One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy
Author(s): Richard J. Bernstein
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/191689

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
During the last decades of the nineteenth century, John Dewey, who had been strongly influenced by his Vermont Congregationalist upbringing, was in the process of being "radicalized." This was a time of enormous ferment in America, due in part to the effects of rapid industrialization, urbanization, the changing demographic character that resulted from waves of immigration, and the growth of a laissez-faire ideology. Looking back to this period it appears to be a strange mixture of evangelical social zeal, reformist rhetoric, populist sentiment, and fragmented utopian projects. Dewey was caught up in this fervor, as evidenced by his brief encounter with the flamboyant Franklin Ford. Ford, who had been an editor of Wall Street's Bradstreet's, turned against the "moneved classes" and wanted to publish a new socialist-oriented newspaper, Thought News, which would spread the gospel of radical social reform. The editor of Thought News was to be a young philosophy professor from the University of Michigan, John Dewey Dewey, who at the time identified himself with philosophical idealism, wrote to his friend William James enthusiastically recommending Ford's writings. In a letter dated June 3, 1891 (when Dewey was 32 years old), he wrote:

What I got out of it is, first, the perception that the true or practical bearing of idealism—that philosophy has been the assertion of the unity of intelligence and
Bernstein / ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BackWARD 539

the external world in idea or subjectively, while if true in idea it must finally secure the conditions of its objective expression. And secondly, I believe a tremendous movement is impending, when the intellectual forces which have been gathering since the Renaissance, and the Reformation, shall demand complete free movement, and by getting their physical leverage in the telegraph and printing press, shall through free inquiry in a centralized way, demand the authority of all other so-called authorities. 1

Dewey’s rhetoric, his desire to foster “the true or practical bearing of idealism,” even his conviction that journalism might play a leading role in furthering social reform, recall the esprit of another young philosophical radical who started as a journalist, Karl Marx. There are even parallels between the role that Feuerbach played for Marx in his movement away from philosophical idealism and the role that Ford played in Dewey’s search for the objective expression of the “unity of intelligence and the external world.”

Thought News was never published, but this early episode in Dewey’s career is indicative of his lifelong desire to reach beyond the university and the academy, to give philosophy a genuinely “practical turn,” and to inform philosophic reflection with everyday practical experience. This commitment—this sense of the continuity of reflection and practical engagement—marked Dewey for the rest of his life. It is evidenced in his founding of the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, his involvement with working-class immigrants at Jane Addams’s Hull House, his initiative and support for a variety of progressive social and political causes, his “popular” journalism in such periodicals as The New Republic and The Nation, and even his willingness to travel to Mexico when he was 78 to serve as chairman of the Commission of Inquiry investigating the charges brought against Trotsky and his son at the infamous Moscow Trials.

Dewey, who was always skeptical of militant revolution, nevertheless advocated radical reform. In the Public and Its Problems (1927), Individualism: Old and New (1930), Liberalism and Social Action (1935), and in many other writings, Dewey returned over and over again to criticize outdated and even pernicious “old” forms of individualism and liberalism, and he sought to articulate and defend his vision of radical communal democracy. Increasingly, Dewey came to believe that the economic, social, and political tendencies at work in American society were distorting and undermining the very conditions that are required for the flourishing of democracy, whose “task is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to
which all contribute." He wrote about the "eclipse of the public." Democracy, he claimed, is not a set of formal procedures, but a "moral ideal." He even wrote that "Democracy is the very idea of community life itself." In *The Public and Its Problems*, he declared "the invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life." The one theme that runs throughout all of Dewey's social and educational writings (indeed, it surfaces in virtually all his writings) is the need to reconstruct democratic communal life—a form of life that requires and cultivates civic virtue. Jefferson was always one of Dewey's heroes because Jefferson's own vision of democracy is "moral through and through: in its foundations, its methods, and its ends." For all Dewey's desire to encourage the objective development of democratic communal practices, he was sharply critical of those who claimed that the breakdown of communal life is a necessary consequence of modernization, industrialization, and technological development. He never wavered in his conviction of the practical necessity of integrating democratic everyday life with science and technology.

Concerning liberalism, he wrote in 1935:

Liberalism must now become radical, meaning by "radical" perception of the necessity of thorough-going changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass. For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken ad hoc. The process of producing the changes will be, in any case, a gradual one. But "reforms" that deal now with this abuse and now with that without having a social goal based on an inclusive plan, differ entirely from effort at re-forming, in its literal sense, the institutional scheme of things. The liberals of more than a century ago were denounced in their time as subversive radicals, and only when the new economic order was established did they become apologists for the status quo, or else content with social patchwork. If radicalism be defined as perception of the need for radical change, then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed.

II

I have introduced my discussion of Rorty with a brief sketch of Dewey's commitment to radical reform and to democratic communal life for several reasons. When Rorty announced in the opening pages of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that Dewey (along with Heidegger and Wittgenstein) is one of the "three most important philosophers of
the twentieth century," he shocked many of his readers. Except for a small group of philosophers dedicated to preserving and revitalizing "American pragmatism," most professional Anglo-American and Continental philosophers considered Dewey to be passé, a minor "fuzzy-minded" thinker who, at best, had his heart in the right place, but not his head. Since the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty has increasingly identified himself as a "Deweyean pragmatist." Yet, as I hope to show, the disparity between the type of "aestheticized pragmatism" that Rorty advocates and Dewey's primary concerns is becoming greater and greater. But my main aim is not to show that Rorty distorts and betrays Dewey's legacy but rather to locate some serious inadequacies in Rorty's emerging "position," especially as it pertains to politics and public life. For despite occasional protests to the contrary, it begins to look as if Rorty's defense of liberalism is little more than an apologia for the status quo—the very type of liberalism that Dewey judged to be "irrelevant and doomed."

After Rorty's sustained critique of "professional philosophy" and his attack on the very idea of philosophy (or what he sometimes labels "Philosophy" with a capital "P") as a well-defined Fach with its own distinctive foundational problems, he left us in an ambiguous situation about what useful role (if any) the philosopher might still play in the ongoing "conversation of mankind." He suggested that we think of the philosopher (or her successor) as a "kibitzer," a self-consciously amateurish cultural critic.

