Rorty, Habermas, and radical social criticism
Michael Bacon and Nat Rutherford
Royal Holloway, University of London

In this chapter, we make three connected claims. First, despite Rorty's expressed 'bourgeois liberal' reformism, there are philosophical resources within his political philosophy which indicate a latent programme of radical social criticism. Second, we argue against the charge that Rorty is a relativist who lacks the necessary foundations for social criticism by comparing the liberalisms of Rorty and Jürgen Habermas. Thirdly, we argue that Rorty's anti-foundationalism would commit him, by his own lights, to engage in radical criticism of actually-existing liberalism. On this account of Rorty's political philosophy, the idea that redescription of our social situation might take us beyond bourgeois liberalism becomes a real possibility.

1. Introduction

Rorty's self-identification as a leftist is often obscured by his liberalism. The idea that liberalism and the left are incompatible political projects has been commonplace in Europe since Marx, but this antinomy has been less pronounced in American political thought. Rorty is clear that for 'us Americans, it is important not to let Marxism influence the story we tell about our own Left'. Colloquially, the term 'liberal' in the United States has often been interchangeable with 'left-wing' in a way that has not been possible in Europe. The political philosophers who dominated post-war American political theory, including such figures as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Singer, Brian Barry, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum, identified as both liberals and leftists. For these thinkers and for Rorty, being on the left meant being a liberal. Left liberalism, or social democracy, has always shied away from 'radicalism' and gravitated instead towards reformism. The 'reformist left' that Rorty defended and hoped to revivify in Achieving Our Country was characterised by its belief that 'the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of constitutional democracy'. Conversely, what was wrong with what Rorty termed the 'cultural left' was that it is 'obsessed with the idea of “radical criticism”...which is rarely in a reformist, pragmatic spirit, but rather in a mood of either deep pessimism or of revolutionary fury'. Liberal reformism is, to varying degrees, conservative because it seeks to achieve change from within pre-existing institutional structures, and so seeks to preserve
those structures rather than dismantle them. Reformism as a political strategy also comports with Rorty's pragmatism, which commits him to the view that any 'attempts to ground a practice on something outside the practice will always be more or less disingenuous'. His philosophical pragmatism finds its political counterpart in reformism. If practices can only be grounded from within, then so too can politics only be altered from within. This has led many of Rorty's critics to regard him as a social and political conservative who was unable to offer radical criticism of the liberal status quo or to imagine politics beyond the constraints of liberal democracy. This perception, while justified in some ways by Rorty's own statements, can also be addressed by the philosophical resources he provides.

2. Rorty, radicalism, and social criticism

Rorty's political philosophy was characteristically enigmatic and provocative. He was accused of being a relativist and a postmodernist, but he was a critic of figures such as Michel Foucault. His critique of Foucault and 'the cultural left' indicated a sympathy towards the primacy of the class analysis of the old Marxist left. But Rorty had little good to say about Marx either. Rorty was accused of being a complacent liberal, despite his trenchant criticism of the foundations of liberal political philosophy. He was derided as nonprogressive and (despite his protests) a conservative, but his diagnosis of the failure of the left was motivated by a desire to salvage an electorally viable leftism and progressivism. Rorty's refusal to fit squarely in any intellectual tradition made him an uneasy bedfellow with almost everyone, including those on the left. But despite the apparent incompatibilities between Rorty's political philosophy and political radicalism, Rorty has much more in common with radicals than he is often credited with. As Bjørn Ramberg has argued, there is a latent 'radical Rorty' behind Rorty's explicit commitment to his own unorthodox 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism'. Ramberg reconstructs this character from Rorty's philosophical views, while setting aside Rorty's expressed political philosophy. 'Radical Rorty' is an interesting proposition because his philosophy (as distinguished from his political philosophy) is well suited to radicalism. Even though Rorty's commitment to liberalism is clear, there are resources in his philosophy that point beyond the liberal reformism he espoused.
On the face of it, Rorty’s philosophy looks much more radical than it does liberal. His philosophical commitments have various affinities with that of the left, and diverge in important ways from liberalism. His anti-authoritarianism tallies with the emancipatory ambition of critical theory, it contradicts the universalizing tendencies of liberalism, his elevation of democracy above philosophy parallels the radical democracy of writers such as William Connolly, and his emphasis on practice and action over abstracted contemplation accords with Marx’s materialism and understanding of the purposes of philosophy. In particular, the affinities between Marx and Rorty are underappreciated, not least by Rorty himself. On the few occasions Rorty mentioned Marx, it was to spurn him. In Achieving Our Country, Rorty writes ‘that it would be a good thing if the next generation of American leftists found as little resonance in the names of Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as in those of Herbert Spencer and Benito Mussolini’. Comments such as this might be explained by Rorty’s ‘uncanny capacity simply to allow a train of thought that was moving in a direction he found uncongenial to peter out without it ever being completely clear why no further step in the conversation was made’, as his friend and admirer Raymond Geuss describes him. Had Rorty not found Marx so immediately uncongenial, he might have uncovered their various shared commitments. His hostility towards Marx and, in a second step, towards Foucault, obscures their common philosophical causes.

