

Starting with a prescient 1998 quote on the impending decline of US liberal democracy into right-wing, strong-man-based demagoguery, this paper outlines Richard Rorty's political philosophy, which I believe can help us understand perplexing political trends in today's political reality well beyond the US alone. Specifically, I tackle three key-terms encapsulating the thrust of Rorty's political philosophy, i.e. "liberalism of fear", "bourgeois" and "postmodernism". Also, I address a contraposition that explains how Rorty would approach and attempt to defend liberal democracy from contemporary right-wing, strong-man-based degenerations, namely the priority of "poetry" over "philosophy". Essentially, if one wishes to win in the political arena, she must be armed with the most effective rhetorical weaponry, however good, solid and well-argued her political views may be. Finally, some remarks are offered on the role that "philosophy" can still play within the same arena.

## **Richard Rorty**

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) was probably the most famous American philosopher at the end of the last century. As I pen this introduction, ten years after his death, his name has reappeared on the pages of many newspapers, at least in the Anglophone press, and some aspects of his political thought are going 'viral' across the world-wide-web. We live in the age of Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, after all. Various passages of his 1998 book, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), have been 'unearthed' and variously circulated. Among them we read what follows:

Members of labor unions, and unorganized and unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else... At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no

longer be calling the shots... Once the strongman takes office, no one can predict what will happen. *[However, o]ne thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past 40 years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion... All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet... [e.g. in] socially accepted sadism... directed toward people such as gays and lesbians[.]* (ibid., 81ff)

To past European generations and probably most modern historians, a socio-political picture like the one portrayed above is likely to recall the rise of autocratic demagogues such as Napoleon III or Benito Mussolini. Today, however, this passage sounds like an eerily accurate prediction of the bitter conclusion of triumphant post-Cold-War globalisation and its 'inevitable' sacrifices, epitomised by the rise of Donald Trump. And so it has been taken by media outlets and opinion-makers, e.g. Stephen Metcalf's 10<sup>th</sup> January 2017 "cultural comment" for *The New Yorker*, entitled "[Richard Rorty's Philosophical Argument for National Pride](#)" and discussing also the media attention received by the passage above.

## Donald Trump

Fresh US President and long-time billionaire, Mr Trump won in 2016 a harsh electoral campaign against a seasoned politician, Ms Hillary Clinton, who, it should be noted, was the publicly vocal and politically proactive US First Lady when Rorty's book was published *qua, inter alia*, scathing critique of the increasingly right-wing, free-market policies promoted by the Democratic Party, which Rorty regarded as his own party of choice in the US. Whilst describing the leading 20<sup>th</sup>-century Democrats, from F.D. Roosevelt to L.B. Johnson, as outright social-democrats, Rorty did not approve of several decisions taken by the Clinton's administration, such as the controversial 1994 NAFTA agreement with Canada and Mexico and the 1999 repealing of the long-lived Glass-Steagall Act, a child of the Great Depression and a piece of legislation that had limited the systemic threat of unbridled finance (cf. Richard Rorty, "Una filosofia tra conversazione e politica", interview by Giorgio Baruchello, *Iride*, 11(25), 1998, 457-84; translation mine). Those of us who remember the roots and the fruits of the 2008 financial collapse, namely the Great Moderation at one end and the Great

Recession at the other, should not find it difficult to realise what momentous consequences the Clintons' friendliness toward Wall Street has been outpouring. It is in fact in a climate of unresolved under- and un-employment, globalisation-induced economic insecurity, and increasingly strong anti-immigration and anti-establishment feelings that Donald Trump came to prominence *qua* political leader.

Prominent, if not brazen or simply unusual, were his language and many of his declared stances throughout the electoral campaign of 2016. As recorded and frequently criticised by mainstream media, Mr Trump often: (1) uttered racist, sexist and homophobic slurs; (2) fashioned himself *qua* anti-establishment champion of the impoverished, economically insecure, and primarily white working class of his country; (3) paraded his willingness to cooperate with foreign dictators and political leaders whose human-rights record is far from spotless; and (4) insouciantly condoned words and concepts that make violence, torture included, seemingly acceptable in the public sphere, both domestically and internationally. Evidence of all this is not hard to find. Trump's electoral speeches are archived and available [online](#) (cf. also a [selection](#) of his statements by *The Telegraph*). In power for only few weeks at the time of writing, Trump has already started delivering on his electoral agenda, at least as regards tightening immigration rules in the US, though it is far too soon to pass any trenchant judgment yet. Cruelty, in the shape of "socially accepted sadism" or worse (e.g. extensive warfare), might regain the front stage as a major ingredient in the political life of the world's sole nuclear super-power, whose 500 and more military sites outside US borders and territories span across most continents, and *a fortiori* in the political life of all countries at large. I write "front stage" because Trump's predecessor did not halt, say, police violence in the US or the bombing of the populations of foreign countries by US drones (e.g. Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen), but he never spoke publicly of such issues in as cavalier a manner (concerning the US military foreign sites, cf. Department of Defense, [Base Structure Report - Fiscal Year 2015 Baseline](#)). Bombs may have been dropped throughout the two-term Obama administration, but not verbal ones.

