking individuals and cutting across the public-private boundary. This point has been illustrated by the feminist argument that socially created gender roles define what conduct is appropriate in the private sphere. The influence of these roles, therefore, would mean that the private sphere of the home is a main site for the reproduction of patriarchy, for it is in the home that women's public lives, or lack thereof, are set. Similarly the argument against pornography turns on arguing that the private and the public are mutually implicated within certain social relationships. In this case the private consumption of pornography, for example, would be held to have public consequences, because it would reinforce a particular view of women; and this view of women as sex objects would underlie the production and consumption of pornography in the first place. The private want for pornography would stem from socially defined (public) gender relations, and consumption of pornography would recreate those relations, both in the public and the private spheres.

#### THE SECOND THESIS: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT ARGUMENT

##### *The Poetic Self and a Minimalist Conception of Politics*

In addition to the pragmatist argument for ethnocentrism, Rorty has a second political thesis. With this second thesis we still have an emphasis on language games, but in this case, instead of a decentred self being programmed by the public rules of the language game, we have individuals who create private languages.<sup>24</sup> Here Rorty tacitly imports an essence for the self, as a poetic creator of private languages, with the poetic self being enriched by refashioning its (discursive) identity through the creation of such private languages. This avoids the epistemic and normative relativism that befell the pragmatist ethnocentric argument, by justifying liberalism in relation to an essentialist concept of the self/human-being. I refer to this second thesis as the 'social contract argument', because a minimalist con-

<sup>24</sup> Obviously such a notion of private languages would be an anathema to Wittgenstein, but despite the references to Wittgenstein, the notion of creating unique final vocabularies is akin to fashioning private languages. This is because the individual is solely responsible for using words in a new way and giving them new meaning.

ception of politics (as a fixed set of rules to protect individuals' property and freedom) is justified by reference to an ontology of human being, as (discursively) acquisitive. The poetically self-enriching individual needs to have the freedom to enrich him-/herself, whilst having their (discursive) property (i.e. their identity) protected from abuse by others. This does not mean that Rorty essentialises the public-private distinction though, as many critics hold:<sup>25</sup> rather, the way he essentialises the self precludes the possibility of justifying liberalism and its defence of the public-private boundary.

### *The Poetic Self*

Rorty's social contract argument for liberalism is just that: an argument for liberalism, rather than for the contemporary form of liberalism as liberal democracy. Consequently, the argument centres upon the public-private distinction. Rorty shares the classical liberal conviction that individuals should be left to their own devices to enrich themselves, and that the state should interfere with an individual's freedom only in order to prevent harm. Unlike classical liberals though, Rorty does not conceptualise harm and enrichment in material terms. His argument is that the self can discursively enrich itself by poetically reweaving its identity, or 'final vocabulary', and that harm is to be understood in terms of having an identity forced upon one. Such harm is described by Rorty as a unique form of pain, and one which separates humans from animals: it is the harm of humiliation. Rorty describes this as a 'common danger' which unites all people.<sup>26</sup> It is a human universal, which leads Critchley, Dews and Warren to comment that Rorty makes an appeal to a universal fact about human nature.<sup>27</sup> Recognition of cruelty in terms of a universal fact about human nature seems to be the ethical basis for Rorty's defence of liberalism, but this is only half the story.<sup>28</sup> If the essence of the self were

<sup>25</sup> See for instance: T. Ball, "Review Symposium on Richard Rorty", *History of the Human Sciences* 3/1 (1990), 101–4; R. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 81–108; E. Laclau, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony" in C. Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 47–67; and M.E. Warren, "Review Symposium on Richard Rorty", *History of the Human Sciences* 3/1 (1990), 119–21.

<sup>26</sup> *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>27</sup> S. Critchley, "Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?", in C. Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, op. cit., 19–40; P. Dews, "Review Symposium on Richard Rorty", *History of the Human Sciences* 3/1 (1990), 108–14, p. 112; Warren, op. cit.; and Geras, op. cit., 47–70.

