

# Richard Rorty the Multi-Pragmatist

*by Stéphane Madelrieux*

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**Rorty made conversation a philosophical genre in its own right, which led him to reject any distinctions he considered futile: between analytic and continental philosophy, between the Enlightenment and postmodernity, between philosophy and literature.**

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How do we portray the man who wrote that "we should not hold on to a single image of ourselves"<sup>1</sup>? Richard Rorty (1931-2007), the most famous American philosopher of his time, did not believe that a description could identify someone's true personality behind their external appearance. Nor did he believe that it should strive to be an adequate representation. He was not advocating saying false or inaccurate things, but believed description to be a task of contextualization, not representation, because it consists in relating a thing or a person to other things or persons. For Rorty, there was no such thing as an ultimate context that would deliver the intrinsic essence of that thing or person. Rather than a single portrait, let us thus trace three contexts — three images — that will allow us to appreciate the multiplicity and complexity of his philosophical personality.

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty, in J.-P. Cometti (ed.), *Lire Rorty*, Combas, Éditions de l'éclat, 1992, p. 167.

## The polyglot conversationalist

In a world of philosophy deeply divided between two opposing trends — on the one hand, so-called "analytic" philosophy, dominant in English-speaking countries and emphasizing logical analysis of the language in which philosophical problems are formulated, and on the other hand so-called "continental" European philosophy, well represented in France, which defends a historical or existential approach to philosophical problems — Rorty was the philosopher of conversation. This is evidenced by the numerous collective works on his thought, in which he took the time and care to respond not only to his supporters, but also to his harshest critics, without ever seeking to interrupt the conversation. *Rorty and His Critics* (Blackwell, 2000), edited by Robert B. Brandom, is a model of its kind thanks to the eminence of Rorty's discussion partners (Jürgen Habermas, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Daniel C. Dennett, John McDowell, Jacques Bouveresse, Robert B. Brandom, etc.) and the quality of his answers. Philosophers of the analytic tradition accused him of betraying the cause and giving in to the irrationalism of continental thought, and in particular to the "postmodern relativism" of the French philosophers in vogue at the time (Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, etc.), against whom the honor of Science and of objective Truth should be defended. Dennett recalls the definition of Rorty's name in the satirical dictionary *The Philosophical Lexicon*: "*a rortiori*, adj.: true for even more fashionable and continental reasons".

In his response, Rorty sets out to show that the opposition between the serious and the frivolous does not draw any distinction between analytic and continental philosophers but in fact runs through both traditions. The real distinction lies between those who strive to build conversational bridges by seeking to connect their jargons, their current interests and their general goals to those of their discussion partners; and those who are focused on their own philosophical microcosm, lack intellectual curiosity, and assume — sometimes even by rationalizing — that there is no legitimate alternative model to the way they find themselves practicing philosophy in the here and now. They simply do not have enough historical awareness to realize that they have inherited this practice from their teachers, and that this practice is, like any human practice, perfectly contingent and not inscribed in the nature of things, of thought or of philosophy itself. These are often the same people, Rorty notes, who proclaim to take universal truth as their ideal and who do not concretely and actively seek to *broaden* the circles and audiences with which they justify their ideas. If there is a need to moralize the debate, it is not by invoking norms of truth that some would

follow and others would shamelessly flout, but by endorsing standards of philosophical conversation that break people's habit of using dogmatic *conversation-stoppers* such as "this is not philosophy", "this is totally irrational" or "this is thought terrorism". Rorty believed that recognizing the contingency of one's own philosophical practice, and envisaging or even imagining alternative ways of doing things, is the condition for philosophical progress as much as for one's own intellectual development.