For all we know, the new US presidency might prove less prone to endorse the highly destructive forms of legally termed humanitarian intervention and politically proclaimed promotion of Western-style democratic institutions seen, say, in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan under George W. Bush and Barak Obama (e.g. military occupation, air raids and killings by remote-controlled drones). On the domestic front, Trump himself might succeed

in becoming an effective tribune of the common people, or at least of a large segment of it. Chronically disenfranchised blue-collar Americans might end up enjoying more and better jobs than they have over the previous three decades. Who knows? They might even witness the end of the gross – when not grotesque – imbalance in incomes and influence between Wall Street and Main Street that Ronald Reagan's economic policies kick-started in the 1980s, and that Bill Clinton's aforementioned abolition of the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act definitively entrenched. Rather than christening involuntarily a shantytown, as some of his predecessors did (i.e. post-1929 "Hooverville" and post-2008 "Bushville"), the name of a flamboyant US billionaire might go down in history for reverting the forceful re-affirmation of patrimonial capitalism that has been occurring in most countries on Earth since the days of Thatcherism. Unlike Obama, Trump might not "stand between [the bankers] and the pitchforks" (Lindsay Ellerson, "[Obama to Bankers: I'm Standing 'Between You and the Pitchforks'](#)", *ABC News*, 7th April 2009). Alternatively, as Rorty suggests in the same foreboding pages of *Achieving Our Country*, the elected "strongman" will just "make peace" with "the international super-rich" and appease the masses *via* jingoistic militarism and charismatic posturing. Time, as always, will tell. Cruelty, whether in the shape of petty humiliation of minorities or military extermination of scores of people, is never too far away.

## Poets

*Cruelty* matters a lot, at least for Richard Rorty, who championed one specific school of political thought that, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, made this notion central to the understanding of social and political life, claiming that Western liberalism is characterised by a unique abhorrence of cruelty in the public sphere. Called "liberalism of fear", this school of thought was a theoretical creation of Harvard political scientist Judith Shklar (1928–1992), but it is commonly recalled today in connection with Richard Rorty, who was and still is far more famous than Judith Shklar. The quintessence of their political stance is simple to express: "liberals... think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 73). Therefore, they draw a clear distinction "between cruel military and moral repression and violence, and a self-restraining tolerance that fences in the powerful to protect the freedom and safety of every citizen" (Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge: Belknap, 1984, 237). Liberals opt for the

latter option and defend all those institutions (e.g. parliaments, constitutions, human rights, judiciary independence, freedom of the press, etc.) that foster peaceful coexistence over violent oppression, debate over force, individual liberty over State control, and people's safety over their systemic endangerment.

*Rhetoric* also matters a lot for Rorty. Ironically, it is of the essence. According to Rorty: "The principal backup [for liberals] is not philosophy but the arts, which serve to develop and modify a group's self-image by, for example, apotheosizing its heroes, diabolizing its enemies, mounting dialogues among its members, and refocusing its attention" ("Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 80(10), 1983, 587). The art of rhetoric must be understood in a catholic manner here. In his texts, Rorty would normally speak of "arts", "narrative", "poetry" or "literature". What he means, however, is that he does not trust traditional philosophical argument and repeated appeals to reason to do the job. Reason matters, of course. Rigour too. But relevance *vis-à-vis* the context and the audience is the actual key, hence the ability to persuade that one can attain by reaching people's hearts as well as their minds, especially when fundamental social values are at issue, rather than the day-to-day activities of tribunals or elected councils. Only in this manner can liberals hope to achieve any progressive aim. Truth does not imply *per se* any victory whatsoever in the public arena; nor does it matter much, in the end. Speaking and writing well in favour of liberal principles and institutions do, instead; they are much more crucial, even if we may not be able to demonstrate once and for all *why* we should prefer liberalism to Nazism or Social Darwinism. As Rorty writes: "Whereas the liberal metaphysician thinks that the good liberal knows certain crucial propositions to be true, the liberal ironist thinks the good liberal has a certain kind of know-how. Whereas he thinks of the high culture of liberalism as centering around theory, she thinks of it as centering around literature (in the older and narrower sense of that term - plays, poems, and, especially, novels)" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 93).

