Abstract  For pragmatists, the inability to stand outside of the contingencies of human practice does not impede social criticism. However, several pragmatists have argued that Richard Rorty’s position unnecessarily and undesirably circumscribes the scope of social criticism, allowing for nothing more than an appeal to current practices, with no way to challenge or revise them. This article argues against this understanding, showing that on Rorty’s account, social criticism is an interpretive activity in which critics draw on elements within current practices, focusing attention on the ways in which a society’s practices fail to live up to its self-image. In so doing, Rorty’s position is shown to allow for everything that his fellow pragmatists think important, but take him to be denying.

Key words  conversation · pragmatism · reflective equilibrium · Richard Rorty · social criticism

Pragmatists unite in rejecting what Hilary Putnam has called the ‘God’s-Eye View’, the view that there is a way the world is, independent of the various descriptions humans give of it.1 Although they regard the absence of such a perspective to be of no cause for concern, they acknowledge that many people think otherwise, believing it to amount to a denial of the grounds for moral belief and commitment. Richard Bernstein has written of what he calls ‘Cartesian Anxiety’, the view that without a grounding outside of any particular human perspective, we are left adrift in a morass of relativism and nihilism. As he puts it, for many there are only two options: ‘Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.’2 However, for Bernstein, this is a false dichotomy. Together with other pragmatists, he believes that we are able to make
sense of our beliefs, values and commitments without needing back-up from the fixed foundations offered by religion or philosophy, while at the same time resisting nihilism and an empty-headed relativism.

On this point, pragmatists are in agreement. Yet Bernstein and Putnam, together with writers such as Ian Shapiro and Jürgen Habermas (philosophers who, if not pragmatists, are sympathetic to pragmatism), have all criticized Richard Rorty’s position. Unlike many critics, they do not dismiss Rorty’s account of pragmatism, and indeed are in some respects sympathetic to it. At the same time, they all believe that his position leads to an impoverished understanding of pragmatism, of which a significant defect is that it deprives us of the means to challenge received beliefs and practices.

Rorty thinks that his account of pragmatism permits social criticism. He writes that a post-metaphysical, ironic culture would be ‘every bit as self critical . . . as our own familiar, and still metaphysical, liberal culture – if not more so’.

However, his pragmatist critics join others in thinking that his position offers insufficient scope for social criticism. In different ways, they argue that he sees current practices as fixed, and that he deprives us of the means to challenge or revise them. For Bernstein, this is because Rorty himself suffers from a form of ‘Cartesian Anxiety’, a refusal to allow for the existence of a middle ground between an appeal to current practices and an untenable foundationalism. As Bernstein understands him, ‘the only alternatives open to us are either appealing to what is local and ethnocentric or appealing to fixed permanent ahistorical foundations’. Shapiro has suggested that ‘If a contextually bounded political theory is to be convincingly described, an idea of immanent criticism must be unpacked that is grounded in the internal logic of conventional argument while somehow looking beyond it’, and in his view Rorty denies the possibility of looking beyond convention in any way. For these writers, this denial is not entailed by pragmatism. Pragmatism is said to allow for a more independent standard of criticism, and thus a potentially more thoroughgoing critique of present practices, than Rorty either recognizes or permits.

This article will argue that Rorty’s position allows for meaningful social criticism. Contrary to the understanding of many of his critics, I show that Rorty is aware that traditions are not unified, but sites of contestation. It is through critical engagement with competing and even incompatible elements within traditions that social critics are able to suggest improvement. I then argue that, although Rorty rejects the appearance–reality distinction, his position can accommodate the view that some ideas and practices are harmful and distorting, and should be revised. Finally, I counter the complaint that his version of pragmatism entails the view that any interpretation of a tradition is as good as any other by showing that this rests on a misunderstanding of what he calls
'anti-authoritarianism'. For Rorty, pragmatists can be as committed to, and as able to argue for, their views as anyone else; they simply cannot claim an authority for those views beyond that which can be gained for them in conversation. In making my argument, I suggest that Rorty’s account provides all that pragmatists could want in the way of social criticism, and that other pragmatists depart from him either as a result of misunderstanding his position, or by tacitly invoking notions that they have ostensibly forsworn.