Rorty was guided relatively early in his career toward this idea of an ethics of philosophical conversation. He began studying at the University of Chicago at the age of 15, where he was less enthusiastic about the lectures of Carnap, a great figure of analytic philosophy, than about those of McKeon, an admirer of Aristotle, or Hartshorne, a disciple of Whitehead, who together steered him toward the great historical frescoes of ideas in the manner of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* or Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, and who convinced him early on of the historicity of philosophical problems. He completed his PhD thesis at Yale — in a philosophy department that was actively resisting the analytic wave — under the supervision of Paul Weiss (a metaphysician specializing in Whitehead and Peirce). It was a study of the concept of potentiality, a key concept in Whitehead's metaphysics, in which — over the course of 600 pages, as yet unpublished — he builds a dialogue between the philosophy of Aristotle, Cartesianism and the analytic philosophy of logical empiricism<sup>2</sup>, thus already taking a historical perspective on the formulation of problems in analytic philosophy. After his military service and first teaching post at Wellesley College, where he taught a little of everything (including a course on phenomenology that sparked a great admiration for Sartre and a lasting dislike of Husserl), in 1961 he was invited by Gregory Vlastos to join the philosophy department at Princeton to teach Greek philosophy. Vlastos wanted to make the burgeoning department a leader in analytic philosophy, like those of Oxford and Harvard, and during his years there Rorty rubbed shoulders with Carl Hempel,

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<sup>2</sup> Empiricism or logical positivism sought to defend the theories of the classical empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) on the grounding of knowledge in experience, using the new tools of language analysis provided by formal logic (developed by Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein). It is especially known for the verification principle, which states that no linguistic proposition has meaning unless it is verifiable in experience. This principle allowed it to discount metaphysics as a set of meaningless statements, since they are empirically unverifiable. Originally appearing in the German-speaking world (particularly in Vienna), this trend gradually took hold in the English-speaking world, particularly after the emigration of Austrian and German philosophers threatened by Nazism, such as Carnap and Hempel. Its standard formulation is found in Alfred J. Ayer's book, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), which Carnap set for his students in Chicago, Rorty included.

Stuart Hampshire, Donald Davidson, David Lewis, Thomas Kuhn and Saul Kripke. He then made up for his late start, becoming a full-fledged discussion partner in the analytic conversation, and publishing articles on the most current topics in the philosophy of mind, such as identity theory or the private language argument, in which he defended a position, "eliminativist materialism", which earned him early recognition among his peers.

The 1967 publication of *The Linguistic Turn* — an anthology on the method of solving or dissolving philosophical problems through the analysis of language, preceded by a long introduction that holds the proponents of "the philosophy of ideal language" (Carnap, Quine) up against those of "the philosophy of ordinary language" (Austin, Wittgenstein) — established him as one of the most promising young analytic philosophers of his generation, and in 1970 he was granted tenure as a Professor at Princeton. However, during that decade he was already quietly weaving together analytic pieces with fragments of other philosophical colors. In his papers, he imaginatively seeks to bring together in conversation — and even merge — an analytic philosopher and a metaphysician, like Sellars and Whitehead, or even Wittgenstein and Peirce. In his anthology, he takes note of the internal debates in linguistic philosophy to show that the ambition to make philosophy a science had failed, insofar as there is no method of analysis in philosophy that is neutral and without substantial presupposition, and which would precede any philosophical problem and make it possible to solve them all. The ethics of conversation resulted from these considerations about philosophical method and problems. In one philosophical debate, Rorty argued that there is no real possibility of proving the truth of one's own position in a non-circular way, or of refuting one's opponent's position without relying on premises that they dispute. There is therefore no external and superior standpoint from which to arbitrate the contenders, such as a common ground where agreement may already be obtained in right despite the appearance of conflict, and which would guarantee the final convergence of opinions. The person who claims to have found such a neutral point of view is actually looking for a "conversation-stopper" in the form of a definitive argument that will silence his/her opponents ("the method demands it", "the nature of thought or rationality implies it", "the very conditions of possibility of language demand it", "reality demands it", etc.). In opposition to Platonism, which places conversation under the ideal of rational agreement given in right, but also to skepticism, which renounces conversation as an impossible and useless exercise, Rorty argues that the only purpose of conversation is always more conversation, which implies renouncing any appeal to a neutral standpoint and facilitating communication

as much as possible. The best philosopher is the polyglot metaphilosopher, who can handle and compare many different philosophical traditions and language games.