We should not overstate these affinities, and there are other features of Rorty’s philosophy which are less compatible with political radicalism. His ironism reflects the kind of doubt that is closely tied to the liberal value of revision, and could easily be misconstrued as leading to political quietism. His civic nationalism and American exceptionalism are both anathema to many who identify with ‘the left’. Yet, as Ramberg notes, ‘Radical Rorty’s use for theory stems not from a boot-strapping attempt to legitimize a vocabulary by transcending its embeddedness, but from a diagnosis of the present as rife with practical conflict and political tensions reflected in a multi-layered and strained hodge-podge of vocabularies and descriptive options’. Leaving aside the talk of vocabularies, this sounds much like the essential Marxist insight that ‘that no social order can achieve changes that are not already latent within its existing condition’. For Rorty and Marx, social change would necessarily come from within those practices, material relations, and institutions that already exist. In comparing these two, it becomes clear that a prominent strand of criticism against Rorty has little force. Jonathan Allen, for example, asks, ‘If our very selves and sense of the
world are constructed within social projects and vocabularies, how is it possible for us to take up a critical stance towards those vocabularies?". But for Rorty and for Marx, the question itself is a mistake because there can be no self or world separate from our constructions of these within social projects and vocabularies. Rorty's rejection of a 'God's-eye view' highlights a key methodological difference between mainstream analytic liberalism and Rortyan liberalism. It also reflects his Deweyan view that 'philosophy was to treat evaluative terms such as "true" and "right" not as signifying a relation to some antecedently existing thing—such as God's Will, or Moral Law, or the Intrinsic Nature of Objective Reality -- but as expressions of satisfaction at having found a solution to a problem'. This rejection has led Rorty's critics to conclude that Rorty was a relativist for whom justice and morality are simply a matter of 'the way we do things around here'; Ian Shapiro thinks that in the absence of foundations, Rorty looks to settle disputes by 'an appeal to convention' or 'a simple appeal to consensus'. But to say that we start where we already are is not to say that we must end there. Rorty's point, reflecting Marx's critique of utopian socialism, was that radical social criticism could only begin from within because the possibility of grasping reality in any other way is a fantasy. Geuss argues a similar point against the 'God's-eye-view' approach to analytic criticism, when he notes that 'the distance I am able to put between myself and my social world with its associated beliefs, intellectual habits, and attitudes is a crucial variable in determining how much I can see, how much I can understand, and whether I can occupy a position from which radical social criticism is possible'. On this account, the possibility of radical criticism depends on our ability to understand the practices and vocabularies which we inhabit and use. The kind of immanent critique of Geuss, Marx, and Rorty all pursue are firmly rooted in the material conditions, social practices, and traditions of society, and it is these concrete conditions which can chart a course for radical Rorty.

