

# Theory & Event

**Theory & Event**

**Volume 2, Issue 3, 1998**

**Johns Hopkins University Press**



Article



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## **Additional Information**

# Left Conservatism, IV UCSC 1/31/98

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Seriously, I was pleased to know Chris thinks I invented this term — I didn't — but I found myself in a tough spot because he said this obligated me to come.

I didn't quite know what I wanted to talk about but I finally decided that since some of my own recent work has, in part, tried to develop a strong kind of critique of the authority of American pragmatism in the last fifteen or twenty years, I might be able to write out some of what I had been thinking about in that context, but around the work of Richard Rorty. I have to say that, since I first came to know Rorty's work in the mid 1970s it has always dissatisfied me — that feeling dates from the very time I saw him give a paper at Columbia University in 1976 when he began what I take to be an important opening front in the now successful against theory or anti-theory movement.

But in our political and intellectual context it seems to me Rorty has become symptomatically interesting as a figure because he is both a self-avowed anti-foundationalist and writes for *The Nation*. He may be the only person who does that. In that way he seems to raise a conundrum for our flyer authors whose cartoon-like anti-theory attacks on “post-modernists” requires them to oppose all anti-foundationalists — oddly excepting Rorty. I want to claim that the adherence to anti-foundationalism in itself politically guarantees nothing at all, that Rorty's anti-foundationalist position is in many ways congruent with the work of several other people whom *The Nation* and many of the rest of us would identify as being not only foundationalist but conservative. And in the longer version of this project, I have made an effort to explain some of that in terms of

Rorty's relation to E.O. Wilson, which relation was recently noticed in the *New York Times*.

Let me begin then, by giving you a few little remarks about Rorty, and a couple of quotations from Rorty to try to set up some sense of his own work, and then I want to read a few pages of my own, which I think will make a more consistent unit of comment.

The anti-foundationalist position, I think, is really most nicely put in a recent piece that Rorty has written, that is, the introduction to Wilfrid Sellars' essay on empiricism. "The whole idea of foundations of knowledge basic to both empiricism and rationalism disappears once we become psychological nominalists." Rorty claims that Quine and Sellars destroy the philosophical ambition to foundationalism by respectively, "attacking the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths and by attacking the distinction between what is given to the mind and what is added to the mind." I think it would be interesting to go on and talk about Rorty as a kind of nominalist and as a kind of mis-reader of Sellars, but that is largely beside the point of what we are talking about at this conference. Yet, in context, Rorty makes an extremely revealing remark, revealing of his own position, in commenting on an important statement in which Sellars gives some definition to the notion of what he, Sellars, means by science. Rorty says that Sellars may have been the first philosopher to insist that we see mind as a sort of hypostatization of language. Rorty continues, "Sellars argued that the intentionality of beliefs is a reflection of the intentionality of sentences rather than conversely. This reversal makes it possible to understand mind as gradually entering the universe by and through the gradual development of language, as part of a naturalistically explicable evolutionary process, rather than seeing language as the outward manifestation of something inward and mysterious which humans have and animals lack." I'm going to make the claim that that kind of statement gives Rorty the grounds for claiming himself to be — uncritically — a kind of general intellectual, a person who extends his reach into general areas of policy, culture, and politics.

Rorty concludes his commentary on Sellars by saying that what we should derive from Sellars' commitment to a critique of empiricism is "the fact that rationality, which Sellars calls science, is not a matter of obedience to standards but rather a give-and-take participation in a cooperative social project," which is, of course, a characteristic gesture of the American pragmatist tradition that we all recognize.

Rorty's own deep connection to explicitly conservative intellectuals of E.O. Wilson's type lies I think in his commitment to the idea of progress. While Rorty describes himself and has been described and can be described as liberal, sometimes as a social democrat, and my colleague John Beverly has sometimes called him a Fabian, I think it is far more exact to call him a Whig. It is because I think the key to Rorty's authoritative position as an American general intellectual lies in his commitment to progress, which seems to come at times very close to the way E. O. Wilson and others like him tell what are essentially evolutionary biological tales indebted to the notion of the selfish gene.