His analytic colleagues, who had not been paying sufficient attention to these shifts in Rorty's thinking, cried treason when *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was published in 1979. In his book, Rorty takes a historical rather than an analytic view of philosophical problems, criticizing all the Cartesian and Kantian presuppositions that formed the basis for the very idea of a theory of knowledge (epistemology), which at the time formed the core of analytic philosophy. The modern theory of knowledge was defined by the types of problems it seeks to solve, such as the problem of skepticism and the problem of the mind-body relationship. But Rorty argues that these problems, far from being the eternal problems of philosophy, are in fact perfectly optional insofar as they find their historical condition of possibility in the 16th-17th centuries, following the emergence of modern science. They are rooted in the image of the mind as a mirror of nature, which leads to a conception of knowledge as the set of mental representations that are adequate to reality. If we can understand the contingency of such an image and the possibility of describing the mind and knowledge in a different way, we will let go of the idea that philosophy should have the task of stating the neutral and ahistorical criteria that allow us to draw a line between beliefs that represent reality and those that are not adequate.

Far from originating in the very structure of thought or human experience, the problems that hold analytic thought captive, such as that of skepticism, reveal their historical and artificial nature. Following not only Wittgenstein, but also Heidegger and Dewey — whom Rorty declares to be the three most important philosophers of the 20th century and brings together in an unprecedented way here — Rorty proposes to dissolve these problems rather than try to solve them. Drawing on Quine and Sellars, who had already criticized some of the core dogmas of logical empiricism, he calls for the self-overcoming of an analytic tradition that was merely adding a few more strokes to the game instead of changing the game itself, insofar as it only reformulated these same problems in terms of language rather than mind. In 1979, while president of the American Philosophical Association, he supported the "pluralist revolt" led by phenomenologists, existentialists, historians of philosophy and pragmatists, demanding that analytic philosophers loosen their grip on the philosophical institution (the pluralists criticized the organizers for systematically excluding non-analysts from the program).

Although *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* met with disapproval from his analytic colleagues, its public success, particularly among non-philosophers, earned Rorty a fellowship at the *Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences* at Stanford University in 1982-83. He then received a subsequent offer of a humanities professorship at the University of Virginia, followed by a professorship in comparative literature at Stanford in 1998. He never abandoned the dialogue with analytic philosophers on truth, objectivity, reality and rationality, but he sought to broaden the philosophical conversation by including discussion partners who had little or no contact with one another, showing that they could be connected in countless ways, as he had already shown by positioning logical empiricism within the history of philosophy. First of all, the pragmatists: from his next book, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), onwards, he openly claimed to be part of this American philosophical tradition, thereafter following in the line of James and Dewey rather than Peirce, who clung to Kantian presuppositions. In his works, while he emphasizes the re-pragmatization of analytic philosophy after Quine and the heirs of Wittgenstein, he uses pragmatism to propose an alternative image to "representationalism" (the theory of the mirror of nature, according to which our mind or language is made to represent reality, and that truth is the correspondence of our ideas or propositions with the world as it is in itself). There has never been a time in the evolution of species when animals have stopped adjusting to ("coping") with their environment and started mentally representing ("copying") reality. Human language is made up of a plurality of games which, like the body's organs, are instruments that enable them to achieve various goals. Philosophers' problems arise precisely when such practical instruments are converted into theoretical representations of the world as it is in itself.

At the same time, Rorty increasingly read the continental philosophers, especially the post-Nietzschean tradition of Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault. In their historicist method, which advocated overcoming the tradition of Platonism in philosophy and the "metaphysics of presence", he saw points of convergence with the critique of what Dewey called "the quest for certainty" and that of the search for the foundation of empirical knowledge that Sellars had also proposed. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) is perhaps his most "continental" book. To look through the index, one might think it was written in France in the 1960s: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are referenced alongside Hegel, Heidegger and even Kierkegaard. Not only does he discuss Derrida and Foucault, and move decisively into the field of political philosophy, but like them he uses literature as a means of doing philosophy, devoting chapters to the creation of the self in Proust and cruelty in Nabokov and Orwell. And yet these references are intertwined with others to Davidson, Sellars, Wittgenstein,