Roughly speaking, Rorty's kibitzing during the past decade has focused on three interrelated motifs. First there is his continued battle with what he takes to be the legacy of the "bad" foundationalist, ahistorical impulse in philosophy, especially as it is manifested in the preoccupation with the varieties of "realism."

Second, the "aesthetic" strain in Rorty has become more and more pronounced. In one of his early papers, playing on the statement "let a thousand flowers bloom," Rorty advocated the flowering and invention of what he calls different "vocabularies" for "coping." Rorty's own vision of the "good society" is one where we will play, a type of jouissance where there is a nonviolent tolerant celebration of our capacities for making and self-creation, where we would abandon the "spirit of seriousness" and no longer think it is important to hold positions about "Truth," "Objectivity," "Rationality," and so on. It is a vision where we all become poets who have learned to live with contingency, preferably "strong poets."
The third motif is Rorty's "defense" of pluralistic "post-modern bourgeois liberalism." Against those who think we are living through the cosmic night of a self-destructive nihilism or think we are facing some sort of deep crisis of liberal democracy, Rorty cheerfully thinks that a liberal democracy that embodies and extends the principle of tolerance and encourages the poetic metaphorical impulse of making and self-creation is—if not the best possible world—at least the best possible world achieved by European civilization.

One can also see how these three motifs are interwoven. Sometimes Rorty suggests that if we would only stop worrying about the wrong issues, simply abandon worn-out "vocabularies" that have for too long obsessed philosophers, and realize the benefits and moral progress of liberal democracy, then we can all get on with the playful task of poetizing life.

Rorty is sensitive to the charge that his recent writings adopt "the air of light-minded aestheticism toward traditional philosophical questions" (p. 39). But although Rorty has expressed his skepticism about the influence of any philosophical reflection on the dynamics of society, he defends himself by claiming that "such philosophical superficiality and light-mindedness helps along the disenchantment of the world. It helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality."

Moral commitment, after all, does not require taking seriously all the matters which are, for moral reasons, taken seriously by one's fellow-citizens. It may require just the opposite. It may require trying to josh them out of the habit of taking those topics so seriously. There may be serious reasons for so joshing them. More generally, we should not assume that the aesthetic is always the enemy of the moral. I should argue that in the recent history of liberal societies the willingness to view matters aesthetically to be content to indulge in what Schiller called "play" and to discard what Nietzsche called "the spirit of seriousness" has been an important vehicle of moral progress (pp. 39-40).

III

For all the attractiveness of Rorty's vision of a world of tolerant liberal play, and his debunking of "the spirit of seriousness," there is something a bit too facile about this vision, or so I want to argue. More important, I want to show how Rorty's rhetoric and the ways in which
he structures and poses issues tends to obscure more than they illuminate, and even mask conflicting tendencies in his own thinking. Ironically, although Rorty calls himself a “Deweyean pragmatist,” he helps to perpetuate just the sort of fruitless debates that Dewey and the other pragmatists sought to jettison. One reason that the “classical” pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and James went into eclipse is because many thinkers began to feel that the pragmatic attempt to soften and blur all philosophic distinctions had the unfortunate consequence of depriving us of the analytic tools needed for clarifying and getting a grip on important differences that make a difference, and resulted in a bland undifferentiated monotonous holism. Rorty, who has done so much to get philosophers to take pragmatism “seriously” (at least by constantly invoking the names of the pragmatic thinkers), is guilty of a similar tendency of leveling in his light-minded joshing. This tendency comes to the foreground in his recent writings, especially his article “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy.” The very title indicates Rorty’s polemical thrust. He seeks to show us that “liberal democracy” is prior to philosophy in the sense that it simply does not stand in need of any “philosophical justification.”

Rorty’s primary intention is to give what he calls a “Deweyean historicist interpretation” of John Rawls’s theory of justice, and to defend Rawls against his so-called communitarian critics, in particular, the criticisms advanced by Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice.* Rorty confesses that he, along with others, first read Rawls as seeking to provide some sort of foundationalist, quasi-transcendental, ahistorical justification and legitimation for justice as fairness, but he now realizes this was a mistake. Focusing on Rawls’s writings since the publication of *A Theory of Justice,* especially “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” and “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” Rorty now sees Rawls as closer to the historicist strain in Hegel and Dewey rather than the transcendental foundationalist, philosophical strain in Kant. According to this interpretation of Rawls’s project, we can read *A Theory of Justice*—for all its ambiguity—as elaborating a political “articulation” but not a philosophical “justification” of liberal constitutional democracy. Controversial philosophical or metaphysical claims about human nature or the theory of the self are simply irrelevant to articulating the intuitions, settled habits, and shared beliefs of those who identify themselves with the historical community committed to liberal constitutional democracy. Consequently, Rawls disarms his communitarian critics who think that his theory of justice “presupposes”
a faulty and objectionable "theory of the self" that needs to be replaced by a better theory of the self. According to Rorty, all of this is beside the point. He concedes that if one feels the urge to elaborate a theory of the self that "comports" with the political institutions that one admires then something like what the communitarians tell us will do, but nothing crucial depends on it.

Emphasizing the principle of tolerance (which for Rorty is close to indifference), we simply do not need "to take a position" on controversial philosophical or metaphysical views just as we do not need to take a position on controversial religious views in order to champion liberal democracy. So Sandel and his fellow communitarian critics are left hanging on a limb that Rawls has deftly sawed off. Liberal democracy does not need any justification at all. Rorty goes even further, for he suggests that to the extent that we elaborate philosophic "theories" they should be adjusted to fit our political intuitions. This is how Rorty understands "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical."13

I want to concentrate on Rorty's claims about liberal democracy and philosophy.14 In his recent work, Rorty is not primarily interested in arguing against what he takes to be faulty philosophical and metaphysical theories, but he wants to make a more "radical" move—to expose the pointlessness and irrelevance of philosophical and metaphysical vocabularies and debates. In this respect, Rorty exhibits a proto-positivist strain in his thinking that has become more and more blatant. Like the early logical positivists, he seeks to show us that it is pointless to argue about the "truth" or "falsity" of controversial metaphysical "theories." Employing his own terminology, one can say his moral-aesthetic intention is to show us why we should abandon the worn-out vocabularies of philosophy and metaphysics. They are no longer useful for coping.