1 ‘The way we do things around here’

The core of Rorty’s pragmatism is a rejection of any authority over and above that of human agreement. As he writes, pragmatism ‘is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers’. For Rorty, pragmatism so conceived has both a narrow, philosophical sense and a broader, romantic one. In the former, it is an attack on ‘representationalism’, the view that there is a way the world is independent of our particular attempts to understand and cope with it, and which, if accurately represented, would underwrite those attempts. In the latter, it is the culmination of a narrative in which Rorty views humanity to be gradually putting aside non-human sources of authority – be they religious or secular – and coming to respect only freely secured human agreement.

This position clearly resembles the writings of other pragmatists; it entails, for instance, Putnam’s anti-representationalist rejection of the God’s-Eye View. However, Putnam and others believe that Rorty mistakenly infers from a rejection of the God’s-Eye View the view that the current practices, traditions and conventions of particular communities should constitute the final, unchallengeable authority in questions of morality. This concern is captured in the summary that is often given of Rorty’s position, which is that truth, justice or morality for him are merely a matter of ‘the way we do things around here’.

Rorty is thought to assume that widely held beliefs and conventions exist which can, when disagreement occurs, be called upon in order to reach a resolution. Shapiro, for example, believes that for Rorty, disputes are to be settled by ‘an appeal to convention’ or ‘a simple appeal to consensus’. The difficulty with this is twofold. First, it is critically empty, recognizing no room for critical purchase upon society in order to criticize its values. Social criticism is on this understanding merely a matter of articulating the values of contemporary society, whatever they might be. But secondly, this position is quite obviously
false in assuming there is a single, agreed-upon consensus. Saying that disputes are to be settled by an appeal to convention or consensus begs the question of which conventions or consensus. As Bernstein puts it, Rorty ‘speaks of “our” practices, “our” tradition, the “consensus” of a particular community as if this were simply a historical given’, but clearly, there is no such ‘given’.

To say that Rorty thinks moral questions should be settled by reference to a consensus in society seems inconsistent with his own political writings. For he has frequently offered his own, quite clearly controversial, interpretation of American values and traditions. He has, for example, written of ‘the path which led us from the abolition of slavery through women’s suffrage, the Wagner Act and the Civil Rights Movement, to contemporary feminism and gay liberation’. Since this path is not one that everyone would regard as exhibiting America at its best, and since very different narratives of American history can be and have been given, it would seem inaccurate to think of Rorty as crudely appealing to a consensus, since that is not what he himself does.

However, far from demonstrating that Rorty is aware that traditions contain disagreement and conflict, for some writers claims such as this are further evidence of his falsely assuming a consensus, in this case a consensus of those who recognize the truth; in Shapiro’s words, Rorty presents his interpretation of American history and values to be ‘self-evident to all right-thinking people’. And in making this point, Shapiro goes on to offer a further criticism, which is that Rorty contradicts himself: ‘He lurches between a blind appeal to consensus, on the one hand, where everyone is asserted to agree on all moral and political essentials, to a remarkable (and undefended) account of ideology, on the other.’ Bernstein also claims to find a tension: ‘Rorty’s own appeal to a “we” masks deeper conflicting tendencies in his own thinking.’ On the one hand, he is said to fail to take account of the different and often conflicting practices that are embodied in societies: ‘a hidden ahistorical essentialism creeps into Rorty’s rhetoric . . . he ignores the historical fact that we are confronted with conflicting and incompatible practices – even in so-called liberal democracy’. But on the other, as Bernstein writes, for Rorty there are ‘no facts only interpretations’.

I suggest, however, that the points which Shapiro and Bernstein present as amounting to tensions and contradictions in Rorty’s thinking are in fact consistent with each other, and that properly understood, they illustrate why he is not committed to a crude appeal to ‘the way we do things around here’.

Rather than holding there to be no facts but only interpretations, Rorty’s view is that facts are the result of interpretation. Criticism cannot be a matter of correctly or accurately representing an essential tradition, for on his view there is no such thing. Different critics will
appeal to different events as exemplifying a society or tradition at its best, and will give different interpretations of those events: ‘Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original.’ Social criticism is not an attempt to uncover a tradition, but is rather an interpretive, constructive activity in which critics attempt to establish what that tradition is.