<sup>28</sup> Note that whereas Critchley links this to Rousseau's notion of *pitié*, Warren links it to Hobbes' argument that solidarity stems from mutual fear.

just that it could be repulsed by harm, then the question would arise as to how humiliation could occur. For if the self is a decentred contingency, then reference to inner states, such as being distressed by harm, would be nonsensical. Therefore we need some notion of agency to make sense of Rorty's claim; and he provides this by presenting the self as discursively creative.<sup>29</sup> It has the ability to edify itself through the ironic reworking of its discursive environment. Hence Rorty's 'liberal utopia' would be a society where individuals would be Nietzschean poets engaged in self-overcoming and liberals like J.S. Mill, who recognise that others must not have their freedom interfered with.

Fraser<sup>30</sup> and Bhaskar (drawing upon Fraser)<sup>31</sup> both note that there is a tension here between the emphasis on liberalism and the emphasis on poetry. They argue that there are three possible configurations of liberalism and poetry. Using Bhaskar's version, we can say that the first is the complementary position, which takes the form of a trickle-down argument whereby a poetic culture enriches all, as everyone is encouraged to rework their final vocabulary, in a stimulating culture. The second is the opposition position, whereby poetry and pragmatic liberalism cannot complement each other: the poet would be opposed to the liberal, who would not want the reworking of discourse to humiliate another. The third position is the separation one, which depends upon drawing a sharp and clear distinction between the public and private spheres. Against the trickle-down argument it is noted that what is good for poets may not be good for workers, unemployed people, etc. Against the separatist position it is argued that the radical reworking of ideas need not be élitist and anti-democratic. Further, and this brings us to the complementary position, making a distinction between the public and private spheres requires more than just a simple reference to these spheres. One cannot maintain that a *definition* can do the work of a *defence*.<sup>32</sup> After all, all action is social and so all actions within the private sphere have some sort of public effect. Basically I accept these

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<sup>29</sup> See M. Hollis, "The Poetics of Personhood", in A.R. Malachowski, ed., *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and beyond)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 244–56, and R. Shusterman, "Postmodern Aestheticism: a new Moral Philosophy?", *Theory, Culture and Society* 5/2 (1988), 337–55, who argue that a decentred self would be too passive to be a poet. Both, however, stop short by noting that poetry is not possible, rather than arguing that Rorty does actually import an essence for the self, thus contradicting the contingency of selfhood argument.

<sup>30</sup> N. Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy", in A.R. Malachowski, ed., *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and beyond)*, op. cit., 303–21.

<sup>31</sup> Bhaskar, op. cit., 84–96.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

points, but I wish to go beyond them by arguing that instead of there simply being a tension between liberalism and poetry, Rorty's prioritisation of poetry makes politics redundant.

*Staying in the State of Nature*

Now, if we were dealing with a conventional argument for liberalism, we would be dealing with material relations between individuals and with private property being protected by the state, which would also regulate market relations in civil society. In other words, the state would interfere with freedom in order to safeguard individuals and their property, by regulating the way that property can be alienated and appropriated. With Rorty's second thesis though, property takes two forms: the public language game which is the source of enrichment for all, and which cannot be appropriated; and an individual's poetic reworking of language, which elides the property of the self into the identity of the self.

Such an argument would entail what may be termed a discursive hyper-voluntarist conception of agency. This is because individuals would have virtually no constraint upon their agency. By being situated within a language game, individuals would have all the discursive capital that they require, as enrichment would come from turning normal discourse into abnormal discourse, and everyone has access to, and possession of, normal discourse. Therefore agency does not have to overcome constraints in order to be successful, because agency will be successful by definition. Agency and the success of agency are inseparable. To act is to act upon discourse; and in doing this, individual agents will enrich themselves, by fashioning private languages or new final vocabularies. Everyone would have an equal amount of 'capital', as the public language game could not be appropriated, and everyone would have the ability poetically to rework this into a new private language.