Because I am claiming that Rorty obfuscates more than he illuminates, and that the very way in which he structures issues tends to distract us from questions that really do make a difference, let me locate in a bit more detail the precise point of Rorty's objection to Rawls's communitarian critics. Rorty tells us there are three strands or claims in communitarianism that need to be disentangled. First there is "the empirical prediction that no society can survive which sets aside the idea of ahistorical moral truth in the insouciant way that Dewey recommended" (p. 6). This is the "line" that Rorty claims Horkheimer and Adorno take in Dialectic of Enlightenment. "Second, there is the moral judgment that the sort of human being who is produced by liberal
institutions and cultures is undesirable" (p. 6). This is the type of judgment that Rorty claims is at the heart of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. But it is the third claim that Rorty primarily addresses. “Third, there is the claim that political institutions ‘presuppose’ a doctrine about the nature of human beings, and that such a doctrine must, unlike Enlightenment rationalism, make clear the essentially historical character of the self” (p. 7).

To evaluate this third claim, Rorty poses two questions. “First, whether there is any sense in which liberal democracy ‘needs’ philosophical justification at all” (p. 7). And, the second question is “whether a conception of the self which, as Taylor says, makes ‘the community constitutive of the individual’ does in fact comport better with liberal democracy than does the Enlightenment conception of the self” (p. 8). Rorty’s answers to these two questions is unequivocal.

I can preview what is to come by saying that I shall answer “no” to the first question about the communitarians' third claim and “yes” to the second. I shall be arguing that Rawls, following up on Dewey, shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions. But I shall also argue that a conception of the self which makes the community constitutive of the self does comport well with liberal democracy (p. 9).

We should not think Rorty is conceding very much in his affirmative answer to the second question, for he makes it clear that nothing crucial hangs on fleshing out “our self-image as citizens of such a democracy with a philosophical view of the self” (p. 9).

IV

In order to evaluate Rorty’s “arguments,” let me first note some striking features of his defense of Rawls. There is scarcely any mention of such themes as the “original position,” “the veil of ignorance,” “the thin theory of primary goods,” or Rawls's understanding of rationality and rational choice. Nor does Rorty pay attention to Rawls's detailed critique of utilitarianism or other versions of liberalism. What is even more surprising is that Rorty never even mentions what—on any interpretation of Rawls—is the heart of his theory, that is, the successive formulations and defense of the two principles of justice. Throughout Rorty simply speaks globally about “liberal democracy” without ever
unpacking what it involves or doing justice to the enormous historical controversy about what liberal democracy is or ought to be. Rorty is concerned (one is tempted to say "obsessed") with variations on a single theme—the meta-theoretical question of whether Rawls's enterprise is one of "articulation" of common intuitions and shared beliefs or a "justification" of liberal democracy. Is Rawls grounding his theory of justice (whatever its substantive content) on controversial philosophic or metaphysical premises? This is even reflected in Rorty's metaphors. He speaks of "philosophic foundations," "philosophic back-up," and "philosophic grounding." When these metaphors are unpacked or decoded it becomes clear that Rorty's "picture" of justification is simple—perhaps even simplistic. Philosophic justification amounts to deduction from premises that are presumably unassailable.\(^{15}\) To justify liberal democracy would be to deduce it from such premises—premises about human nature or the self. And if such a deduction fails, then we have failed to legitimize liberal democracy. This is the type of language game that Rorty urges us to abandon. In this sense liberal democracy does not need any justification or legitimization.

I do not want to suggest that Rorty is attacking a straw man. There have been philosophers who have endorsed such a "picture" of justification, although I do think that when we "look and see" at the ways in which defenders and critics of the varieties of liberalism actually support their claims, then Rorty's conception of the justificatory process is close to a caricature. Even Rawls does not advocate abandoning "justification" but argues for a more sophisticated and open textured understanding of justification. Justification is not a matter of deduction from indubitable premises, but rather "a matter of mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view."\(^{16}\)

What I find most objectionable in Rorty's strategy is that it diverts us from the pragmatically important issues that need to be confronted. For there is another sense of "presupposing" that is relevant to controversies about liberalism. "Liberalism" itself is a vague term that embraces many diverse and even incompatible positions. We could not make sense of Dewey's strong critique of older forms of liberalism unless we recognized this. Nor would Rawls's project make much sense unless we appreciate the extent to which he is arguing against what he takes to be mistaken conceptions of liberalism and unsatisfactory justifications of it. For as soon as one attempts to clarify what one means by "liberalism," what one takes to be primary or secondary about liberal democracy, one is
caught up in controversy. What for one “liberal” is basic for liberty or freedom is to another “liberal” a mark of coercion. This is illustrated not only in the controversies of political philosophers such as Rawls and Nozick, but is itself manifested in everyday debates about the responsibilities and obligations of the government concerning the range of “welfare rights.”

At times Rorty writes as if “we” all have common intuitions about what liberal democracy means or should mean, but this is really ingenuous. It is ironical that Rorty, who in his pragmatic and Wittgensteinian moments argues so effectively against “essentialism,” falls into an essentialist mode of speech when he speaks of “liberal democracy” or “political freedom.” Sometimes Rorty concedes that there are important differences among the varieties of liberalism, but these differences are political not philosophical. But Rorty’s labeling language game does not really get us very far in clarifying or resolving substantive differences. For he does not clarify what constitutes “the political” or how one is to evaluate critically competing political arguments. He writes as if something extremely important depends on labeling controversies about liberalism as “political” rather than “philosophical.” This is why I think Rorty is actually perpetuating the sort of fruitless debates that the classical pragmatists sort to dismiss. Furthermore one finds deeply conflicting tendencies in Rorty’s own mode of argumentation.

On the one hand, Rorty has relentlessly argued against the very idea that disciplines can be conceived of as “natural kinds” with well-defined domains and methods that demarcate them from different disciplines. (This thesis is “foundational” for his version of “holism.”) And in the case of philosophy, Rorty has exposed the ways in which the search for demarcation is little more than a power play, an exclusionary tactic that seeks to rule out the invention of new vocabularies and new modes of description.