Only if one held that by articulating a tradition one were seeking accurately to represent that tradition would one hold it possible simply to ‘appeal to’ it in order to settle disagreements. This is entirely contrary to Rorty’s rejection of the God’s-Eye View, but it is the position ascribed to him by Shapiro. For both Shapiro and for Bernstein the reason for this is that, despite disavowing the God’s-Eye View, Rorty contradicts himself by going on to assume the existence of a single correct understanding of a tradition, one which (in Shapiro’s words) is ‘self-evident’, and which therefore ignores (as Bernstein puts it) ‘the historical fact’ of competing traditions.

But does Rorty really do these things? As Shapiro and Bernstein point out, he certainly makes repeated references to ‘we’. However, there is no reason to think that he admits of no ‘they’, no differences within traditions. Writing of American history, Rorty says:

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

This passage reiterates the point that moral deliberation is not a matter of accurately representing a society’s history or values. But it also demonstrates that Rorty is aware that American public culture is contested. Here, that contest is presented as being between the Left and the Right, but elsewhere, Rorty acknowledges differences within these groups. For example, he notes that no single consensus existed among social democrats about the Vietnam War, and that some, such as Sidney Hook, were against America’s withdrawing its troops. Thus although Shapiro chides Rorty for his claim that America betrayed its highest ideals by fighting the Vietnam War because a plausible case could be made in Rorty’s own terms for saying those ideals required the war to be fought on and won, I can see no reason why he cannot in fact agree with Shapiro about this, or why it constitutes an objection to his position.
In perhaps his most explicit acknowledgement that his use of ‘we’ in phrases like ‘we liberals’ and ‘we democrats’ does not denote a blindness to difference, in a response to Bernstein Rorty writes that his ‘we’ is a self-conscious attempt to set differences aside and focus on what is held in common. Writing of his use of the term ‘we pragmatists’, he says that it names a collection of people with certain overlapping beliefs, not a single, unified group: ‘I am implicitly saying: try, for the nonce, ignoring the differences between Putnam and Peirce, Nietzsche and James, Davidson and Dewey, Sellars and Wittgenstein. Focus on the following similarities, and then other similarities may leap out at you.’

In order to bring Rorty’s anti-representationalist claim that there is no single, univocal tradition which social critics attempt to represent more or less accurately together with his awareness of the plurality of possible interpretations of those traditions, it is helpful to separate Shapiro’s claims that Rorty seeks to ‘appeal to consensus’ from an ‘appeal to convention’. Shapiro uses ‘convention’ and ‘consensus’ as if they were synonyms, but Rorty is careful to distinguish them. He rejects the notion of a convention, thinking it anti-pragmatic in implying the existence of something more fixed and stable than the settled (for the moment) habits and practices of particular human communities. This highlights once again the point that he does not appeal to ‘the way we do things around here’, if by that phrase is meant something fixed which constrains inquiry and serves as the last word against which to judge our different interpretations. In contrast, Rorty often refers to a consensus, or a ‘we’, but this is a summary of current agreement, not a foundation to be appealed to in order to secure an agreement. Any consensus is itself a reflection of the state of conversation, not something that participants in that conversation can appeal to against their conversational partners.

That is, Rorty is aware that cultures and societies contain disagreements, and does not hold to the view that all members of any particular culture are in agreement in every respect. Bernstein writes that disagreements ‘cannot be resolved simply by appealing to existing social practices, for the heart of the controversy is the genuine and serious conflict of competing social practices’. He intends this as a criticism of Rorty, but I have suggested that this is Rorty’s own view, one which he can hold without contradiction.

2 Social criticism and reflective equilibrium

It might be asked, however, whether on this view it is possible for social critics to move beyond existing practices and understandings in order to dispute them and forge a new ‘moral identity’. Some commentators
have suggested that it is not. Jonathan Allen argues that for Rorty it is impossible to distance ourselves from our beliefs and practices in a way necessary for us to challenge them; as he writes, ‘on the Rortian view we seem to be thrown back into the thick of shared projects and practices’. The problem as Allen sees it is that we possess no way to stand aside from those shared projects and practices in order to gain a critical vantage point, but are stuck with them for good or ill. Rorty is said to fail to allow for a way to contrast our current situation with something that, if it does not entail standing outside of our practices, is at least not exhausted by them; what is needed, in Allen’s words, is a way ‘to balance the sense of situatedness and its attendant blindnesses of vision and failures of sympathy with the desire for detachment and purity’.