In this case a political order would not seem to be necessary: for in a society of poets no state would be needed. A society of poets, or rather a collection of poets, could exist in a state of nature with no need to set up a state to regulate their interaction. For if everyone were a poet then every individual would have sufficient resources to defend themselves from harm (redescription), and as their enrichment was discursive, they would not possess any material 'thing' that could be appropriated. A poet with imperial pretensions could not appropriate the language game, which would always remain a public resource for all to use for personal enrichment. Rorty's defence of liberalism turns on preventing a redescription being forced onto someone rather than on harm in the sense of having material property taken away; so if individuals were all poetic there could

be no humiliation and so there would be no need for liberalism. Property would be protected because no one could appropriate the language game, and each poetic individual would be able to defend themselves from redescription.

Of course, liberalism may be required if some individuals were less poetic than others. It may be argued that the less poetic would need to be protected from the more poetic. The problem, though, is that if one tried to justify liberalism in these terms, the argument would break down, for three reasons. The first is that it is hard to see why a poet would want to harm a non-poet, as they would gain nothing from it. If enrichment is a private matter of reworking a language game into a private language then it is hard to see why anyone would want to redescribe another, as they would not be enriched by so doing. Conversely, and this brings us to the second point, if a non-poet were redescribed by a poet then they would be enriched by this, as their vocabulary would be increased. Now it may be objected that an individual would not want to be forcibly redescribed. In this case, enrichment would clash with hatred of redescription: one would be enriched, but dislike the process. With this view of human beings one would want to be enriched only if one had worked for it: there could be no lottery-style instant enrichment, because that would not be wanted. This brings us to the third point, which is that less poetic individuals would be to some extent enriched anyway, because the language they used would be changed by the more poetic. The less poetic would be dependent upon the redundant tropes of yesterday's language games, and so they would be humiliated. Here we would have discursive trickle-down, because the less poetic would have to draw upon a public language game that was changed by the poetic, and so their personal enrichment would be dependent, to some extent, upon the activity of those changing the public resource of language. The public language game could not be separated from private language games, so the poor would be indebted to the rich. The less poetic might dislike this, but liberalism could not prevent it happening. It could not prevent the private sphere being affected by the public sphere language game, which was recreated by the poetic (Matters can be made more complex, of course, by arguing that vernacular language is a form of poetic reworking, in which case everyone would be a poet, even if some were quite poorly educated).

The essentialised self argument would give us a social contract justification of liberalism if the theory of human being, as the poetic self, could be used to justify a liberal political order, but it cannot. If a liberal state regulated the public sphere, this would mean that it regulated the use of the language game, which would invade people's freedom by limiting the

way the self may recreate that language game in private. The discursive property of the self would be limited by the state. This model of the state restricting language is an idea put forward by the proto-liberal Hobbes, who argued that the sovereign ought to prescribe the meaning of words; its Orwellian flavour would not sit well with liberalism, however. Further, liberalism cannot protect the less poetic from redescription, because the public language game that the less poetic drew upon would be recreated by the poetic: the private sphere could not be sealed off from the public sphere. And in that case liberalism has no justification for limiting freedom, as it cannot prevent harm. One may try instead to argue for socialism, but this would fare no better. If property pertains to a public language game that cannot be appropriated, and to the identity of the self (based on its innate poetic ability), then there could be no redistribution of property. As enrichment is a reflection of innate ability, there can be no unjust inequality, and so there can be no case for a redistribution of property, which could not be reappropriated anyway.