But on the other hand, Rorty—especially in his polemics against philosophy and justification—writes as if philosophy is a “natural kind,” indeed a noxious weed that should be rooted out and thrown away. And again, he sometimes writes as if labeling a controversy as “political” illuminates the controversy. But “the political” is no less an essentially contested concept than is “the philosophical.”

This is why a statement such as the following tells us more about Rorty’s rhetorical construction of the issues than it does about how they are to be resolved. In his address to the Eleventh Inter-American
Congress of Philosophy, he concludes by stating "briefly and dogmatically a view for which I have argued elsewhere."

This is that philosophy, even though it is often inspired by politics, should not be thought of as a foundation for politics nor as a weapon of politics. We should not assume that it is our task as professors of philosophy to be the avant-garde of political movements. We should not ask, say Davidson or Gadamer, for the "political implications" of their view of language, nor spurn their work because of its lack of such implications. We should think of politics as one of the experimental rather than of the theoretical disciplines.

It may seem foolish to speak of "play" as I have done, in the midst of a political struggle that will decide whether civilization has a future, whether our descendants will have any chance to play. But philosophy should try to express our political hopes rather than to ground our political practices. On the view I am suggesting, nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitimizes them, nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things really are. The sense of human languages and practices as the results of experimental self-reflection rather than of an attempt to approximate to a fixed and ahistorical ideal—the position in which I am claiming the philosophy of our century culminates—makes it less plausible than ever to imagine that a particular theoretical discipline will rescue or redeem us.18

We can read this passage sympathetically as a moral-aesthetic plea not to expect more of philosophy than it can deliver, not to judge the "theoretical" discipline of philosophy by inappropriate political standards. But the entire passage is filled with impossible dichotomies that dissolve as soon as we reflect upon them. Once again there is the pervasive contrast between "philosophy" and "politics" as if these labels demarcated "natural kinds." And once again there is the identification of philosophy with seeking "a fixed and ahistorical ideal," with putting us "in touch with the way things really are." (Later I want to examine critically Rorty's claim that this is "the position in which the philosophy of our century culminates.")

When the contrast is made between expressing our political hopes and grounding our political practices, then Rorty's plea has some polemical force. But does it make any sense to speak of expressing political hopes without seeking to evaluate "political practices" critically? Here, too, a hidden ahistorical essentialism creeps into Rorty's rhetoric. For Rorty writes as if we all know what these practices are. Given Rorty's constant appeal to history and historicism, he ignores the historical fact that we are confronted with conflicting and incompatible practices—even in so-called liberal democracy. Thus, for example, a number of commentators have argued that to understand American
history and political thought we must be sensitive to the tensions and conflicts between a tradition of liberalism with its emphasis on negative liberty and the tradition of civic republicanism that highlights positive participatory freedom. These competing traditions lead to different evaluations of the very practices that are taken to be vital to the flourishing of democracy. We do not settle issues by the appeal to “our political practices”—we need to confront the issues of which practices are to be favored and which are to be modified or eliminated. If we take “seriously” Rorty’s claim that politics is an experimental discipline, then don’t we need to appeal to some standards or criteria to judge what counts as a “successful” or a “failed” experiment?

Rorty sometimes seems to think that whenever one talks about standards or criteria one is on the slippery slope that leads to “bad” foundationalism. He himself has shown us that this is a myth. But he never faces the hard issue of clarifying what historical standards and criteria ought to be employed in evaluating the experimental discipline of politics. Sometimes Rorty writes as if any reference to criteria and standards is irrelevant. We should rather focus on examples and exemplars of what we politically admire. One can be sympathetic with the critique of the modern obsession with rules, principles, criteria, and standards. As Aristotle, Gadamer, and Oakeshott remind us, we should be wary of “bad” rationalism and realize that what is crucial in political and ethical judgment is the application of general principles to particular cases. But we also should not forget the lesson that Socrates teaches us when Euthythro thinks it is sufficient to answer the question “what is piety?” by citing examples. We cannot avoid confronting the question “By virtue of what is a particular example an instance of piety, justice, etc.?”

Rorty’s fateful, although shifting, dichotomies—the either/or’s that structure his thinking—lead him to all sorts of dubious and double-edged claims. When he distinguishes three responses to the breakdown of the Enlightenment confidence in a universal ahistorical rationality—the absolutist, the pragmatic, and the communitarian, he tells us:

If we swing to the pragmatist side, and consider talk of “rights” an attempt to enjoy the benefits of metaphysics without assuming the appropriate responsibilities, we shall still need something to distinguish the sort of individual conscience we respect from the sort we condemn as “fanatical.” This can only be something relatively “local and ethnocentric”—the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture. On this view what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it is necessary to justify ourselves—to the body of shared belief which determines the reference of the word “we” (p. 4).20
If the only alternatives open to us are either appealing to what is local and ethnocentric or appealing to fixed permanent ahistorical foundations, then Rorty’s claim has some bite. But why should we accept this dichotomy? Rorty, of course, knows that there are pernicious and benign forms of ethnocentrism. The standard form of intolerance is one where some group takes itself to be the measure of what is “rational” and excludes some other group whether we speak of “we Greeks (versus barbarians),” or “we white South Africans,” or “we white males.” So despite Rorty’s manifest plea for extending the principle of tolerance, the latent content of what he says can lead to the worst forms of intolerance unless he is prepared to distinguish (even locally and historically) pernicious and benign forms of ethnocentric appeals.

Thus far I have been arguing as if Rorty has nothing to tell us when we turn our attention to substantive disagreements about the type of liberal democracy we ought to endorse. This is not quite accurate. But what he does tell us leads to further aporias. According to Rorty, we do not need any “philosophic justification” for liberal democracy, all we need is “reflective equilibrium.” Insofar as justice becomes the first virtue of a society such a society will get accustomed to the thought that social policy needs no more authority than successful accommodation among individuals, individuals who find themselves heir to the same historical traditions and faced with the same problems. It will be a society which encourages the “end of ideology” which takes reflective equilibrium as the only method needed in discussing social policy. When such a society deliberates, when it collects the principles and intuitions to be brought into equilibrium, it will tend to discard those drawn from philosophical accounts of the self, or of rationality (p. 20).