It is certainly the case that for Rorty, we are inescapably located within shared projects and practices, and that we are unable to stand apart from them. He makes this point in a discussion of the self. The self is not something that can sit back and scrutinize its beliefs, because the self is the summation of those beliefs. However, it does not follow that we are unable to criticize our beliefs. Selves are confederations of beliefs and desires, and constantly change in response to new experiences. When Allen asks, ‘If our very selves and sense of the world are constructed within social projects and vocabularies, how is it possible for us to take up a critical stance towards those vocabularies?’, the answer lies not by recourse to standards that lie outside of our projects and vocabularies, but in the fact that selves are not homogeneous. We criticize our projects and vocabularies by comparing them with each other, attempting to secure consistency among them, and with newly acquired beliefs generated through our encounters with the world.

Rorty’s account of social criticism takes the same form. Most of us belong to many different communities, and criticism is a matter not of casting off our attachments to these communities, but rather of viewing ourselves in one situation from the perspective of another. Indeed, Rorty suggests that it follows from the availability of alternative and conflicting interpretations and understandings that social criticism is not only necessary, but the means by which it is made possible: ‘It is this plurality of identities that accounts for the number and variety of moral dilemmas, moral philosophers and psychological novels in [modern] societies.’

This form of social criticism is one that Rorty thinks is captured in John Rawls’ notion of reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is open-ended. It does not assume a fixed set of problems, ‘a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies’. Rather, it takes the form of a comparison of practices to reveal inconsistencies and shortcomings, and the reinterpretation and modification of those practices in
the light of such comparison. It is also a matter of playing off theory and practice, between what we claim to believe and the reality of our practices. On this view, social critics should protest ‘in the name of the society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image’. And in making their criticisms, they should appeal not to ‘the way we do things around here’ but towards their hopes for the future. Rorty proposes that:

[I]f you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters’ descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe. Instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of your judgement of the worthwhile life.

Invention is not to be contrasted with the attempt to draw on current standards, because it is a process of drawing on those standards (‘selecting aspects’) in an effort at creation. Critics should not seek critical distance by appealing to an underlying reality outside of any particular practice or, as Allen implies, through divesting themselves of their situation and attachments, but by appealing to other values, contained both within their societies and in others.

In what Rorty calls the ‘ideal liberal society’, social critics would offer new proposals in the course of conversation. Some commentators associate his notion of conversation with superficiality, contrasting it with the rigour and rationality of argument. For Rorty, however, conversation is the ideal form of inquiry, because it entails openness to other beliefs, and the concern to justify ourselves to an ever widening audience and to ever more challenges and alternative possibilities. In response to Bernstein’s view that Rorty appeals ‘to what is local and ethnocentric’, we can note that while ethnocentrism is inescapable (there is no God’s-Eye View), this does not commit us to being ‘local’ in the sense of unconcerned with what other people (for example, those in other societies) are doing. For Rorty, it is a mark of moral progress to be concerned with precisely this. As he writes, ‘[j]ustification gets better as the community to which justification is offered becomes more sophisticated and complex, more aware of possible sources of evidence and more capable of dreaming up imaginative new hypotheses and proposals’. Conversation is imaginative inquiry, contrasting with what Rorty regards as the narrowness and closed-mindedness of argumentation which assumes a ‘natural order of topics and arguments’, a fixed set of questions and concerns.

Rorty takes up his view about the need to develop new hypotheses and proposals in a discussion of metaphor. Metaphors, or ‘unfamiliar noises’, come from outside the current ‘order of topics and arguments’. They may cause us to change our views, even though they are not, from the point of view of our current beliefs, rational. The metaphorical use
of language – for example, in a claim like ‘love is the only law’ or ‘the earth whirls round the sun’ – was surprising when first the metaphors were uttered.\textsuperscript{38} The attempt to make sense of the surprise may lead us to alter our theories and vocabularies in order to take account of it. Rorty suggests that in this way, metaphors are the engine for moral change and progress: ‘The “irrational” intrusions of beliefs which “make no sense” (i.e. cannot be justified by exhibiting their coherence with the rest of what we believe) are just those events which intellectual historians look back upon as “conceptual revolutions”.’\textsuperscript{39} Consistent with his view of social criticism, however, metaphors are said to be ‘intrusions’ into current beliefs, not an overthrowing of those beliefs and their wholesale replacement with others.