#### FEMINISM AND ASCRIBED STATUS: RORTY'S ATTEMPT TO PRIVATISE INEQUALITY

Given the above, inequality is simply a direct reflection of innate poetic ability. If one has ability, then one is poetically enriched, and if one lacks ability, then one is not enriched. The problem here is that there is no way to conceptualise social factors which may limit freedom and equality of opportunity, which means that there is no way to conceptualise how inequality may not be a true reflection of ability. So, when it comes, for instance, to the issue of feminism, and the use of an ascribed status (the imposition of an identity which is defined as inferior/subordinate in order to oppress a particular group) to sustain inequality, it is not surprising to find that Rorty discusses this issue in solely individualist terms. He argues that pragmatism, when linguistified along the lines suggested by Putnam and Davidson, gives you all that is politically useful in the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Derrida-Foucault tradition:

[P]ragmatism, I claim, offers all the dialectical advantages of postmodernism while avoiding the self-contradictory postmodernist rhetoric of unmasking. [...Such pragmatism avoids] the embarrassments of the universalist claim that the term "human being" – or even the term "woman" – names an unchanging essence, an ahistorical natural kind with a permanent set of intrinsic features. Further, they would no longer need to raise what seem to me to be unanswerable questions about the accuracy of their representations of

“woman’s experience”. They would instead see themselves as *creating* such an experience by creating a language, a tradition, and an identity.<sup>33</sup>

To overcome inequality then, women must take it upon themselves to refashion their identity.

The key problem here is that in trying to privatise inequality, Rorty has no way to analyse, or even to accept the existence of, patriarchy, because he cannot recognise the existence of an ascribed status limiting individuals’ freedom. If, *ex hypothesi*, property means, first, the public language game which cannot be appropriated and is equally open to everyone, and, second, each individual’s private language, then inequality can pertain only to the latter, as one’s enrichment is just a matter of poetically reworking a language. In other words, the private property of the self is a direct reflection of its ability to fashion a private poetic identity, or private language. Thus there can be no notion of factors beyond the individual, interfering with the individual’s freedom and opportunity to acquire property. There can be no notion of how an ascribed status of inferiority can be used to create, recreate and legitimise inequality. In this case, we cannot say that women are forced into particular gender roles which limit their equality of opportunity and their freedom. We cannot say that an ascribed status limits women’s material freedom and opportunities, because our only concepts pertain to individuals, their private languages and a (potential) cornucopia furnished by the public language game. Thus there could be no patriarchy, because there are no factors beyond public discourse or an individual’s ability which limit individuals’ freedom to create private languages.

So, if there is inequality between men and women, then either women are less able, or else women have not bothered to exercise their poetic ability. In either case we blame the victim. This means that the legitimacy of feminism *qua* critique is denied, as the only people responsible for inequality are the less able. Rorty does, though, allow feminism a voice, by demarcating its role to the private sphere. For whilst feminism may not give us a truth claim about social factors limiting freedom, it is in itself legitimate as a piece of private poetry. That is to say, in putting forward feminist arguments, the feminist would not be saying that it was true that women were oppressed, but instead, the feminist would be reworking the public language game in new, and private, ways. To develop feminist arguments is to enrich the individual who makes those arguments, which means that feminist arguments cannot be criticising female inequality, for the articulation of such arguments enriches women. If one ‘criticises’ the notion that women’s role is in the domestic sphere as a housewife, one

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<sup>33</sup> R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211–12, emphasis in original.



is not actually making a *criticism*, but rather a piece of *poetry*, which is restricted to the domestic sphere. Furthermore, if one did attempt to change gender roles, then one would be trying to redescribe another, which the liberal state would have to prevent, for it would entail the infliction of harm on others in the public sphere. One cannot legitimately redescribe the identity of patriarchs. By having no notion of illegitimate inequality, or critique, we end up with the view that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

### THE THIRD THESIS: POSITIVISTIC CONSERVATISM

In the discussion on feminism above, the topic broadened out from a discussion of the self *vis-à-vis* liberalism as a political philosophy, to include a reference to a feature of contemporaneous liberal democracies, *viz.* sexual discrimination limiting equality of opportunity. The point was made that one cannot put forward theoretical critiques of contemporaneous society because these would be pieces of private poetry, which must not be imported into the public sphere. In addition to this, we can note that for Rorty, the attempt to construct theoretical critiques of liberalism is immature. Instead of overcoming our self-imposed immaturity by ‘getting on’ with practical matters, we give in to the temptation of metaphysics, and fetishise some putative super-human force. As Rorty puts it,

