

[Back to index](#)**Richard Rorty. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.*****Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998****by
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Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* consists of the 1997 William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization, supplemented by revised versions of two earlier talks. "Movements and Campaigns," a tribute to the life and work of Irving Howe, was given at the City University of New York and published in *Dissent* in 1995. "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," which I will discuss further below, was given at the December 1995 meeting of the Modern Language Association and subsequently published in *Raritan*. Although it is a compilation of various lectures, this short book is nevertheless united by the idea that American leftists should surmount internecine theoretical battles and instead rally around pragmatic ideals for achieving social justice. These ideals can flourish, the author argues, only with a shared sense of pride in the past and hope for the future.

The first of the three Massey lectures, entitled "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey," opens with the controversial-sounding claim that national pride is a necessary condition for national self-improvement. Rorty affirms that there are today few sources of inspiration within American popular culture and that the only mainstream version of national pride consists of simpleminded militaristic chauvinism. Indeed, the overwhelming consensus holds that national pride is inappropriate and undesirable. Influenced by such writers as Foucault and Heidegger, the elites as well as the populace at large find "pride in American citizenship impossible, and vigorous participation in electoral politics pointless" (7). Rorty contrasts the reigning sense of national self-mockery and self-disgust with the national hope of early twentieth-century leftist intellectuals, and likens the difference between the two to that between agents and spectators. Unlike late twentieth-century intellectuals, earlier writers such as William James thought that disgust with American hypocrisy was pointless unless accompanied by active efforts to give the country reason to be proud of itself in the future. By contrast, writers today tend to retreat into resigned pessimism, while American colleges and universities foster this "spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action" (11). What is needed instead, Rorty maintains, is an active desire to participate in political initiatives, a desire reflected in James Baldwin's call to "achieve our country, and to change the history of the world."

The Left must foster this hope because the political Right, naturally conservative, always contests the necessity of change. To the extent that "a Left becomes spectatorial and introspective, it ceases to be a Left," which is precisely what Rorty argues has happened: "Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate" (14). The remainder of the first lecture details the retreat from secularism and pragmatism to theory detached from real political problems. It culminates in the claim that there is now, "among many American students and teachers, a spectatorial, disgusted, mocking Left rather than a Left which dreams of achieving our country... Members of this Left find America unforgivable, as Baldwin did, and also unachievable, as he did not" (35). Rorty ends the first lecture with a plea for a return to the ideals of Dewey, who "wanted Americans to share a civic religion that substituted utopian striving for claims to theoretical knowledge" (38).

The second lecture, entitled 'The Eclipse of the Reformist Left', picks up the thread of the argument with the claim that the American Left was weakened by internal divisions originating in different approaches to Marxism. For Rorty, however, it is important to stress similarities rather than differences, so he suggests that the distinction "reformist Left" designate "all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong. This includes lots of people who called themselves 'communists' and 'socialists', and lots of people who never dreamed of calling themselves either." In contrast, 'New Left' means "the people—mostly students—who decided, around 1964, that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system" (43). The

differences between the reformist Left and the New Left ought likewise to be bridged, so that each new generation of students can "think of American leftism as having a long and glorious history. They should be able to see, as Whitman and Dewey did, the struggle for social justice as central to their country's moral identity" (51). In an autobiographical section, Rorty shows how it was possible to be fervently anticommunist while remaining a good leftist. At the same time, he cautions that America owes an enormous amount to the "anti-Vietnam and even procommunist" rage of the New Left between 1964 and 1972 (68). At the end of the day, everyone "should take pride in a country whose historians will someday honor the achievements of both" the reformist and the New Left (71).

In the third and final Massey lecture, entitled 'A Cultural Left', Rorty catalogues how leftist intellectuals lost interest in labour unions and economics more generally and began to focus instead on the cultural politics of difference, identity and recognition. The "leftist ferment which had been centered, before the Sixties, in the social science departments of the colleges and the universities moved into the literature departments. The study of philosophy—mostly apocalyptic French and German philosophy—replaced that of political economy as an essential preparation for participation in leftist initiatives" (77). While most contemporary leftists try to bring about cultural change, the residual reformist Left focuses more pragmatically on laws that need to be passed in order to effectuate real change. The cultural Left's focus on "political correctness" has undoubtedly made the United States a better country, but it has diverted attention from the distribution of income and wealth; the rise of a "frightening economic cosmopolitanism" and the "creation of hereditary social castes" (85, 86) have been ignored by cultural leftists.

Such ignorance of economics in favour of cultural issues has the active support of the ruling class: "For the sake of keeping the proles quiet, the super-rich will have to keep up the pretense that national politics might someday make a difference. Since economic decisions are their prerogative, they will encourage politicians, of both Left and Right, to specialize in cultural issues. The aim will be to keep the minds of the proles elsewhere... with ethnic and religious hostilities, and with debates about sexual mores" (87-8). In order to talk less about stigma and more about money, Rorty suggests that the Left should declare a "moratorium on theory" and should attempt to "mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans" (91-2). American leftists today should derive their moral identity from their "citizenship in a democratic nation-state, and from leftist attempts to fulfill the promise of that nation" (97).

In "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," Rorty repeats Harold Bloom's criticism of the rise of a "school of resentment" whose members are incapable of romantic enthusiasm, noting that the drive to professionalization in American colleges and universities tends to favour "analysis and problem-solving over imagination, to replace enthusiasm with dry, sardonic knowingness." In Rorty's view, the "dismalness of a lot of social science, and of a lot of analytic philosophy, is evidence of what happens when this replacement is complete" (135). The political consequences of this replacement are considerable, since this lack of enthusiasm prevents belief in the utopian vision necessary to undertake political projects. Thus Rorty asserts that the "Foucauldian academic Left in contemporary America is exactly the sort of Left that the oligarchy dreams of: a Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create a better future" (139).

In the final analysis, Rorty skirts the same trap into which he accuses the cultural left of having fallen: giving up the hope for change and a better future. His affirmation that some projects—such as a more participatory democracy—are unachievable risks sliding into hypocrisy when contrasted with the injunction that leftists must always hold out hope. Against his earlier position that there is no clear way of defining social justice, and thus no clear idea of what to work for, *Achieving Our Country* presents an eloquent plea for "achieving America." Contrasted with other attempts at constructive criticism of the political left, however, this book gives amply in criticism yet barely delivers in constructive suggestions. In the end, Rorty's book embraces a rhetoric of commonality as the only solution. Everything returns to the claim that "outside the academy, Americans still want to feel patriotic. They still want to feel part of a nation which can take control of its destiny and make itself a better place" (99).

This is not the place to question the accuracy or correctness of Rorty's portrayal of Dewey and Whitman, nor his historical portrayal of the American left. But we can question Rorty's view of the present and future. The command that leftists must "start proposing changes in the laws of a real country, inhabited by real people who are enduring unnecessary suffering, much of which can be cured by governmental action" sounds much like the political programs of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Gerhard Schröder, the more so since the book is vague on what precisely "achieving one's country" should mean (99). Rorty ends on a pessimistic note of doubt about the left's chances of finding a new way of creating a sense of commonality at the level of national politics (101). Yet his insistence on this sense of community as the sine qua non of democratic politics, on a People's Charter of specific reforms to be endlessly reprinted and debated, and

on finding a new civic religion to rally the masses, recalls earlier revolutionary rhetoric. La nation est morte; vive la nation!