### 3 Ideology and Distortion

If coherence secured through reflective equilibrium is all that Rorty’s pragmatism can offer, this might seem to be a very emaciated form of social criticism. For if it is the case that there is no underlying reality to which social critics can appeal, it might be inferred that there is no vantage point from which they might claim that received practices are immoral, degrading or in need of improvement.

Once again, a difference between Rorty and his fellow pragmatists seems to emerge. Putnam agrees with Rorty that reason and justification are historically conditioned, but he worries that Rorty endorses a form of complacent majoritarianism, whereby what counts as ‘better’ is whatever a community (or the majority within it) takes to be ‘better’.\textsuperscript{40} Rorty sees justification as a sociological matter, which Putnam takes to mean that whatever a community thinks of as morally good or progressive is morally good or progressive – even fascism – since the standards by which morality and moral progress are measured can only be those of the people who employ them. As he sees it, ‘Rorty’s view is just solipsism with a “we” instead of an “I”’.\textsuperscript{41} In contrast, Putnam argues that on his own account, fascism would not count as progress just because a majority held it to be so. This is because he does not think of warrant as a sociological matter, but as something that swings free of whatever is taken to be warranted or justified by a particular community. Armed with this notion of warrant, he opposes what he takes to be Rorty’s relativism, in which truth or goodness or justice is whatever we happen to think around here.

The distinction between what happens to be agreed upon and what is warranted or justified is also central to Habermas, specifically his attempt to distinguish ‘acceptance’ from ‘validity’. By providing ideally perspicuous epistemic conditions that exclude the distorting influences
of power relations and ideology, Habermas believes that truth will emerge through free encounter. He summarizes these conditions as follows: ‘openness to the public, inclusiveness, equal rights to participation, immunization against external or inherent compulsion, as well as the participants’ orientation toward reaching understanding (that is, the sincere expression of utterances).’ These conditions characterize the ‘ideal speech situation’, which allows for the uncovering of distortion and, through genuinely free discussion, the means to overcome it. Social critics root out the distorting influence of power and wealth, distinguishing the general interest from what Habermas calls the ‘appearance of the general interest’.

In response to Putnam and Habermas, Rorty argues that both rely on notions that, insofar as they are pragmatists, they are debarred from using. It is inconsistent to hold, in Putnam’s words, that we are ‘beings who cannot have a view of the world that does not reflect our interests and values’ while also claiming that standards of justification and warrant are independent of those same interests and values. Unless there is a ‘natural order of topics and arguments’ which structures justification or warrant independently of what is taken to be justified or warranted by some particular community, these notions are necessarily tied to communal practice. Rorty thinks that this is the moral of Putnam’s own critique of the God’s-Eye View, and that only Putnam’s misplaced fear of relativism stops him from recognizing that this is so. He suggests that Putnam’s anxieties should be allayed once it is seen that, although justification is a sociological matter, social critics offer alternative interpretations and seek to justify them. As he puts it, ‘many (praiseworthy and blameworthy) social movements and intellectual revolutions get started by people making unwarranted assertions’, assertions that were not justified by the standards and norms of the time. In such cases, the point of those social movements was to change those standards.

Rorty offers a similar response to Habermas. Shapiro writes that ‘Rorty does not need to posit any “ideal speech situation” (as Habermas does) because his benign view assumes it exists here and now in contemporary America – a heaven on earth’. Shapiro is mistaken to say that Rorty thinks this way about presentday America – as he makes clear in Achieving Our Country and elsewhere, this is very far from being the case. But he is correct to say that Rorty does not endorse Habermas’ ideal speech situation. This is because he thinks this notion relies on the appearance–reality distinction of which pragmatists cannot make sense. For Rorty, no idea or practice is any closer to the ‘reality’ lying behind any particular ‘appearance’, for they all look upon the world from a particular point of view. Habermas’ shift from ‘subject-centred’ to ‘communicative’ rationality means that no distinction can be drawn between acceptance and validity, because there is no possibility of
attaining ‘validity’ by reaching behind particular human perspectives to a position that is not a reflection of such a perspective.

