

# Leftward, Ho!

ACHIEVING OUR COUNTRY:

*Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.*

By Richard Rorty. Harvard Univ. Press. 159 pp. \$18.95

by Jean Bethke Elshtain

If the American Left could heal itself, then it might heal what ails the American nation. That, in short, is the belief that drives Richard Rorty's appeal for a real politics: a left-liberal politics that will help achieve, at long last, the country dreamed of by Rorty's heroes, John Dewey and Walt Whitman.

Rorty, clearly, is no glib detractor of his nation. A professor of humanities at the University of Virginia, he presents himself as an American who loves and celebrates his country, who cheers America's achievements and laments its indecencies. "National pride," he asserts, "is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement."

Rorty also skewers those elements of the cultural Left that have abandoned the terrain of democratic hopes and fears in favor of a hypertheorized aestheticism that turns citizens into mere spectators and strips them of effective agency. He decries escape into "the most abstract and barren explanations imaginable" even if the matter at hand is "something very concrete," such as transformations in work life or sexual relationships. And he notes that a cultural politics of difference (racial, genderal, or even sexual) promotes the view that there is not and cannot be a political language of commonalities that might forge and sustain coalitions cutting across racial and other lines.

None of this is new, of course. Todd Gitlin, Michael Walzer, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and I, among other scholars, have advanced similar arguments. But Rorty's ripostes carry special zing given his

status as one of the fathers of antifoundationalism, a position associated with those postmodern trends whose excesses he decries.

Rorty's political prescriptions also carry a whiff of nostalgia. Any viable left-liberal politics, he contends, must rebuild long-moribund coalitions. He would resurrect the old alliance between intellectuals and labor, though many sympathetic to his general perspective insist it lies beyond

repair because it presumes what no longer exists: a coherent labor movement and a unified group of left-wing intellectuals. (Rorty skirts part of the problem by defining *all* intellectuals as partisans of the Left.) In this respect, Rorty's book is a plea for restoration of what held the New Deal together.

Unlike some on the left, the author defends the nation-state against its "cosmopolitan" detractors as the only political entity currently capable of making decisions about social justice in response to global market forces. In his defense of patriotism, Rorty blasts the telling of the American story as a long train of atrocities, not only because the picture is false but because it promotes political apathy and cynicism. Rorty's genuine affection for America shines through so tellingly—the book's autobiographical fragment is instructive in this regard—that it seems almost churlish to cavil. But cavil I must, on several points.

First, Rorty beats the drums against objectivity in a way that undermines the commitment to politics and the American project he aims to promote. If we can't even "try to be objective when attempting



to decide what one's country really is," we are tossed to and fro between equally subjective, hence indefensible, alternatives. Why, if that is the case, should anyone accept Rorty's defense of American possibilities against, for instance, Elijah Muhammad's argument that America is a perverse experiment conducted by "white people [who] started out as homunculi created by a diabolical scientist"? Surely there are some facts that cannot be denied, some forms of public recognition and cognition that any person who cares about truth will acknowledge as the basis from which political deliberation can arise.

Second, Rorty deploys "right" to mean stingy, selfish, unfair, and chauvinistic, and "left" to mean generous, compassionate, fair, and patriotic. This is politics as simplistic morality play. Rorty surely knows that not all chicanery lurks on one side of the spectrum and not all civility resides on the other.

Third, Rorty repeatedly disparages religious belief as the last refuge of intellectual weakness. In an ideological enterprise more or less on a par with intolerant Marxism, he would have Americans "think of themselves as exceptional" but "drop any reference to divine favor or wrath." If one goes this route, however, one cannot explain the life and work of Abraham Lincoln, Rorty's great, prototypical American, who believed that the nation was under divine judgment and that the Civil War was visited on it for the sin of slavery. Nor can one explain the tasks undertaken by most abolitionists, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, large segments of the anti-Vietnam War movement, or many of today's activists opposing capital punishment.

Rorty wants us to stand in awe only of ourselves. He favors a "utopian America" that will "replace God as the unconditional object of desire." But this prescription paves the way for the ideological excess he deplores, opening the doors to triumphalism and an idolatrous sacralization of necessarily finite, limited, and contingent human projects. One of Rorty's heroes, Vaclav Havel, has decried the "arrogant

anthropocentrism" of modern humankind, which, having closed the window to transcendence, feels free to run amuck, a dangerous Titan and destroyer. Rorty needs to tell us why his self-assured pronouncements will not lead down such a path. What framework of evaluation enables us to nurture our civic and political projects, and, when appropriate, to chasten them as well?

Rorty claims that those who take sin seriously are committed to the view that the "commission of certain acts" is "incompatible with further self-respect." One wonders where this misconception comes from. The Christian understanding of sin is tied to a capacity for self-responsibility and agency of the sort Rorty extols. Sin doesn't place one beyond the pale; it serves as a prelude to awareness of one's faults tethered to a call to fellowship and service to one's neighbor. And to associate a "belief in sin" with a "failure of nerve," as Rorty does, leaves one puzzled. Does he really want to tell hopeful citizens—those who, every day in our cities, towns, and villages, work to make the world less cruel and more just—that they are weak-minded and wrong-headed if their hope stems from faith? Should tens of thousands of citizens abandon the ground of their hope, repudiate the beliefs that make them agents and not mere spectators?

Rorty poses some questionable philosophical points as well—one can reject a correspondence theory of truth and classic foundationalism without embracing full-fledged antirealism—but that is another debate. He has given us a sprightly volume that sees in what used to be called "the American dream" a call to action worthy of free citizens. I regret that he treats so roughly those of his fellow citizens who persist in beliefs he distorts and, having distorted, denounces.

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