This side of Rorty's thinking requires that we raise certain non-philosophical issues, particularly those associated with subjectivity and culture, issues that are in Rorty's political formulation as troubled as they are troubling. We may go to the Rortyan idea, if we like, that a general intellectual's vocabulary can circulate only because it already participates in what Gramsci and others would help us to call the common-sensical languages in circulation at the time of its own attempted emergence. If we do this, we can approach the question of how Rorty's way of talking would let us imagine the coming into being of new or different languages. Equivalently, we would then see that Rorty's way of talking requires that the developing new language be similar enough to the already circulating, to the old, the solidified and habitual metaphors, that it can be recognized as either partaking in the same conversation — one of Rorty's favorite terms, as when he speaks of truth values in his definition of irony — or in changing the conversation to recognizable but merely adjacent words and forms of speech. (A contrast to another American line of thought, that represented by Henry Adams and explicitly rejected by Rorty, would be enlightening. <sup>1</sup>)

There is I think throughout Rorty's work a kind of productive tension — and by productive in this case I mean the tension simply allows him to go on talking — between his “pragmatist” denial of criteria for rationality and his denial of the idea that there is a comforting assurance that judgment can be made to guide value judgments on the basis of reason. There is a tension between that on the one hand and his confidence that historical transformations in the way we talk — from religion to pragmatism, for example — mark definite improvements, progress in human ability to evolve languages, and other actions for what he calls “coping.”

Putting aside for the moment the fact that Rorty has no clear way of accounting for the effects of power and interests in the development of languages, in part because he has put aside, of his own, most notions of cause and effect as metaphysical, nonetheless, he routinely asserts that the setting aside of religious modes of talk and thought, their supersession by science and secularism, marks an advance, a kind of absolute progress, and that this change brings society closer to the ideal of human cooperative intercommunications which Rorty quotes Sellars to define as “science.” It is the fact that Rorty's way of talking takes the form of this rather traditional narrative, a narrative so traditional in modernity that it reminds us of the narrative of Hegel's preface — it is a narrative that holds not only that there is progress but that that progress leads toward the way of talking that marks the past as indeed progress towards it itself, that is, towards Rorty's own way of talking. In other words, in Rorty, history takes the form of a whiggish movement that guarantees the emergence of Rorty's own position. Everyone who has tried to think in the shadow of the last two hundred years is now tired of this exhausted form — but perhaps pragmatists don't worry about form — they just hold on to the familiar.

I want to quote from a passage in the 1982 introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* — there are at least two more recent texts I could cite in which Rorty makes the same

moves and makes some of the same claims that he does here. I want to quote this passage in part because I think that one of the reasons why Rorty's work has been successful lies in his ability to operate a language that in the American tradition looks like the language of plain-speak, as opposed to the languages of complexity, of middle-brow journalism rather than the tasks of thinking. I said somewhere before that for a person who talks about irony as much as Rorty does, he is the least ironic prose writer that I've ever seen. I also want to quote this passage though because in this case, as in many others, we can find in the authored habits of those who operate in the traditions of plain-talk and defend the "protocols of decorum" and so on of plain-speak and gentle conversation — we can occasionally find more than traces of violence that is not otherwise always recognizable or easily available — that it is the task of plain-speakers to hide. So I want to spend a few minutes working with you from a rather complex and to me extremely troubling passage that, as I say, comes not from a recent essay but from an older and immensely influential one, that is, the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*. — which introduction has frequently been referred to as one of the places where the neo-pragmatist movement regrouped itself in the humanities.