Nevertheless, when understood in explicitly political terms, Rorty would I think readily endorse most of the conditions that Habermas specifies as constituting the ideal speech situation. Openness, inclusiveness, the equal right of participation and immunization against external compulsion are things Rorty thinks liberal democracies provide better than any alternative, both with respect for equalizing freedoms and opportunities by removing barriers to participation based on race or gender, and by economic egalitarianism to create the freedom and ability to make use of those opportunities. With regard to ‘immunization against internal compulsion’, I suspect that he would gloss this as whatever results from the free discussion of humans enjoying the political, social and economic freedoms and opportunities that are, ideally, provided in liberal democracies. The one condition that characterizes the ‘ideal speech situation’ which is not open to being ‘politicized’ in this manner is Habermas’ notion of ‘orientation toward reaching understanding’. Habermas says this entails ‘the sincere expression of utterances’. If that means simply that people be open and truthful with each other, then Rorty certainly agrees with him about its importance. However, ‘orientation toward reaching understanding’ must, on Rorty’s account, be made in reference to some particular (that is, ethnocentric) goal or understanding.

That this is so does not, however, mean that current practices cannot be challenged for their undesirable effects. For Rorty, ideology means simply ‘bad idea’, and the task for social critics is to replace such ideas with better ones. While his position cannot allow for appeals from appearance to reality, it is, he claims, able to unearth forms of distortion. ‘We do this by starting with such obvious differences as that between Socratic dialogue and hypnotic suggestion. We then try to firm up the distinction by dealing with messier cases: brainwashing, media hype, and what Marxists call “false consciousness”’. Of course, by speaking of false consciousness, Rorty does not mean a contrast with a true or (pace Allen) pure consciousness that has been obscured and which the social critic should reveal through detachment and purification. Distortion is itself measured from a particular, ethnocentric, position. But it remains possible to identify distortion. This is illustrated by examples that Rorty gives which are, significantly, very similar to ones offered by Habermas. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas provides a socio-historical account of the emergence of the liberal public sphere. There he points out the way in which the interests of a particular class of men came to be represented as the general interest, showing that the notion of ‘basic rights’ was applied to property owners, a class which was in turn identified with
Despite rejecting the idea of the ideal speech situation as Habermas conceives it, Rorty is able to make the same kind of observation. He observes that Thomas Jefferson could affirm the absolute truth that all men are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights while himself owning slaves, and that a similar act of exclusion occurs when the term ‘man’ is used as a synonym for ‘human being’. In each of these cases, the form of social criticism that Rorty commends unearths distortion (and does so without invoking what he takes to be anti-pragmatist notions) by demonstrating how the practices of individuals and societies do not live up to their professed ideals.

4 Pragmatism and anti-authoritarianism

A remaining problem identified by Rorty’s fellow pragmatists is that his account does not offer enough guidance for social critics. Bernstein suggests that, ‘if we apply to Rorty the same tough pragmatic standards that he applies to others, there is very little concrete payoff’. For if imagination and experimentation are important for social criticism, should there not be some measure of their success? As we have seen, Rorty’s account of social criticism takes the form of reflective equilibrium, but Bernstein thinks that this does not name a solution, but merely restates the question at hand, namely: ‘[W]hat sorts of arguments are appropriate in evaluating competing intuitions? I fail to see how Rorty’s appeal to “reflective equilibrium” gives us any clue about the resolution of such conflicts.’ Similarly, Shapiro argues that if one has conflicting loyalties to different communities – for example, the dilemma faced by a Catholic Democrat deciding whether or not to oppose abortion rights – one needs guidance as to what to do. Rorty’s account is said to be of no help, for ‘[a]nyone who hopes to come to terms with these problems must begin by deciding which are the relevant communities’.

It is not clear, however, that Bernstein or Shapiro has identified a real objection. For they seem to have conflated two separate points: that pragmatism itself does not specify any particular view or outcome to conversation, and what individual pragmatists themselves can hold and argue for as participants in that conversation.