Rorty did actually speak of "rhetoric" as well, but only occasionally. Nonetheless, it has been argued that, as far as the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American academic community is concerned, the ancient art of rhetoric regained ground *primarily* thanks to him, *pace* Kenneth Burke's (1897-1993) efforts in this sense since the 1930s. First came the 1979 publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), by now a widely acknowledged modern classic, which excavated the metaphorical

roots of all objectivist, rigorous, scientific and pseudo-scientific terminologies. Then, a series of conferences were held in the mid-1980s at Iowa and Temple Universities, out of which was launched the "Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry" (POROI). Richard Rorty participated in them and another participant, Herbert W. Simons, credits him with coining at one of the meetings the now-popular slogan "the rhetorical turn" (*The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990, vii).

Interested in persuading wide audiences rather than producing bullet-proof arguments for academic circles, Rorty declares himself to be candidly partial to "the Hegelian attempt to defend the institutions and practices of the rich North Atlantic democracies... [i.e.] 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism'." ("Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", 585). As he writes: "I call it 'bourgeois' to emphasize that most of the people I am talking about would have no quarrel with the Marxist claim that a lot of those institutions and practices are possible and justifiable only in certain historical, and especially economic, conditions." (ibid.) Money matters too, then. Liberal institutions, high and low, depend upon appropriate material conditions. This is the fundamental insight and theoretical legacy of Marxism, according to Rorty. We must take the "structure" seriously into account, if we wish to make sense of the "superstructure", even if we consider the latter to be partially independent from the former and not fully determined by it, i.e. a sort of mere epiphenomenon. That is why economic insecurity and inequality matter so much in liberal polities, as Donald Trump's election has further confirmed.

Rorty's acknowledgment that material conditions are important does not mean that he subscribed to Marxism, Chicago-style liberalism, Randian Objectivism or any fundamental claim about the nature of the human soul and human societies. According to Rorty: "There is no answer to the question 'Why not be cruel?' - no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible ... Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question - algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort - is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician." (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv-i). A self-declared champion of American neo-pragmatism, Rorty followed this tradition in believing that "morality is a matter of... 'we-intentions'... the core meaning of 'immoral action' [being] 'the sort of thing we don't do'." (ibid., 59) There is no grand narrative; no ultimate vocabulary as Kenneth Burke understood this term, i.e. a theory or discourse capable of ordering all relevant conceptual elements, including apparently

conflicting ones, into one synthetic vision, account or system. As Rorty explains: "I use 'postmodernist' in a sense given to this term by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who says that the postmodern attitude is that of 'distrust of metanarratives,' narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat. These meta-narratives are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these or other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future." ("Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", 585)

Let me add that, according to Rorty, postmodernism is not relativism: "Relativism certainly is self-refuting, but there is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify. Post-modernism is no more relativistic than Hilary Putnam's suggestion that we stop trying for a 'God's-eye view' and realize that 'We can only hope to produce a more rational conception of rationality or a better conception of morality if we operate from within our tradition'." (ibid., 589) One thing is to say that we can, in theory, set all moral or political options beside one another and state that they all have the same value. Another thing is to say that we cannot do it, because we can only and must operate from within one option at the time, building or burning bridges with the others. The latter being Rorty's stance on the matter.

## Philosophers

We are philosophers, scientists, academics. Rational argumentation is our bread and butter. Yet, it is *ours*. It is probably also the judges', the lawyers, the engineers' and some others'. It is not *theirs*, though, i.e. 'common' human beings' at large. Talk to your relatives; your neighbours; the 'man of the street'; have a conversation in a bar, shop, or parish hall. Arguments matter, generally, but only to a point. Sometimes, it is plainly futile to even present one and expect it to be listened to, not to mention being taken so seriously as to change the listener's beliefs. Let us ask ourselves, why do we engage in rational debate? Because we expect it to bear fruit. In other words, we do so under two major assumptions: (1) we can find reasons; and (2) reasons matter. As Rorty once stated: "To take the

philosophical ideal of redemptive truth seriously one must believe both that the life that cannot be successfully argued for is not worth living, and that persistent argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs" ("[The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture](#)", 2000).