In the introduction to this volume Rorty tries polemically to establish the novelty in pragmatists' way of thinking and talking, to put an end to the sort of scandalized concerns that intuitive realists have when pragmatists deny not only their values but their way of talking. According to Rorty, intuitivist realists are scandalized when anti-foundationalists say there is no rational ground for justifying democracy over tyranny. Rorty says something like: it may be true but the real problem isn't the absence of grounds, the real problem is that you're scandalized about their absence. So Rorty goes on to explain, as he says *a là* Sellars, that the sense of scandal is socially formed — that is, he's a social constructivist of the kind that Alan Sokal doesn't like — and insists that with new ways of thinking it is possible not to have any longer the intuitions that realists always have and have had. It is in this context that Rorty most convincingly tells us that his way of thinking involves changing the subject, rather than taking part in the conversation, and fairly openly links this notion to the idea of evolutionary progress as a modernizing supersession of antiquarian, quaint localized or alien intuitions. Rorty almost always presents himself as a modest and gentle figure in the ordinary language and plain talk of his style, so I think he rather startles his careful reader in this passage. We sense some of the violence at work in his talking, a violence which we know from his writings on Nabokov and others is just that which liberal humanists essentially believe to be the irreducible enemy of all evolved pragmatists. And perhaps not surprisingly, this violence occurs when Rorty's thinking about the human and about humanism comes to the question of the non-European:

The pragmatist . . . thinks that the quest for a universal human community will be self-defeating if it tries to preserve the elements of every intellectual tradition, all the “deep intuitions” everybody has ever had. It is not to be achieved by an attempt at commensuration, at a common vocabulary which isolates the common human essence of Achilles and the Buddha, and Lavoisier and Derrida. Rather it is to be reached, if at all, by acts of making rather than of finding, — by poetic rather than Philosophical achievement. The culture which will transcend, and thus unite, East and West, or the Earthling and the Galactics, is not likely to be one which does equal justice to each, but one which looks back on both with the amused condescension typical of later generations looking back at their ancestors. So the pragmatist’s quarrel with the intuitive realists should be about the *status* of intuitions — about their *right* to be respected — as opposed to how particular intuitions might be “synthesized” or “explained away.” To treat his opponent properly, the pragmatist must begin by admitting that the realistic intuitions in question are as deep and compelling as the realist says they are. But he should then try to change the subject by asking, And what should we *do* about such intuitions — extirpate them, or find a vocabulary that does justice to them?” <sup>2</sup>

The answer, of course, is to extirpate them.

This is an extremely interesting text. What begins as an argument, we might say, within the Western philosophical tradition — what are the values of private intuitions, a question Sellars treats brilliantly and technically in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* — this becomes in Rorty’s passage an act of translation more like a slip of a tongue. Perhaps it is not necessary to point out again that despite all of Rorty’s talk about getting into a post-capital “P” philosophical culture, his own language and way of thinking belongs essentially to that tradition and its offshoots. Even to prefer poets to philosophers after all is not very far from Aristotle’s sense of the poet’s value in relation to history and philosophy. In other words, Rorty’s own terms here are, as he concedes, inevitably part of the old, and in this case the old most explicitly rests on a particular modern form of the West, that is, a tradition of Western philosophy from Hegel to Davidson. For his language not to be part of the very old, whose terms and arguments he needs to borrow, Rorty would need to have already arrived at the post-philosophical culture where the antiquarian could be viewed with condescension. This is clearly an impossible demand, except in the mode of intellectual prolepsis. Even so, you could not expect Rorty to occupy the future he postulates as *our* evolutionary future, but from his point of view, he could say it would be nice if we were in a society already in which the very idea of treating as commensurate differing deeply held intuitions of the East and West had become a silliness long forgotten. So Rorty would have us believe, that is, if we believe in the human community as an ideal, as I think Rorty clearly claims he does.