Rorty certainly opposes what he takes to be the central assumptions of philosophy when it has sought methods or procedures for neutrally arbitrating between beliefs and values. He takes this to be the desire to avoid confronting difficult questions by closing off options in advance through the provision of an algorithm, and against it he joins, with Putnam, in arguing that the belief that philosophers should formulate explicit criteria for moral questions ‘contradicts the very idea of philosophy’. For example, Rorty would not, I think, regard the following
question, raised by Michel Rosenfeld about the relevance of pragmatism to jurisprudence, as being to the point. Rosenfeld asks: ‘Assuming that different interpretations of the same law would lead to different practical consequences, can recourse to pragmatism determine which of the available alternatives ought to be pursued?’ The response is that of course it cannot. The pursuit of an algorithm to determine an interpretation of the law – or anything else – is precisely what pragmatism rejects.

One of the reasons it does so is that attempts to override free discussion in this manner can lead to injustice, with claims to have finally identified the truth potentially standing in the way of innovation and change. J. Judd Owen asks:

> How can Rorty ignore the possibility that his own rejection of political rationalism – his headlong rejection of all ‘absolute truths,’ such as ‘that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights’ – could prove (as earlier cases have in fact proved) more dangerous?

Far from ignoring this possibility, Rorty argues that the attempt to provide foundations can be a conservative desire. It threatens to become the attempt to shore up the views of the day by assuming a fixed set of questions to be discussed in language that is already available: ‘investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image.’ In more overtly political matters, he suggests that foundationalism plays into the hands of those who want society to remain as it is; this is why the Right ‘easily becomes the pawn of the rich and powerful – the people whose selfish interests are served by forestalling . . . change’.

This constitutes, I think, the most important difference between Rorty and Habermas. On Rorty’s ‘anti-authoritarian’ view, Habermas betrays his best insights by suggesting that ‘the better argument’ or ‘all the relevant reasons’ can mean anything more than whatever is taken to be better or relevant reasons and arguments by particular human beings. This is not only impossible (since it can only be specified in this way if there is a ‘natural order of topics and arguments’), but also threatens to perpetuate injustice of the sort that social critics are concerned to identify.

But this is certainly not to say that pragmatists, on Rorty’s understanding, do not have commitments, and that they cannot argue for them. They can offer suggestions, for example, to someone facing the circumstances Shapiro describes. All that pragmatism does is debar pragmatists from claiming that their view is the last word, or appealing over the head of conversation and specifying what counts as a resolution. On
Rorty’s view, rather than presenting their views as being ‘self-evident to all right-thinking people’, in the absence of a ‘natural order of topics and arguments’ what remains are different human views, and conversation about which should prevail.

In conclusion, this article has argued that Rorty recognizes that traditions are contested, and that on his view the purpose of social criticism is to articulate and defend particular interpretations. Social critics offer up suggestions for improving current practices in the course of imaginative conversation by drawing on particular values and practices within their traditions. In doing so, they are not attempting accurately to represent an underlying tradition, but are engaged in a creative enterprise. Consistent with this view, Rorty is keen to emphasize that philosophers such as himself are a further voice in conversation, a position which does not, as some have thought, debar them from holding and arguing for their own views. The many criticisms that Rorty has received from his fellow pragmatists are thus mistaken, both in their claims that his position cannot provide for helpful and important social criticism, and for suggesting that pragmatism should seek to offer anything more.

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Notes

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7 Rorty has tied these two senses of pragmatism together in his more recent writings. See, for example, Richard Rorty, ‘Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism’, Revue Internationale de Philosophie 1 (1999): 7–20.

9 Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 36.

10 ibid., p. 37.


14 ibid., p. 49.


16 ibid., p. 548; original emphases.

17 ibid., p. 554.


20 In contrast to those who think that Rorty’s use of ‘we’ glosses over or even ignores differences between people and communities, other commentators suggest that his ‘we’ is drawn too starkly, and that it over-emphasizes such differences. Michele Moody-Adams writes that ‘Rortean ethnocentrism . . . dangerously divides the world into “us” and the “others” in a way that renders fruitful cross-cultural conversation difficult if not impossible because it assumes that one can say in advance who is a member of one’s ethnos and who is simply beyond the pale’. Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 27; original emphases. This gets the logic of Rorty’s argument the wrong way around: it is not that we first define ‘us’ and the ‘others’, something which then has the unfortunate consequence of making conversation difficult or impossible; rather, it is the difficulty or impossibility of conversation that leads us to recognize that others are not part of our ethnos, not one of ‘us’. But Moody-Adams recognizes that there are some who do not fall under Rorty’s ‘we’, among whom he includes Marxists, Straussians and conservatives.