Perhaps we can find some reasons. Perhaps even good reasons. No final, ultimate reasons can be found, though, according to Rorty, who claims chimeric any conclusive philosophical grounds of agreement that correspond to a universal and unchanging human nature, the essence of things, pure rationality, the hidden structure of historical dialectics, God's plan for the universe, etc. According to Rorty, when we look deep and hard into ourselves, the most profound things that we can get a glimpse of are the most entrenched prejudices of our own culture, our *ethnos* or, as quoted above, "our tradition". But this is not everything. Even if there were any such deeper, ultimate reasons, who would listen to them? Some people would. Perhaps a fair amount. Not most human beings, however. Religion, politics, marketing, economic history, psychology and many ordinary experiences bear witness to the limits of human rationality. Albeit not irrational, people are frequently unreasonable, impervious to logical thinking, biased in many ways, and unwilling to reconsider their basic, often deeply engrained and sometimes blissfully unaware assumptions. If this is a plausibly correct assessment of humankind under contemporary democracy, how can liberals win in the public arena? Rorty's answer is patent: a "turn against theory and toward narrative" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi). In other words, rhetoric is needed. A good one, of course, in both content and form.

As regards the content, Rorty's own political plans and works show what it should be: the principles and institutions of liberalism. To them, he then adds specific projects that liberals should focus upon (e.g. universal healthcare; cf. "Una filosofia tra conversazione e politica"). As regards the form, that is where "poets" excel or, as Rorty also calls them, successful "agents of love" (i.e. 'missionaries' reaching non-liberals) and "justice" (i.e. enforcers of liberal principles within liberal ethnoi; "On Ethnocentrism", *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth - Philosophical Papers vol. I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991[1981], 206). Let us learn from them: read good books; watch good films; read good books; practice your communication skills; read good books; engage in your own ethnos' ongoing moral and political conversation (e.g. by joining a political party, charitable organisation or a trade union); and, to top it all, read good books. There are no ideal Platonic philosopher-kings



here; poets are the kingmakers. "Poets" too must be understood in a catholic manner, though. They can be priests, film-makers, propagandists, teachers, political leaders, etc. They may not be able to produce a definitive demonstration of why liberalism is to be preferred and pursued; however, at least for us children of liberal institutions, it is not a serious issue. What really matters is to keep them going; and that is what poets can help us with. What is left for us as philosophers? I have three suggestions:

(A) We can and, perhaps, should join the ranks of the "agents of love" and "justice". Become better at speaking and writing well, and use your skills to fight the good fight—the liberal fight, according to Rorty. Be an engaged intellectual. Be a promoter of democracy in the schools, as the US pragmatist John Dewey (1859–1952) had already tried to do and let American teachers do. If you cannot be a leader, help one to emerge. Rorty himself regarded his work as making room for, or paving the road to, greater minds, such as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004; cf. "Una conversazione tra filosofia e politica").

(B) As Rorty never denied, there are people, a minority of course, who do respond to philosophical arguments; philosophers can still be useful in finding ways "of making political liberalism look good to persons with philosophical tastes" ("On Ethnocentrism", 211).

(C) My personal contribution is that philosophers can provide ideas, social legitimacy and psychological encouragement to poets. In our culture, *pace* Rorty's "turn against theory", poets are not expected to give us rational arguments and axiological foundations, whereas philosophers still are. Then, even if such an aim is ultimately utopian and as long as this division of intellectual labour holds in our culture, poets can find things to say and work upon. The rhetorician's *inventio* and *topoi* can unfold in close contact with the texts by philosophers that they admire and may decide to rely upon. Dante Alighieri had Thomas Aquinas, Ugo Foscolo Condorcet, George Bernard Shaw Friedrich Nietzsche, Luigi Pirandello Henri Bergson, Mahatma Gandhi Lev Tolstoy, James Joyce Giambattista Vico, and *Zeitgeist's* Peter Joseph John McMurtry. Through their association with established philosophers and philosophies, moreover, the same poets can obtain a higher degree of social acceptance, insofar as their ethnos still acknowledges the special status of philosophers as those members of society who grasp 'deeper' or 'higher' things. Poets themselves may be reassured and sustained in their fights by the knowledge that there are thinkers who, in more analytical and articulate ways, agree with them.

(A)-(C) may not seem much, *prima facie*, especially if one recalls the Platonic ideal of philosopher-kings; but they are more than enough for a meaningful existence, both personal and professional, in a contemporary liberal *ethnos*, which political leaders like Donald Trump would seem to endanger and, at the same time, reveal to us all - as sceptical and blasé as some of us may have become - as awfully valuable.