Of course in the pragmatist way of talking there is no way to do justice to the intuitions,

to develop a model of commensurability, nor to imagine criteria on which this might be done. Nor am I saying, by the way, that there should be because that's not a conversation I want to join. Many possibilities of traditional humanism would need to be left out, but the issue of privilege, this issue which approaches as well the issue of power, gets no treatment at all. Like E.O. Wilson, Rorty assumes that evolutionary progress of mind is inseparable from the privilege accorded certain Western models of thinking and talking. Again we can see that the pragmatist knows this and thinks that it is inevitable. Indeed the pragmatist, having so conceded, announces that the ideal of thought's evolution is to put an end to the very structures that make the origin of pragmatism within Western philosophy possible.

The contradiction here is very deep. Perhaps the non-West, or as Rorty calls it, the East or the Galactic, will evolve differently, not toward pragmatic secularism at all. Why can there be no imagination of a non-philosophical supersession of difference? Rorty would have it that only in the post-philosophical, would the deeply held intuitions be superseded so that the antiquarian way of doing justice to the incommensurate will have passed away. Rather than the selfish gene in the name of which socio-biology holds all knowledge to synthetic account, pragmatism in Rorty takes its own ideals from what we might call the end of history, that moment when, as Fukuyama insists in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, boredom sets in as a result of the loss of dramatic contest between ideologies, or what we might call in the license of Rorty's extension of Sellars's thinking, "deep intuition."

To put it in a word then, once Rorty comes to his internally necessary position that deeply held intuitions have no right to be respected and tries to talk us out of considering that they might, presumably in time with the movement of evolution away from all religion and metaphysics, Rorty, in trying to deliver a cash value that will let us "cope" with different intuitions — precisely by doing away with them — brings along the weighty traces of something else, which we are now accustomed to call Orientalism. He brings with it too the same inability to hear the Oriental as we saw indeed in Said's own great book of that name.

Getting rid of a vocabulary that lets us speak as though community can be formed through a synthesis treating all intuitions as commensurate lets Rorty and his fans do certain things. For example, it lets them speak clearly of a future in which ethnic cleansing will be done away with because "humans" will have evolved beyond the languages that keep us from looking on these "antiquarian" present realities with the proper condescension. (What a burden for that seducer, language, to offer to carry!) Rorty, of course, would have it that pragmatism pertains to language and thinking, not, let us say, to the sphere of violence or force. But there is a certain version of the problem we inevitably meet in this situation. Rorty's way of talking is thought to be abstract, or better we might say without content — that is, empty, which is why it is so happy with the traditions of bourgeois philosophy, but as the Orientalist example suggests, for in this emptiness content and consequences come unannounced and unexamined.

Let us imagine for instance a conversation between a pragmatist and a Singaporean statesman. That statesman might well insist that Rorty's talk about the desire for secular languages to compete in the arena of rationality sounds a lot like the actual market effects of global capital in its neo-liberal form. That statesman might make an argument for an alternative way of talking, one resting on entirely different deep intuitions. Indeed the statesman might hold that Rorty's way of talking seems right to Rorty only because it pays a cash value in Rorty's world, but when seen by others who talk differently, which must mean for Rorty in a more antiquarian fashion, can only pay a cash value if and when their own world has become like Rorty's. It seems to me that Rorty cannot deny this. His goal is for a world of secular liberalism formed with democratic republican institutions and most important, American style free markets.