22 Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 45.


25 Indeed on Rorty’s view, there is reason to think any consensus will only be temporary. He shares what Dewey called the ‘means–end continuum’, whereby the pursuit of one’s goals transforms those goals, and suggests that if you are a participant in a conversation, you will, in however small a way, alter it. Richard Rorty, Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 217. As Robert Brandom writes, in a passage that Rorty cites with approval, ‘Every claim and inference we make at once sustains and transforms the tradition in which the conceptual norms that govern that process are implicit . . . To use a vocabulary is to change it.’ Robert Brandom, ‘Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism’, in Brandom (ed.) Rorty and His Critics, pp. 156–83 (177). Cited by Rorty in his ‘Response to Brandom’, in Brandom (ed.) Rorty and His Critics, pp. 183–90 (188).


27 Allen, ‘The Situated Critic or the Loyal Critic?’, p. 32.

28 ibid., p. 42.

29 Rorty satirizes the notion of a self that can stand apart from its various attachments by characterizing it as ‘an existentialist, Californian, self which can somehow sit back and choose its ends, values, and affiliations without reference to anything except its own momentary pleasure’. Richard Rorty, ‘A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism’, in Anita L. Allen and Milton C. Regan, Jr (eds) Debating Democracy’s Discontent: essays on American politics, law and public philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 117–25 (118). Although he would probably not claim to advocate such a view of the self, Allen seems committed to it. He does not explain in any detail what he means by the words ‘detachment and purity’, but he implies that it is possible for the self to detach itself and stand apart from its situation. This view is indicated in particular by the word ‘purity’ which, with its religious connotations of freedom from corruption, suggests a contrast between a thing in itself, and something extra that is in danger of contaminating it.

30 Allen, ‘The Situated Critic or the Loyal Critic?’, p. 32.


32 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, p. 52.

33 ibid., p. 60.

34 Rorty, Truth and Progress, p. 216; original emphases.


ibid., p. ix.


The need to draw on elements within a tradition while looking beyond it can be illustrated in reference to Rorty’s own position. He notes that current everyday intuitions are realist, not pragmatist, that most people typically hold metaphysical beliefs of the sort that pragmatism rejects. The pragmatist must therefore seek to change things rather than appeal to the way things are done here and now; they ‘cannot appeal to neutral premises or widely shared beliefs’, but instead ‘should see themselves as involved in a long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community’. Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 41. The way to do so is, once again, not to appeal to values outside of current practice, but to draw on those aspects that can be used to support pragmatism. Thus although Rorty agrees with Thomas McCarthy that we live in societies that are ‘structured around transcultural notions of validity’, he continues by saying that neither are they exclusively so structured, nor are they so structured everywhere. He writes that he can therefore ‘appeal to things that are said and done in the other places. I can play off some elements in our culture against others (thus doing, I think, the same thing that Socrates and Plato did, no matter what they described themselves as doing).’ Richard Rorty, ‘Truth and Freedom: a Reply to Thomas McCarthy’, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 633–43 (637).


Rorty regards Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality, and the associated notion of the ideal speech situation, as an uncomfortable halfway house between Kantianism and the pragmatist view that freedom and equality remove the need for notions of ahistoric rationality or universal validity. Richard Rorty, ‘The Ambiguity of “Rationality”’, *Constellations* 3 (1996): 73–82 (74–5).

Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 84, n. 6.

ibid., p. 48.

Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 83, 88.


ibid., p. 169.

Shapiro, Political Criticism, p. 52.
Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 25. However, Putnam himself has attributed to Rorty the view that standards within vocabularies are algorithmic. Hilary Putnam, Renewing Philosophy (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 68–9, and Hilary Putnam, ‘Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification’, in Brandom (ed.) Rorty and His Critics, pp. 81–6 (83). In the latter, Putnam cites Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1979), p. 342. But there, Rorty seeks to reject the contrast between, on the one hand, science as being a matter of objective algorithms, and on the other those things which are merely human creations.
Rorty, Achieving Our Country, p. 31.
Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 46.
ibid., p. 47.