[B]y inventing “History” as the name of an object that could be conceptually grasped, Hegel and Marx made it possible to keep both the romance of the Christian story about incarnate Logos, and the Christian sense of solidarity against injustice, even after we lost religious faith.<sup>34</sup>

So, one cannot derive meaning from a teleological fantasy about History, whereby a future end state allows us to make sense of the present, as a moment on the way to the realisation of History’s goal.

It may seem from this that Rorty is something of a post-structuralist, who would reject “metanarratives” about History, in order to talk about a plurality of discourses which could be “deconstructed”. This, however, would be a rash assumption. Such post-structuralism is also guilty of an immature desire for a metaphysical prop, as far as Rorty is concerned. Rorty argues that in place of this or that Discourse, we should focus on practices and new ways of doing things. He argues that

[W]e might then stop trying to find a successor to “the working class” – for example, “Difference” or “Otherness” – as a name for the latest incarnation of the Logos. [... This]

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 235.

might help us avoid what Stanley Fish calls “anti-foundational theory hope” – the idea that a materialism and a sense of historicity more radical than even that of Marx’s will somehow provide a brand-new, still bigger, albeit still blurrier, object – an object called, perhaps, “Language” or “Discourse” – around which to weave our fantasies.<sup>35</sup>

Hence Rorty rails against what he takes to be the latest version of ideology-critique, which replaces “bourgeois ideology” and the essence-appearance divide with deconstructions. Rorty dismisses such ‘idiot jargon’ of ‘left-speak’, describing it as “a dreadful mishmash of Marx, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan [. . . which] resulted in articles that offer unmaskings of the presuppositions of earlier unmaskings of still earlier unmaskings”.<sup>36</sup> To be mature then, is to replace theorising with practices, at least as regards the public sphere, where we ought to get on with doing things and not indulge ourselves in poetry or metaphysical fantasies. As Rorty puts it, in a reply to Critchley,<sup>37</sup> who argued that Derrida was not just a private ironist, but someone who could be used for public political discourse, “[O]ur [pragmatic] attitude is: if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it. Keep on using it until you can think of some other sort of tool which might do the job better.”<sup>38</sup> Hence we should “save problematizing for the weekends”.<sup>39</sup> This means that Rorty’s conception of how actual liberal democracies function, as opposed to his arguments about liberalism as a political philosophy, is quite similar to what Popper called “piecemeal social engineering”.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, Popper would have had no quarrel with Rorty’s view that politics “is a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises”.<sup>41</sup>

This dichotomy, between private theories and public practices, is premised upon a positivistic epistemology; and it is conservative in its social and political ramifications. Instead of using theories to problematise the status quo by, for instance, using feminism to criticise ascribed gender roles, we have to accept the political order as a functioning and legitim-

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty “Thugs and Theorists: a Reply to Bernstein”, *Political Theory* 15/4 (1987), 564–80, p. 570.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 19–40.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty, “Response to Simon Critchley”, in C. Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, op. cit., 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, [1957] 1989). Mouffe notes that Rorty has a piecemeal social engineering approach to policy, which refuses to engage with normative struggle, but she does not draw out the positivistic implication of this. See C. Mouffe, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy”, in C. Mouffe, ed., op. cit., 3.

<sup>41</sup> R. Rorty, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism, in *ibid.*, 17.

ate 'given'. It follows from this rejection of theory that problem-solving (rather than problematisation) is conceptualised in terms of dealing with a-theoretical and non-normative 'facts'. It does not matter whether one is trying to use a grand theory, as cited above, or a more modest 'middle-range' theory, the problem remains that theories *per se* are pieces of poetry, which have no legitimate use outside the private sphere. 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. How a problem is identified, and how it is resolved, are not problematic issues, therefore, since the identification and rectification of problems is a factual endeavour, which cannot be subject to (legitimate) public normative contestation. So, if there is nothing to fix, then there is no need for political change; and if change is required, then it is small-scale tinkering, dealing with 'factual' problems, to restore equilibrium to the given political order.