Dewey, Mill or Rawls, creating a patchwork that has no real equivalent among French philosophers. The lesson is in fact the exact opposite, since it amounts to saying that accepting our contingency does not mean rising up into an authentic relationship with existence, but rather accepting that what matters most to us may not be important to others. It is through and within such acceptance that we can best defend democratic institutions, rather than attempting to establish our own quest for Good as the necessary foundation of common justice. There is no metaphysical significance in accepting finitude, but it is useful for extending liberal democracy, precisely because the search for a neutral, preceding philosophical basis for justifying the superiority of democracy in principle is a means of ending the public conversation that is democracy.

## **The humanist of the Enlightenment**

Rorty's critique of the analytic tradition and his rapprochement with the post-Nietzschean philosophers bolstered the notion that he was a dangerous postmodern relativist, hostile to the ideals of the Enlightenment. But let us take a closer look from the 1990s onwards and reframe his thought not on the scene of American academic philosophy, but in the modern history of culture. In 1996, he gave a series of lectures recently published in a single volume under the title *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* (2021). Far from calling for the overcoming of modernity, Rorty defends the idea that philosophers should seek to take up and complete the ideal of secularization of culture that emerged with the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment ideal of autonomy, directed against the appeal to a source of divine authority, means that human beings can rely only on themselves to determine their future: the moral and political norms of human beings do not have to conform to a reality that is external and superior to the practices they regulate. The Enlightenment imagined a post-religious culture in which human beings would no longer feel compelled to refer to a transcendent source of authority in order to justify their beliefs and desires. The only justifications that human beings can bring to the defense of their practices and projects are internal to the contingent history of those projects and practices, and not based on independent principles that may precede them.

However, modern philosophers, starting with the philosophers of the Enlightenment, have sought to beat religion at its own game by substituting immanent figures of foundation — such as Reason taken as the ultimate source of authority — for God. Contrary to the strategy employed by Habermas, with whom Rorty would

form a true intellectual friendship, in order to go all the way in secularizing culture he believed it was necessary to dissociate the anti-authoritarianism of the Enlightenment, which is its most precious legacy, from its rationalism, which is merely a way of prolonging allegiance to an ultimate source of authority. From this point of view, Rorty was anything but a postmodernist: while he criticized the idea of rationality inherited from the Enlightenment, he did so in the name of the anti-authoritarian spirit of modern thought.

If we consider *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* from this new perspective, we can see in it a history of the remnants of authoritarianism in modern culture: the Enlightenment deified Science as a privileged mode of access to reality; Romanticism then deified the creative self as an expression of a reality deeper than that discovered by science; and finally contemporary philosophy deified Language as a new mirror of nature, or as a privileged form of expression of the deepest self. In Rorty's view, the role of philosophy is, on the contrary, to advance culture to the point "where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi-divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance."<sup>3</sup> If we take another step back, the explicit claim of pragmatism that appeared from *Consequences of Pragmatism* onwards also takes on a new perspective. Pragmatism, from this standpoint, is the extension of the moral and political anti-authoritarianism of the Enlightenment to include the analysis of knowledge. The pragmatist critique of truth as a relation of correspondence between mental representations (or empirical propositions) and reality as it is in itself is explained by the refusal to grant epistemic authority to a non-human power – the world itself – which adjudicates our assertions by serving as the ultimate tribunal of our claims to knowledge. Knowledge is a social practice whose norms are negotiated between human beings, and not a relationship of human beings with a non-human reality that either endorses or rejects their claims of justification.

From this point of view, any attempt to define truth independently of human methods of justification constitutes a means of giving reality the same normative role that classical morality attributed to God. Any culture that continues to favor this image of human beings as answerable – even in their claims to knowledge – to a non-human power is not entirely secularized. Let us take a final step back to re-describe, in this new light, the ethics of conversation that was at the heart of Rorty's first phase. The image of the mind as a mirror of nature expresses the antihumanist desire for

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<sup>3</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 22.



reality itself to dictate how it is to be described, provided that the representational eye of the mind is not obscured and that we know how to use the correct method or suitable language. The only norms that should regulate our knowledge practices, such as our moral and political practices, are in fact conversational. The redefinition of truth as that which is not questioned by our peers is thus the one that best suits a humanist culture. It is not a question of choosing the solidarity of consensus over the objectivity of truth, but of defining objectivity in terms of the agreement of human beings with each other rather than wanting to base human cooperative projects — such as science — on a non-human objective reality.

