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Can Liberalism Be Saved? by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought In Twentieth-Century America* by Richard Rorty. Harvard University Press. 144 pp. \$18.95.

Richard Rorty, a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia, is among the best-known academic proponents of postmodernism, a movement whose credo declares all knowledge to be man-made, corresponding to no ultimate reality. Like his fellow theorists, Rorty believes that notions like truth and justice are "social constructs." Like them, too, he believes, as he wrote in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), that "nothing has an intrinsic nature" and that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed."

What sets Rorty apart is that he promotes these views so engagingly, in writings notable for their rhetorical virtuosity and their (relative) lack of jargon. A favorite among professors, undergraduates, and readers of op-ed pages alike, he is one of postmodernism's great popularizers.

Of no less importance, Rorty has given those who share his philosophical views a way to remain liberals in good standing, despite the seeming dependence of liberalism on certain immutable first principles like "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." His solution has been to wed postmodernism to the pragmatism of John Dewey (1859-1952). With its distrust of abstraction and its redefinition of philosophy as the effort to solve practical problems, as well as in its emphasis on pluralism, progress, and democracy, pragmatism, on Rorty's account, furnishes the committed post modernist with an attractive political project.

In this slender, readable new book, based on his 1997 Massey lectures at Harvard, Rorty turns his attention as never before to practical politics. His aim is to encourage leftist intellectuals, once prominent in American public life, to return to the fray, "to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action." What he actually accomplishes is a far different thing, however, for *Achieving Our Country* points to nothing so much as the continuing confusion in America's academic Left.

For Rorty, the Left in the U.S. was defined for most of its history by a profound commitment to democracy. Much more than a simple devotion to popular government, this was a proselytizing creed, aimed at democratizing every sphere of life and exhorting the American people to improve their lot by challenging authority in all its guises. For inspiration, this leftist tradition drew from the writings of two great "prophets." One of them, of course, was

Dewey, whose philosophy of experimentation was, in Rorty's words, "a systematic attempt to temporalize everything, to leave nothing fixed." But the other, earlier one was Walt Whitman, whose poetry, says Rorty, taught that there is "no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured."

According to Rorty, the civic program espoused by Whitman and Dewey was also aggressively secular. For American democracy, as Rorty presents it, has little to do with such old-fashioned notions as religious pluralism. Rather, finding "no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority," the true democratic faith necessarily seeks to uproot and replace all rival faiths, not least Christianity and Judaism. "Other nations thought of themselves as hymns to the glory of God," Rorty writes. "We redefine God as our future selves."

It is this peculiar brand of self-deifying optimism that, for Rorty, served as the guiding principle of "all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong." The "reformist" American Left, he argues, was --- like Whitman, like Dewey --- proud of its country; it criticized America in order to improve America. And improve America it did. Determined to redistribute wealth and privilege, it supported labor unions, constructed the welfare state, led the civil-rights movement, and advanced the interests of women and minorities. Properly utopian in its aims, on Rorty's view, it dreamed of ending suffering and of establishing a classless and classless society.

And then what happened? Rorty's lament is that, over the last 30 years, this politically-engaged movement --- in its ranks he includes an assortment of progressives, liberals, and radicals from Herbert Croly, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King, Jr. to Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, and Jesse Jackson --- has been supplanted, especially in the academy, by what he calls the cultural or "spectatorial" Left. Today's leftist intellectuals, he writes, are all theory, no practice. Under the influence of French theorists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, they have become mocking, hyper-sophisticated observers of American life, a life in which they decline to participate. Charging their country with unforgivable sins, disdaining its constitutional order, they do nothing about it. Whereas the old Left offered reforms to improve the lives of real people, the new Left simply sits in judgment, a complacent elite.

It is refreshing to find so hard-hitting a portrait of the contemporary academic Left in the work of one of its own. Welcome, too, is Rorty's condemnation of the Left's abiding weakness for Marx, and his uncompromising stand against Communism --- he does not hesitate to describe the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." But these gestures aside, *Achieving Our Country* makes it abundantly clear that in the end, little actually separates Rorty from those he accuses of betraying the true faith.

For one thing, despite his hectoring about the primacy of the practical, nowhere in this book does Rorty put forward a single concrete suggestion for a new political initiative or public policy. More serious, and striking at the very heart of his claim to be a pragmatist, is his refusal to acknowledge that the agenda pursued over the course of six decades by the "reformist" Left --- from expanding welfare and affirmative action to promoting unionism and higher taxes --- has been, in important respects, a practical failure. In the last few years, indeed, this very failure has prompted a "reformist" effort of a very different complexion.

To admit this, however, would require that Rorty recognize the immense popular success of the American conservative movement --- something he will not do. In fact, he can hardly bring himself to refer to the right side of the political spectrum that is, approximately half of his fellow citizens --- without falling into indignation and rancor. In America, only the Left is "the party of hope," the sole carrier of decency, justice, and goodness, while the Right is the party of greed, bigotry, military chauvinism, and benighted religiosity, "the pawn of the rich and powerful." Such absolutism and scorn for those who do not share his political views sound odd, to say the least, in the mouth of one who has indicted the present-day Left for its theoretical excess, and who professes to place his own faith in the people.

It is revealing, of course, that our premier postmodernist defender of liberalism should turn out to be lacking in the true liberal spirit, with its respect for contending perspectives and its appreciation of limits. Like so many of his friends on the academic Left Richard Rorty shows that those who seek to emancipate us from all external authority, far from inaugurating a salutary human liberation, open the door instead to dogmatism and intolerance.

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