When it comes to economic issues, therefore, instead of normative debates about the justification of wealth distribution and the limits to equality of opportunity, such a positivistic-conservatism would be concerned only with practical tinkering and the resolution of putatively factual problems. Hence Rorty says that "[T]here is nothing sacred about the free market or about central planning; the proper balance between the two is a matter of experimental tinkering."<sup>42</sup> The only problem, of course, is that economic policy is influenced by theoretical considerations (such as monetarism); and, more importantly, the very notion of what a successful market economy may be is a highly normative issue. For some, economic prosperity may be the only legitimate indicator of success, whilst for others, profits may be moderately compromised in order to provide what is regarded as a fairer distribution of wealth and life-chances in order to improve equality of opportunity (by, for instance, using taxes to pay for improved state education). In this case, what is a 'fact' can never be a simple 'factual' issue, because the very definition of a successful economy is a normative issue. Rorty's view of politics may be useful for getting the trains to run on time, but it cannot deal with politics as a sphere for legitimate problematisation of the given and for normative contestation.

It may be objected that Rorty<sup>43</sup> holds the view that groups may legitimately mobilise to pressurise the state for policy changes, which would go

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<sup>42</sup> "Thugs and Theorists", op. cit., 565.

<sup>43</sup> R. Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (London: Harvard University, 1998).

against the description offered above. In his work on the ‘American Left’, Rorty defines the Left as being concerned with seeking improvements to social justice, and the Right as believing that the given social and political order embodies social justice. This is not to say, though, that the Right is illegitimate. Rather, a debate or argument is required between the two. As Rorty puts it,

[A]s long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation’s political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left’s struggle for social justice as mere trouble making, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope.<sup>44</sup>

I quote this at length because, given the arguments set out above, it would seem that Rorty should champion the Right, against the Left’s poetic problematising, which would be something to be done ‘at weekends only’. Yet it seems that Rorty now regards public problematising as legitimate.

Rorty does criticise the Left, but this is because the original “reformist Left” became a “cultural Left”, which turned away from issues of concrete social justice (such as those concerning pay and conditions) to indulge in theory for the sake of theory. Instead of being involved in practical problem solving of matters such as distributive justice, the Left is now concerned with theorising cultural Otherness. The change in emphasis can be seen in ‘cultural studies’, which for Rorty means ‘victim studies’. Here the concern with otherness has resulted in disciplines such as women’s studies, black history, gay studies, Hispanic-American studies, and migrant studies; but no unemployed studies, homeless studies or trailer-park studies, because the latter are not ‘other’ in the relevant sense.<sup>45</sup> Instead of seeking practical changes, the Left has become spectatorial, meaning that it theorises difference, but engages with nothing. In which case, it ceases to be a Left.<sup>46</sup>

For the Left to exist as a Left it would have to help the less well-off mobilise over issues of social justice. Rorty recognises that the state may be heavily influenced by powerful monied interests, but he believes that it may still produce policies to enhance social justice, if the Left were able to mobilise. This means that the less powerful may well need the help of the middle-classes, but the state is implicitly presumed to be neutral, and so it is amenable to such pressure.<sup>47</sup> This does not mean that such mobilisation

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 79–80.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 54.

must take the form of movements which seek to question the given order, as opposed to specific aspects of it: as Rorty puts it, “[M]ovements are suited to onto-theological Platonists, campaigns to many-minded men [*sic*] of letters.”<sup>48</sup> Campaigns seek to fix things when they go wrong, whilst movements are indulging in poetic fancy.