From the mid-1990s onwards, during the last decade of Rorty's life, his increasingly explicit claim to this form of secular humanism took shape in two particular ways. The first was a progressively more developed reflection on the question of religion and its place in culture, which appeared as early as the collection *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) and would lead him to establish a dialogue with Gianni Vattimo (*The Future of Religion*, 2005). This new questioning, which in actual fact merely brought the Enlightenment full circle, was particularly important given that it took place against the backdrop of the rise of the New Christian Right movement in the United States and the questioning of the Jeffersonian compromise that made religion a private matter. The second was the demand for a politicization of philosophy, which was reflected in the title of his fourth and final collection of articles, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007). To counter its professionalization into an academic specialty, represented by technical debates among experts in analytic philosophy, Rorty proposed to scrutinize even the most technical debates in theory of knowledge or philosophy of mind in light of the practical differences that each theoretical option would make in culture if adopted. The position one would have to take in each of these philosophical debates would be justified by the hope it would bring of increasing human solidarity and improving inclusive democracy through the extension of the sense of "we", rather than its conformity to a preceding and independent non-human reality. Every philosophical proposition must thus be understood as a political project for the future of the community, not as an answer to eternal problems about the nature of things; and it is primarily as a democratic citizen, heir to Enlightenment liberalism, rather than as a seeker of Truth, heir to Plato, that the philosopher must tackle philosophical problems. Accordingly, Rorty declared himself an anticlerical rather than an atheist, for atheism still shares with theism the idea that the metaphysical and epistemological question of the proof of God's existence is a philosophically important question that can be resolved prior to and

independently of the question of the power of religious institutions over human relationships.

## The American left-wing intellectual

This final politicization of philosophy in Rorty prompts us to go back to the very beginning. Richard McKay Rorty was born on October 4, 1931, during the years of the Great Depression, into a family of left-wing intellectuals. His mother, Winifred Raushenbush, was the daughter of Walter Raushenbush, a pastor and theologian who was one of the leaders of the Social Gospel movement in the United States. This movement — which advocated that love for one's neighbor, whoever they may be, is the only Gospel message — invoked Christian themes to campaign for progressive reforms against the social inequalities and human divisions that capitalism produces, and it would inspire Martin Luther King's later civil rights work. Winifred studied sociology and soon became involved in the women's suffrage movement. She went to the University of Chicago, the birthplace of Deweyan pragmatism and urban sociology, where George Herbert Mead was still teaching, and in 1919 became the assistant of the sociologist Robert Park, with whom she conducted several studies on the causes of racial revolts in the United States. She later became a journalist, writing articles of social criticism as well as studies of fashion as a sociological phenomenon; however, her professional activity decreased after Richard was born. James Rorty, his father, was a New York poet and journalist, influenced by Thorstein Veblen. He was a critic of the advertising industry (*Our Master's Voice: Advertising*, 1934) and close to the group of intellectuals who produced the literary-political journal *Partisan Review*, which was initially communist but later embraced anti-Stalinist socialism. This political line was close to the progressivism of the early 20th century, of which Dewey, along with Herbert Croly and Jane Addams, were key figures.