The appeal to “reflective equilibrium as the only method needed in discussing social policy” is little more than a verbal ornament. Rorty, following Feyerabend, has been a sharp critic of the very idea of “method”—where a method is supposed to lead to some determinate result by well-established procedures. Even if we accept some appeal to reflective equilibrium, it names a problem not a solution. We can agree that in any discussion of political or social alternatives, we begin with “intuitions” or what Dewey called “funded experience.” But this is only a beginning point because the overwhelming historical fact is that individuals’ basic intuitions, even when they reflect upon them, conflict. The problem is rather how are we to resolve these conflicts—which 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.

Here again, Rorty betrays some of his best insights. In philosophic contexts Rorty has criticized those who appeal to the common intuitions that “we” share as a way of resolving philosophic disputes. He has even argued that when realists appeal to “our intuitions” the proper response may be not to deny that we do at times have such intuitions, but that they ought to be abandoned. But it is never clear why he thinks that the appeal to common intuitions in a political context is any more successful in settling controversies than it is in a philosophical debate.

Indeed it begins to look as if Rorty is substituting a “historical myth of the given” for the “epistemological myth of the given” that he has helped to expose. He speaks of “our” practices, “our” tradition, the “consensus” of a particular community as if this were simply a historical given.

He fails to see that he is using a variation on the very type of argument he has sought to discredit. Why is it that liberal democracy needs no philosophic justification or legitimization? Because all the “justification” it needs it gets from the appeal to our common moral and political intuitions, from the consensus of the particular local historical community with which we identify ourselves. But if one is to appeal to a historical consensus or a tradition, then let us be wary of making it into something more solid, harmonious, and coherent than it really is. I agree with MacIntyre when he tells us that a tradition (including the tradition of liberalism) “when vital embodies continuities of conflict” and that when a tradition is “in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives the tradition its particular point or purpose.” If we are serious or playful about politics and liberal democracy, then it is this ongoing argument that should be the focus of our attention. Why does Rorty ignore this or seek to dismiss it by telling us that such controversies are political but not philosophical, and that the method of reflective equilibrium is sufficient to resolve disputes about social policy?

In part, this is because he (at times) “presupposes” that all “philosophic justification” and all argument boils down to logical deduction from presumably unassailable premises. But this “presupposition” conflicts with another strain in his thinking. For Rorty, along with many others, has shown us that argumentation in any discipline—whether philosophy, science, or politics—virtually never takes this “canonical” form. But then one would think the task is to enter the fray, to seek to
advance stronger substantive arguments—in our historical situation—for the type of liberalism and the vision of democracy that one endorses. Global references to "social practices," "shared beliefs," a "historical consensus" only point to a tangled area of controversy, they do not help us to resolve controversies. But Rorty rarely descends from his meta-philosophical heights to substantive argument.

He tends to gloss over what appears to be the overwhelming "fact" of contemporary life—the breakdown of moral and political consensus, and the conflicts and incompatibility among competing social practices. Even if Rorty thinks that claims about the breakdown of moral and political consensus are exaggerated, one would expect some argument showing why the "crisis mentality" of the twentieth century is mistaken—or, at least a clarification of what are the characteristics of the consensus that he thinks does exist among those who take themselves to be champions of liberal democracy. It is never clear why Rorty, who claims that there is no consensus about competing conceptions of the good life, thinks there is any more consensus about conceptions of justice or liberal democracy.

Rorty also tends to downplay or at least circumscribe what has become a major problem for any internal defense or external critique of liberalism—the disparity between the "ideals" of liberty and equality that liberals profess and the actual state of affairs in so-called liberal societies. Occasionally he writes as if this is simply an "empirical" problem that can be handled by the appeal to social science and piecemeal social engineering. Despite his harsh remarks about Marx and Marxism, I do not see any evidence that Rorty faces up to the challenge that Marx poses for us in his critique of ideology, namely, that the structural dynamics of bourgeois society systematically undermine and belie liberal ideals. But one does not need to appeal to Marx to make this point. It is made by Weber—in a different way—when he argues that the spread and institutionalization of zweckrationalität, and the increasingly disenchantment of the world (which Rorty favors and wants to further), has the consequence of undermining the very social conditions required for individual autonomy and freedom. And a similar point is made by Dewey when he claims that "the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken ad hoc." Even Rawls seeks to confront this issue in a more forthright way than Rorty does. For A Theory of Justice is structured not only to specify and defend the principles of justice, but also to show us how they
can be approximated in our "actual state itself." The point can be put simply even if one objects to Marxist claims about the structural conflicts and contradictions of bourgeois capitalist societies.

Since the nineteenth century when the varieties of liberalism have come under heavy attack, there have been those (Marxists, socialists, anarchists, radical reformers, and even Weberians) who have argued that when we examine liberalism as it is embodied in concrete modern societies (especially in a capitalist economic order) we discover that it is not a merely accidental contingent fact that liberal ideals of universal freedom and equality are constantly betrayed in bourgeois capitalist societies. There are forces and tendencies at work (e.g., class conflict, social division, patriarchy, racism) that are compatible with liberal political practices but nevertheless foster real inequality and limit effective political freedom. At the very least Rorty's "defense" of liberal democracy requires him to show the falsity or speciousness of the claims of the radical critics of liberalism. But Rorty does not argue his case, his simply asserts it. At times he suggests that it is only an "empirical" issue whether or not liberal democracies can and do achieve equality and effective universal liberty. But it is never clear what empirical evidence would justify his claims (or even what he means by labeling this issue "empirical").

It may be objected that I am being unfair to Rorty because he has limited his critique to a single circumscribed issue—whether or not liberal democracy needs a philosophic justification. He is not addressing the question of which version of liberalism we should endorse. But I do not think such a response—this easy way of compartmentalizing of issues—is adequate. This is because when we descend from the heights of meta-philosophical discourse to a first-level discussion of competing conceptions of liberalism, then we are forced to face the difficult and controversial reflective issues that Rorty dismisses—whether we label them "political" or "philosophical." This is where competing conceptions of the "self," "liberty," or "political freedom" become pragmatically relevant. This is the sort of issue Dewey was worried about when he said that "any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed."