Although this discussion of the Left does emphasise the need for political change coming from groups in civil society, rather than waiting for the state reactively to solve problems, we should note that this does not really go against the description of Rorty’s conception of politics as positivistic and conservative. Although groups may mobilise to effect change, the change they seek to produce must be piecemeal. Pragmatic campaigns seeking piecemeal changes are legitimate, but movements seeking structural, or large-scale, changes are not. The reason for this is that the former deal with discrete facts, which can be addressed by getting the state to generate a specific policy, whilst the latter turn to theory to problematise the given, and confuse poetry with reality. Further, the conception of the state in his discussion of the Left is very similar to classical pluralism. To be sure, Rorty does recognise that corporate capital has significant power over the state, but his belief that the less powerful can achieve reforms from the state if they mobilise is the same as the pluralist argument that the state will generate a policy, if the group petitioning it is sufficiently well-organised and has a rational argument. To go beyond this, and see how the state’s neutrality is compromised, would require theoretical problematisations. For one would have to theorise what structural constraints there were upon the state. However, such problematisation of the liberal conception of the neutral state is not possible, and this simply leaves us with the view that the state will respond to rectify problems identified by the lower classes, as long as they work to get such change.

#### CONCLUSION: THE IMPRACTICALITY OF COMMUNITARIAN INDIVIDUALISM

Rorty wants to justify an individualistic political system without recourse to metaphysical individualism. He wants to justify liberal democracy without recourse to a theory of the self which is somehow separate from its socio-historical location. He accepts the communitarian critique of individualist notions of the self, but to conclude that liberal democracies are therefore devoid of justification is, for Rorty, a gross *non sequitur*. As we have seen though, if we took his pragmatic ethnocentrism at face value, so

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

to speak, the result would be self-defeating relativism. The contingent self would be determined by the prevailing language game. Rorty may tacitly introduce an essence for the self, but the problem here is that we have an extreme form of individualist metaphysics, with the self *qua* poet having no substantive social constraints upon it. In this case, liberalism cannot be justified because it cannot protect individuals, and so any state limitations upon individuals' freedom would be illegitimate.

In addition to this social contract political philosophy which fails to justify liberalism, we have an argument which makes actual liberal democracies legitimate by *fiat*. Here, the system is taken as given and functional, so that politics can be about only reactive piecemeal changes. If groups do mobilise for change, their goal has to be discrete and 'factual', because any notion of structural or normative critique would be illegitimate and immature. Groups can mobilise to improve a system that works but they cannot question the presumption of utility.

Another way of putting this is to say that there is an overemphasis on the individual (as poet), and an overemphasis on the 'community' (taken as a functioning/working political order). In other words, Rorty is trying to be a communitarian liberal-individualist. Now if politics concerns issues pertaining to the legitimacy of power relations, then Rorty cannot deal with politics. His attempt to be a communitarian liberal-individualist leaves him without the conceptual tools to deal with social limits to equality of opportunity which are irreducible to individual ability, or with normative contestation. He has no way of conceptualising politics as a sphere for the contestation of power relations. With his communitarian-individualism, inequality is privatised, and critique of the status quo is illegitimate. So, as regards sexism for example, we blame the victim, because inequality is taken as nothing more than a reflection of innate ability. Regarding critique, we can say that putative critique is allowed into the public sphere as long as that sphere is presumed to be legitimate, but with 'critique' being pressure for *improving the given order* rather than *questioning/rejecting the status quo*.

Against this it may be argued that any discussion of politics, or social issues more generally, has to be predicated on some form of 'realism', whereby we can make truth claims about society, and which may be highly critical of some aspects of that society. What one cannot do, though, is to approach politics by producing a perspective which results in a parody of either individualism or communitarianism, with individual agency having no external constraints, or citizens accepting the political community as legitimate on the basis that it is described as 'working', respectively. To take Rorty seriously would mean being an anarchist and a conservative.

This would be an interesting piece of poetry, but it is of no use for the public sphere. Applying Rorty to himself, we can say that he should be used in private only.

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