Sydney Hook, Dewey's official disciple who sought to bring pragmatism and Marxism together, was a family friend. At the age of seven, Richard Rorty served Dewey and Hook appetizers at a Halloween party. As a teenager, he recalled that the most visible books in the family library were the reports by the Commission of Inquiry chaired by Dewey in Mexico, in which his father took part, which cleared Trotsky of the charges brought against him in the Moscow trials (*Not Guilty*, 1938). After Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, one of his secretaries, John Frank, who was wanted by the GPU, took refuge for a few months in the Rorty household, which had by then moved

from New York to rural New Jersey. In the aftermath of the Second World War, James Rorty took a strong stand against Soviet communism, but also against McCarthyism, on the grounds that a democracy that defends itself by undemocratic means, such as censorship, loses its main advantage in convincing people of the benefits of democratic freedoms (*McCarthy and the Communists*, 1954). From his adolescence, Rorty would retain the belief that, "the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice"<sup>4</sup>, implying that a philosopher cannot be an expert solely in philosophy, but must also be an intellectual who interprets philosophical controversies through the prism of the possibilities of social and cultural progress.

Rorty's political education remained discreet in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, although Dewey was included alongside Wittgenstein and Heidegger to highlight that the therapeutic activity of the former and the historicist perspective of the latter should be understood "within a social perspective"<sup>5</sup> – which can be taken to mean that they should both be dissociated from their heroic and culturally pessimistic and conservative purpose, in order to serve the creation of a more democratic form of society. In this new light, Rorty's explicit claiming of the figure of James and especially Dewey that began in *Consequences of Pragmatism* was no longer just an effort to make analytic and continental philosophy converse and converge, nor even an attempt to reactivate the anti-authoritarian spirit of the Enlightenment, but a way of reconnecting with a distinctly American policy to promote democracy. Rorty claimed to follow in the tradition of Whitman and Dewey, who substituted faith in a timeless afterlife with democratic faith in human beings' capacity to collectively and cooperatively forge a future that is better than their past. For them, American exceptionalism was not a sign of divine election, but a project that was focused entirely on the future rather than on the past of the European settlers – a hope that has no basis in the order of things and no authority other than that of the free agreement between human beings. In their view as in Rorty's, America represented democracy as an ideal for experimenting with new forms of human solidarity. Rorty aligned himself with the liberalism of John Stuart Mill and Rawls in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* because he saw liberalism as the abandonment of any search for a theological or metaphysical basis for the democratic project of experimentally extending human solidarity beyond class, race, gender and other divisions. By seeking to make it necessary, such a quest for a philosophical foundation would constitute an attempt to place the democratic project under the authority of pre-democratic principles, which should impose themselves by

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" (1992), in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> "*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 13.

their rational evidence alone, independently of any freely consented agreement. Such a project can and should only have practical consequences: reducing suffering and promoting the acceptance of a greater diversity of individual lives. This project was specifically left-wing, to Rorty's mind, because it conceived the moral identity of the democratic community as something that was yet (and always) to be achieved rather than as something already delivered and that should be protected.

This political line — socialism that was democratic and liberal, anti-communist and experimental — runs through and guides all of Rorty's books and led him to support the Cold War against the USSR (although he did not give his blessing to the anti-democratic actions of the CIA). It finds its final expression in his last monograph published during his lifetime: *Achieving Our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1998). This intellectual history of the American left is presented as a critique of the Marxist or post-Marxist New Left and its French Theory-inspired expression on American campuses, and as a call to revive the kind of American progressivism that had prevailed up until the Vietnam War. Rorty identifies several major flaws in the academic left with regard to its relationship with politics: a tendency to overestimate the importance of a philosophical theory that seeks to account for all dimensions of society in a unified way, to the detriment of empirical investigations, the plurality of concrete initiatives and targeted political campaigns; the use of philosophical jargon and even allusions to the inexpressible or undecidable (Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard), thus preventing the circulation of a public rhetoric that would allow collective political projects to be implemented; the denunciation of a total system of Power, acting at all levels of our existence, and from which it would be impossible to escape (Foucault, Jameson), at the expense of in-depth discussion of a particular institution or law, driven by the hope of change; a thirst for the absolute and a need for purity in revolutionary radicalism that leads to a scornful view of any attempt at reform and compromise and any search for an electoral majority to improve here and now, little by little, the forms of human solidarity, which also makes the defense of liberal constitutional democracy ambiguous; the persistence of the Marxist idea that real progress can only come from the bottom up, and that there is only virtue among the oppressed, when past achievements show an interconnectedness between protests by people who have no money or power, and initiatives by people who do have them (including university professors), but who are concerned about the fate of the former; the systematic denunciation of America as an evil empire (Lasch), which stifles any possibility of pride in what has already been achieved and any hope for future progress, in favor of shame as the main affect of political mobilization; the pursuit of identity politics focused on groups whose culture should be recognized, instead of