There is another perspective for exposing the dubiousness of Rorty's claims—unpacking what he means by "we." Earlier I cited the passage in which Rorty speaks of "the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves—to the body of shared belief which determines the reference of the word 'we'" (p. 4). Rorty frequently speaks of "we"—"we
liberals,” “we pragmatists,” “we inheritors of European civilization.” But who precisely constitutes this “we”? Sometimes it seems as if what Rorty means by “we” are “all those who agree with me.” On another occasion, Rorty has criticized Foucault for failing to appeal to a “we.” It is worthwhile to cite Foucault’s reply to Rorty.

R. Rorty points out that I do not appeal to any “we” — to any “we’s” whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a “we” possible, by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result — and the necessary temporary result — of the question as it is posed in new terms in which one formulates it.25

At times, as I have already suggested, Rorty seems to be insensitive to the dark side of appealing to “we” when it is used as an exclusionary tactic — as the “rationalization” for fostering intolerance. But Rorty’s own appeal to a “we” masks deeper conflicting tendencies in his own thinking. Rorty criticizes those versions of “realism” that appeal to a “fact of the matter” that is presumably independent of my (or our) interpretations. Yet he fails to realize that when he appeals to our shared beliefs and our common historical heritage, he is speaking as if there is at least a historical fact of the matter. This is Rorty’s “historical myth of the given,” which he substitutes for the “epistemological myth of the given.” But Rorty, especially in his Nietzschean and existential moments, subscribes to the thesis that there are “no facts only interpretations.” When he defends “strong” readings of texts and traditions, when he emphasizes our capacity for making and self-creation, he comes close to suggesting that “we” are always free to make up what a tradition means for us. There seems to be no genuine resistance, no otherness, nothing corresponding to what Peirce called Secondness to which we must be responsive. Tradition, including the tradition of liberal democracy, does not seem to have any determinate content other than the ways in which we (I) interpret it. And our interpretations, our self-creations, seem to be little more than an expression of our idiosyncratic will to power, our will to self-assertion.

Here it is helpful to contrast Gadamer with Rorty. For Gadamer (and Dewey), we are always already engaged in the “happening” of understanding, interpretation, and appropriation. But for Gadamer, when we are engaged in dialogue, whether it be with another partner, a text, or a
tradition, there is always something "other" to which we are being responsive, that speaks to us and constrains us. There is a genuine to-and-fro movement that enables us to constitute a "we" that is more than a projection of my own idiosyncratic desires and beliefs. But for Rorty there never seems to be any effective constraints on me and my interpretations. This is why Rorty's constant references to "we," a common tradition, a shared consensus appear to be hollow—little more than a label for a projected "me."

There is another disturbing feature about Rorty's own "defense" of what he calls "post-modern bourgeois liberalism," and this touches on a larger theme concerning the political significance of recent debates about modernism and postmodernism. When Habermas suggested that the radical credentials of so-called postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers might be questioned, and that there were parallels between postmodern discourse and young conservative counterenlightenment discourse, he set off a storm of protest that still has not abated. Peter Dews (in his excellent introduction to a collection of Habermas interviews) pursues this theme when he writes:

There are some striking parallels between this [Lyotard's] account of postmodernity and the "end of ideology" debate which preoccupied English-speaking political scientists in the late fifties and early sixties. Indeed, it is curious to observe how the conception of ideology developed by American political science during the first Cold War is reduplicated in many of the themes of the "left" Nietzscheanism of Paris during the 1970's. Daniel Bell's definition of a "total ideology" as an "all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality," "a set of beliefs infused with passion" which "seeks to transform the whole of a way of life," captures the burden of this conception, which—independently of any direct Nietzschean influence—is congruent with Nietzsche's fundamental convictions. Nietzsche insists that any comprehensive theoretical or philosophical system must inevitably distort and simplify reality (for Bell, "Ideology makes it unnecessary for people to confront individual issues on their individual merits"), that the energy which enters into the construction of such systems always derives from pre-rational needs and drives (for Bell, "the most important latent function of ideology is to tap emotion"), and that concepts have an ineliminable pragmatic dimension (for Bell, "not only does ideology transform ideas, it transforms people as well"). Furthermore, like Lyotard, the end-of-ideology theorists portrayed ideological thought as a compensation for the collapse of traditional worldviews, and attributed its decline to the political and social disasters of the twentieth century. Indeed, it is much the same litany of catastrophies, most notably fascism and Stalinism, which is recited in both cases.26

Dews remarks about the parallels between "end of ideology" apologists and champions of postmodernity are even more trenchant when applied
to Rorty who explicitly identifies himself with the end-of-ideology movement. Despite Rorty's critique of Lyotard, he basically shares Lyotard's playful celebration and invention of new language games and vocabularies.

Indeed, Rorty's present position is an odd mixture of avant-garde "radical" postmodern playfulness and what looks like old-fashioned cold war liberalism. But just as it became evident that Bell and his fellow travelers were masking a new form of ideology under the slogan of "the end of ideology" so this is true of Rorty. This becomes even more striking when we consider the politics of some of Rorty's new heroes: Sidney Hook, Karl Popper, Michael Oakeshott, and Lezsek Kolakowski. Rorty's thesis of the priority of democracy over philosophy, his celebration of a new tolerant jouissance of multiple language games and vocabularies is little more than an ideological apologia for an old-fashioned version of cold war liberalism dressed up in fashionable "post-modern" discourse.27 This is surely one step forward, two steps backward.

Thus far I have only obliquely dealt with Rorty's understanding of philosophy and metaphysics. Because Rorty's ongoing battle against the worn-out vocabularies of philosophy and metaphysics is central in all his writings during the past decade, I want to confront his views directly.

Rorty is acutely aware of the self-referential objections that can be brought against his attack on philosophy and metaphysics—that he himself argues against one view of philosophy on the basis of another view that he fails to justify. And he nimbly seeks to get around this objection and defuse it. He tells us,

Both "religion" and "philosophy" [one can add metaphysics—R.J.B.] are vague umbrella terms, and both are subject to persuasive redefinition. When these terms are broadly enough defined everybody, even atheists, will be said to have a religious faith (in the Tillichian sense of a symbol of ultimate concern). Everybody, even those who shun metaphysics and epistemology, will be said to have philosophic presuppositions (p. 36).