Reading Rorty carefully requires more time and more nuance than I have opportunity for here. As I've suggested his work hints at Fukuyama and Wilson, at the evolution to the end of time, and perhaps it hitches on as well to the kind of talk that Samuel Huntington crystallizes for us so nicely in his recent infamous article [and now book] on the conflict of civilizations. A general intellectual in the American mold, coping with the confusion of conflicts as we move from the Cold War through detente to Glasnost to the ethnic cleansings of recent years, in company with the now failing emerging markets that extend capitalism into new areas of life and thought — and not incidentally provide markets for US surpluses — such an American intellectual can reach so far and embody the finest elements of American political desire in history, only by generalizing a version of the American secular ideal — that's the only job for such intellectuals who, after all, are hired hands. The Singaporean statesman points to it as the American way, and in pointing to other historical cultural values embedded deeply in the history of other regions, such a statesman, coming at the seeming (to Americans) end of ideology, the end of time, might well encourage others to think that not ideas but civilizations themselves are likely to be at long and bloody war. For Rorty, the differences must be subsumed, but only when seen from a higher place later in history, one we can now imagine as Rorty's ideal, one that provides the utopian energies that, he would have it, lead us, that is, we Americans, to accept the task of building a worldwide cultural community resting on our own post-philosophical languages. So much the better says the pragmatist is this than endless war and conflict waged by religious fanatics, and so much the better for the American polity as a basis of vision and policy than a putatively more "realistic" policy of inevitable racialized warfare among or between civilizations.

Oddly I think a number of political intellectuals and academicians accuse Rorty of taking part in the general movement widely degraded as political correctness because he is an anti-foundationalist. Indeed critics sometimes name his psychological nominalism as a cause for both the loss of reason and standards in academia. After all, he could be seen as one of those who makes possible the infamous Sokal affair with *Social Text*. But I find this an amusing and finally silly charge, worth noting only in that it shows how right Rorty is to be worried about the foundationalism, fundamentalism, and barbarism he opposes. While

his position depends upon the classic transformation of the other into the Orientalized barbarian, the term barbarian as Sellars himself hurls it and Rorty adapts it, applies most to those chauvinists and patriots, those fundamentalists, (I am now referring to *The Nation* article, December, 1997) who assume positions altogether outside rationality, outside secular science. It is impossible for anyone with senses of a memory to say as Rorty does in *The Nation* that the Left must “stop airing its doubts about our country;” his remark can be saved from pure folly only if we take him to mean that talking about nation, home, and country must be brought into the space of rationality where ideas can be tested at any time and taken out of the domain of political irrationality, which presumably he sees everywhere gaining ground in the United States. But if this is true, how can his foundational chauvinism be reasonable at all?

Let me conclude by making one more quick point. The point would seem to be that to join in Rorty’s conversation rather than to change the subject entirely is a suicidal path for us to follow. Let me refer, by contrast, to Edward Said’s 1978 essay, “Recent American Left Criticism,” and ask as Said did long ago in regard to the movement of deconstruction, what changes have been made in the real material dispositions of force by Rorty’s insistence on speaking in this abstract pragmatist way? Much less, I suspect than the degree of change we have seen in recent weeks as Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence Summers marches through Asia managing the economic crises of Eastern countries as they find the power of markets and the power of American capital administration of capital at work in ending their claims to unique and different, that is *non-neo-liberal* forms of capitalist practice and capitalist ideology. All the claims for Confucianism for once and for all fall by the wayside. If the secular liberal revolution that will make us all speak a new language allowing us to stand in a place where the deep intuitions of East as well as West appear as mere antiquarian curiosities, remembered not even fondly, but with condescension — if this revolution is to occur, it must occur, I would suggest, not in keeping with Rortyan pragmatism, but in keeping with what Marx called the revolutionary potential of capital, which is to say, of course, that the function of pragmatism is to be the ideological expression of the revolutionary potential of capital. This recognition is hardly consoling for such as Rorty, since it promises to force back on our consciousness notions like economic effect — concrete notions that Rorty’s theories of contingency are meant to hold at a distance or displace once and for all.

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Paul Bové is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, author of numerous books on critical theory and intellectuals, including *Intellectuals in Power* and *In the Wake of Theory*. He is also an editor of the journal *boundary 2*.

### Notes



**1.** See Paul Bové, “Giving Thought to America,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Autumn 1996, 80–108); “Policing Thought,” *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (Summer 1997): 939–46.

**2.** Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxx–xxxı.

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## Additional Information

ISSN	1092-311X
Print ISSN	2572-6633
Launched on MUSE	1998-01-01
Open Access	No