seeing the defense of socialism and the welfare state as a means of fostering the creation of rich and varied singular lives; a politics of cultural difference (gender and race) that overrides the socio-economic question of wealth distribution and the division between rich and poor, and allows the right to position the debate in the domain of values rather than living standards and equal opportunity (Rorty points out that there is no such thing as *homeless studies* or *trailer-park studies*); and finally, the disinterest in forming alliances with the trade unions, correlated with the shift of interest from political economy toward literature and cultural studies as a site of social critique. Although he acknowledges the fact that this "cultural left" of American academia had enjoyed undeniable success in alleviating some social suffering and broadening a feeling of solidarity toward women, homosexuals and racialized people, Rorty highlights the grim record of growing economic inequality in the United States over the same period, increasing economic insecurity due to globalization, the rising national and international power of a wealthy, educated "overclass" forming a cosmopolitan elite, and the inability of that cultural left to speak to the poor (especially white, heterosexual, uneducated).

In 1997 Rorty predicted that "[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized 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 (...) One 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. The words 'nigger' and 'kike' will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet."<sup>6</sup> This strongman, he concluded, "will be a disaster for the country and for the world" (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, pp. 90-91).

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<sup>6</sup> Rorty, *Achieving our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, paperback ed. 1999, pp. 89-90.

Rorty was called a relativist when he made curiosity the greatest of intellectual virtues; a postmodernist when he was a modernist; and his discourse on truth is said to have helped Donald Trump come to power when Rorty was seeking to alert the American left to the possibility 20 years before the event — not the least of paradoxes for a philosopher of conversation who struggled to make himself heard.

*Translated by Susannah Dale*

## Further Reading

### Anthology

- *The Rorty Reader*, C. Voparil and R. Bernstein (eds), Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Excellent selection of texts, with a long introduction tracing the main theories and stages of his philosophy.

### Main works by Rorty in French translation (selection)

- *La Philosophie et le miroir de la nature*, trans. by T. Marchaisse, Le Seuil, 2017 [*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, 1979]. Reprint of the translation published under the title *L'Homme spéculaire*, with an enlightening new introduction by Olivier Tinland.
- *Conséquences du pragmatisme*, trans. by J.-P. Cometti, Paris, Le Seuil, 1993 [*Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays 1972-1980*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982]
- *Contingence, ironie et solidarité*, trans. by P.-E. Dauzat, Paris, Armand Colin, 1993 [*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989].
- *Objectivisme, relativisme et vérité*, trans. by J.-P. Cometti, Paris, PUF, 1994 [*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers vol. 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991].
- *Essais sur Heidegger et autres écrits*, trans. by J.-P. Cometti, Paris, PUF, 1995 [*Essays on Heidegger and others. Philosophical Papers vol. 2*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991]
- *Science et solidarité*, trans. by J. P. Cometti, Combas, L'Éclat, 1990. Selection of texts from the two previous collections and not republished in their translations, with an unpublished preface by Rorty

- *L'Espoir au lieu du savoir. Introduction au pragmatisme*, trans. by C. Cowan and J. Poulain, Paris, Albin Michel, 1995 [*Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, 1999, part II: "Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism, pp. 21-90]. Good overall introduction.
- *L'Amérique : un projet inachevé*, trans. by D. Machu, Pau, Publications de l'Université de Pau, 2001 [*Achieving Our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998]
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- Stéphane MADELRIEUX (ed.), "Relire Rorty, *Archives de philosophie*, 2019/3. Collection of articles (in French) on little-known aspects of Rorty's thought (philosophy of mind, metaphilosophy, aesthetics, etc.); also contains the French translation of Rorty's last autobiographical text, "Intellectual Autobiography" (2007), in which he emphasizes his intellectual itinerary between analytic philosophy, pragmatism and continental philosophy.

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