In order to prevent any misunderstanding about the way in which we should take his own philosophic remarks about the self, he tells us,
If, however, one has a taste for philosophy—if one’s vocation, one’s private pursuit of happiness entails constructing models of such entities as “the self,” “knowledge,” “language,” “nature,” “God,” or “history,” and then tinkering with them until they mesh with each other—one will want a picture of the self. Since my own vocation is of this sort, and the moral identity around which I wish to build such models is that of a citizen of a liberal democratic state, I commend the picture of the self as a centerless and contingent web to those with similar tastes and similar identities (p. 36).

But is this convincing or hedging? Rorty is not simply constructing a picture of the self that fits with or comports with his convictions as a citizen of a liberal democratic state—where we are “free” to accept it or not according to whether we share or do not share “similar tastes and similar identities.” He is arguing against all notions of a centered and transcendental self. Whatever his motivations in coming up with a picture of “the self as centerless, as historical contingency all the way through,” he is arguing that this is a more perspicuous—one is tempted to say a “truer”—understanding of the self. One does not get off the hook by telling us that if one wants to play the game of elaborating different “pictures” of the self, that this is a better way to play the game. Because the game does not make any sense unless one is prepared to show and argue—as Rorty claims to do—why one picture is better than its alternatives (regardless of whether or not it comports with one’s conception of liberal democracy). And when Rorty tells us that we do not really need to play any of these games at all in order to defend liberal democracy, he once again fails to recognize that as soon as we attempt to specify what we mean by liberty or political freedom, to characterize what it is that we are championing, considerations such as those that he takes up in his discussion of alternatives “pictures” of the self are implicated. The locus of controversial reflective theories or “pictures” is not in grounding political convictions on firm foundations, but in specifying and describing what precisely we mean by liberalism and liberal democracy.

There is a larger issue looming on the horizon. Why does Rorty think that philosophy (or “Philosophy”) amounts to little more than the worn-out vocabulary of “bad” foundational discourse? So much of his recent writing falls into the genre of the “God that failed” discourse. There seems to be something almost oedipal—a form of patricide—in Rorty’s obsessive attacks on the father figures of philosophy and metaphysics. It is the discourse of a one time “true believer” who has lost his faith.
But I want to bring into the open the narrative of the history of philosophy that informs so much of Rorty’s recent work and that is the “straight man” he attacks in his playful “joshing.” For Rorty has appropriated a version of the narrative of the history of philosophy that has its most dramatic origins in Nietzsche, has been refined and perpetuated by Heidegger, Derrida, and has been disseminated by many of those who identify themselves as poststructuralist, postmodern, or deconstructivist writers. According to this story, the real villain is Plato—at least the Plato identified (mythologized) by Platonism. Platonism, according to its critics, including Rorty, is like a thousand-headed monster—or better a Proteus—who can take on an indefinite variety of forms. Platonism is the search for “metaphysical comfort,” secure ahistorical foundations that will alleviate our deepest anxieties. It is the infatuation with universality, necessity, and episteme. It is the disdain (even hatred) for radical contingency, particularity, historicity. Platonism has to be slayed wherever it appears whether in Descartes, Kant, Habermas, Peirce, the “new” analytic realists, or in Rawls’s communitarian critics. It was Nietzsche who in his brilliant aphorisms first sketched the “history of the West” as the history of Platonism where Christianity becomes Platonism for the masses. Heidegger not only presses these Nietzschean claims but spins a story of the history of the philosophy as the history of the fallenness and forgetfulness of Being. And for Heidegger, Nietzsche is the “last metaphysician.” In Heidegger’s strong reading of the history of philosophy, the “movement” from Platonism to the nihilistic triumph of Gestell (Enframing) is the inexorable working out of “prefigured” possibilities. Then along comes Derrida, who in his “exposure” of logocentrism, phonocentrism, phallogcentrism, and metaphysical presence, tells us:

The entire history of the concept of structure must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determination of the center.

The history of metaphysics like the history of the West is the history of those metaphors and metonymies.28

And he also seeks to root out the last elements of Heidegger’s nostalgia for Being. Rorty, with a certain amount of self-irony, has noted that there can be indefinite variations on this “game.” For Rorty praises Derrida when he is deconstructing the history of philosophy but chides him when he slips into the mode of a “constructive” philosopher of language.29
There are two dominant strains in this narrative—both of which can be found in Nietzsche. There is the heavy despairing strain about the fate and destiny of the “West,” which is expressed in some of Heidegger’s gloomiest passages. And there is the laughing, joshing, playful strain in Derrida, which is taken up in Rorty’s playfulness.

I do not want to denigrate the power, insight, and provocative quality of this narrative of the history of philosophy and the “history of the West.” For it compels us to rethink what philosophy has been, is, and might be. In the best sense there is a Socratic impulse of questioning in this movement—the type of questioning that compels us to face up to our deepest buried judgments and prejudices.

But I also want to maintain that this narrative is itself rapidly becoming a blinding prejudice that obscures more than it illuminates. What was once a stinging critique is becoming a bland, boring cliché. One begins to wonder if there ever was a “foundationist” thinker—at least one who fits the description of what Rorty calls “foundationism.” Even Plato—the Plato of the Dialogues—fails to fit this description. I fully agree with Gadamer when he gently chides Heidegger for perpetuating the myth of “Platonism.”

Heidegger interprets the acceptance of the doctrine of ideas as the beginning of that forgetfulness of being that peaks in mere imaginings and objectifications and runs along its course in the technological age as the universal will to power. But over against this Heideggerian interpretation, the authentic dimension of the Platonic dialectic of ideas has a fundamentally different meaning. The underlying principle is a step beyond the simple minded acceptance of ideas, and in the final analysis a counter movement against the metaphysical interpretation of being as the being of existing being [Sein als das Seins des Seienden].

My main point here is not simply to oppose one narrative of the history of philosophy with another that stresses the questioning, open character of philosophic thinking. It is rather to call attention to the way in which Rorty’s characterization and caricature of the history of philosophy is rapidly running itself into the ground, and to suggest that what is now needed is to demythologize this narrative of the invidious fallenness of Platonism. For it is only to the extent that we still accept some version of Rorty’s mythologizing about what philosophy and metaphysics are, and what “philosophic justification” must be, that his playful skepticism has any sting. Once we give up this “myth”—once we adopt a more open and playful attitude toward philosophy itself (instead of obsessively trying to kill it off over and over again)—then all the hard issues concerning the
defense and critique of liberalism come rushing in. It is time that Rorty himself should appropriate the lesson of Peirce, "Do not block the road to inquiry," and realize that rarified meta-philosophical or meta-theoretical discussion can never be a substitute for struggling to articulate, defend, and justify one's vision of a just and good society.

Rorty, who has eloquently called for open conversation, fails to realize how his rhetorical strategies tend to close off serious/playful conversation about liberalism and democracy. The pragmatic legacy (which Rorty constantly invokes) will only be recovered and revitalized when we try to do for our time what Dewey did in his historical context—to articulate, texture, and justify a vision of a pragmatically viable ideal of communal democracy.

**NOTES**


9. See Rorty's "Introduction" to *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).


Rorty labels as communitarians "such theorists as Robert Bellah, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, the early Roberto Unger, and many others. These writers share some measure of agreement with a view found in an extreme form, both in Heidegger and in Horkheimmer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" (p. 5). One should be very wary of the label "communitarians," which is now becoming fashionable, not only because it lumps together such diverse thinkers, but because it encompasses thinkers whose views span the political spectrum.

Furthermore, given Rorty's characterization of "communitarianism"—especially the central claim that "the community is constitutive of the individual," it is difficult to understand the rationale for not classifying Dewey as a communitarian. There is no evidence that Dewey thought of himself as elaborating a view of the individual and the self that merely "comports" with his political intuitions about liberal democracy. Ironically, one of the best and most succinct statements of what Dewey meant by community is given by the "communitarian" Michael Sandel when he characterizes the "strong sense" of community and distinguishes it from instrumental and sentimental conceptions of community.

On this strong view, to say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments or pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity—the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations—as defined to some extent by the community which they are a part (Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], p. 147).

Because my primary concern in this article is with Rorty's views on liberal democracy and philosophy, I have deliberately avoided the question of the accuracy of Rorty's interpretation of Rawls. I also want to "bracket" the question of whether Rawls in "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical" is clarifying his original intentions, changing his mind, or rewriting his own history. There are already signs in the secondary literature on Rawls that we are about to witness an outpouring of articles on this topic. I suspect that this will be as unilluminating as the extensive discussion about whether Thomas Kuhn was changing his mind or rewriting his own history when he sought to clarify what he meant in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

There is something curious and asymmetrical about Rorty's interpretation of Rawls and his "communitarian" critics. Although admitting that *A Theory of Justice* is ambiguous, Rorty tends to screen out all those passages where Rawls appears to be making philosophical and metaphysical claims. But when Rorty discusses Sandel and Taylor, he exaggerates their commitment to controversial philosophical and metaphysical theories. Rorty never explores the extent to which the entire debate can be read as a political argument (in his sense of "political") about competing visions of democracy.

Rorty writes:

The idea that moral and political controversies should always be "brought back to principles" is reasonable if it means merely that we should seek common ground in the hope of attaining agreement. But it is misleading if it is taken as the claim that there is a natural order of premises from which moral and political conclusions are to be inferred (p. 23).

17. See Richard Rorty, "Back to the Demarcation Problem," forthcoming, in a volume tentatively entitled *The Shaping of Rationality*, to be edited by Ernan McMullin and published by the University of Notre Dame Press.


20. Rorty is even more explicit on this point when in his reply to Clifford Geertz's "The Uses at Diversity" he says: "Anti-anti-ethnocentrists, suggest that liberals should simply drop the distinction between rational judgment and cultural bias" ("On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Summer 1986, pp. 525-34).

21. See Rorty's discussion "deep intuitions" in his Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*.


23. In 1906, Weber wrote:

> It is utterly ridiculous to see any connection between the high capitalism of today with democracy or with freedom in any sense of these words. Yet this capitalism is an unavoidable result of our economic development. The question is: how are freedom and democracy in the long run possible under the domination of highly developed capitalism. The historical origin of modern freedom has had certain unique preconditions which will never repeat themselves.


27 There are two points that I want to stress here. Like many anticommunists, Rorty frequently argues as if damning communism and so-called really existing socialism is all one needs to do to defend and "justify" American liberal democracy. Rorty does think that the Soviet Union is an "evil empire" that has the single ruthless objective of conquering the world and taking advantage of any weakness displayed by the West. Rorty's rhetoric (although not his personal politics) echoes the rhetoric we hear every day from the Reagan administration and those conservatives who stand to the right of Reagan. But anti-Stalinism, an opposition to all forms of totalitarianism and a healthy suspicion of the intentions of the Kremlin, is not sufficient to justify American liberalism. Some of the best recent analyses and sharpest criticisms of totalitarianism and the Soviet Union have been developed by left thinkers who are also penetrating critics of liberalism—including Jürgen Habermas, Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoradis, and the Yugoslav Praxis group.

Second, Rorty scorns American neoconservatism. He sees it as little more than a journalistic cover for opportunists who dream of access to power in the White House. But at times Rorty fails to note how much he shares with the neoconservatives that he despises. It is, of course, true that in opposition to the "spirit of seriousness" of neoconservatives, Rorty advocates light-minded aesthetic playfulness. Nevertheless, Rorty like many neoconservatives (1) endorses the "end of ideology" thesis; (2) slides from militant anticommunism to a virtually unqualified endorsement to "really existing democracy" in Western capitalist societies; (3) tends to downplay the significance of imperialistic policies practices by liberal democracies; (4) never seriously questions the relation between capitalism and liberal democracy; (5) is suspicious of any appeal to universal principles, standards, and criteria; (6) and suggests that it is sufficient in making moral and political judgments to focus exclusively on concrete examples of what "we" admire.


*Richard J. Bernstein teaches philosophy at Haverford College. His most recent books are Philosophical Profiles and Beyond Objectivism and Relativism.*