Foundationalism, as Amy Gutmann puts it, 'is the claim that justification must rest upon truths about human nature, human rights, rationality, or politics that are self-evident, rationally incontestable, or axiomatic'. Rorty holds that nothing is self-evident, rationally incontestable, or axiomatic, and so his justification for liberalism abjures these foundationalist routes. Instead, liberalism should be understood as a historical and contingent set of practices and traditions that happen to serve human needs and interests. Anti-foundationalists 'treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance'. As Mary Midgley, who could well be describing Rorty's
approach, puts it, philosophy ‘involves finding the many particular ways of thinking that will be most helpful as we try to explore this constantly changing world’. But because ‘the world — including human life — does constantly change, philosophical thoughts are never final. Their aim is always to help us through the present difficulty’.\(^{17}\) That philosophy, for Rorty, is always responsive to the actual difficulties of human life reflects a surprisingly uncommon view in much academic philosophy, but this rarity produces difficulties which other less malleable philosophers do not face. As Robert Talisse comments, once ‘the antifoundationalist acknowledges that everything is contingent, he must concede that his antifoundationalist liberalism is tentative’.\(^{18}\) Talisse is right that Rorty’s liberalism must be tentative if it is to reflect his anti-foundationalist commitments, but this is a less fatal criticism than Talisse thinks because it grants Rorty a route to radical criticism which is foreclosed by a writer such as Habermas.

3. Rorty and the legacy of the Enlightenment

Rorty searches for the political principles, institutions, and practices which can garner support in political conversation, writing that in those who take this approach can ‘claim no authority for our premises save the assent we hope they will gain from our audience’.\(^{19}\) This claim constitutes Rorty’s anti-foundationalism, and this, we suggest, indicates the possibility of radical social criticism beyond contemporary liberal theory. The philosophical commitments and methods that Rorty’s critics see as preventing radical social criticism are, we contest, the very commitments that enable radical Rortyan social criticism. This is most clearly seen in a critical analysis of Rorty and Habermas. Habermas offers a useful foil because his philosophical project aims to reconcile normativity with radical criticism. And, as Robert Shelly has written, this project is immediately troublesome because, ‘the notions of “normative foundations” and “radical politics” seem to be incongruous bedfellows in the same sentence’, that is, ‘insofar as the concept of “normativity” connotes the idea of order and social control, by definition it is at odds with the very meaning of a radical politics’.\(^{20}\) Our contention is that Rorty exposes that incongruity, but also provides a viable an attractive alternative in the form of his anti-foundationalism.

Throughout his writings, Rorty expresses sympathy with Habermas’s work. The key similarity is seen in the following passage from his review of Stephen L. Carter’s book A
*Culture of Disbelief*, in which Rorty sets out what he takes to be the central division among Western intellectuals:

These days intellectuals divide up into those who think that something new and important called ‘the postmodern’ is happening, and those who, like Habermas, think we are (or should be) still plugging away at the familiar tasks set for us by the Enlightenment. The ones who, like me, agree with Habermas typically see the secularisation of public life as the Enlightenment’s central achievement, and see our job as the same as our predecessors’: getting our fellow citizens to rely less on tradition, and to be more willing to experiment with new customs and institutions.\(^{21}\)

Rorty once identified with postmodernism, but it is a term with which he grew unhappy and from which he came to distance himself. One reason for this is that the word came to be used in so many different ways that it was unhelpful. But a more significant reason is that postmodernism, in the eyes of many, is associated with a rejection of the ideals and legacy of the Enlightenment. Rorty, however, sides with Habermas in thinking that the Enlightenment constitutes the single most important contribution that philosophers have made to Western culture. Its significance lies in challenging the belief that respect is owed to traditional forms of authority, such as that of revealed religion. For the philosophers of the Enlightenment, claims to authority must be vindicated through the exercise of reason.

The difference between Rorty and Habermas is not about the value of the Enlightenment project, but on how it should be pursued today. Rorty identifies two elements of the Enlightenment which he thinks should be separated. Its *philosophical* project sought to abstract away from any particular context and step back to a neutral standpoint from which they might be rationally judged and evaluated. In contrast, its *political* project concerns the desirability of liberal institutions and their advantages when compared to alternative social and political arrangements. Rorty’s thesis is that it is possible to give up Enlightenment philosophy without endangering liberal institutions; he writes that ‘abandoning Western rationalism has no discouraging political implications. It leaves the Enlightenment political project looking as good as ever’.\(^{22}\)
Rorty regards the differences between Habermas and himself as unimportant, to be 'merely philosophical'. Habermas in contrast thinks them significant, and that their philosophical differences have political consequences. The underlying difference between them is that Habermas does not think it is possible to pull apart the philosophical and political the aspects of the Enlightenment. The interrelation between the two is an theme in Habermas’ The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1987). There, he argues that the modern world faced a problem of justifying our beliefs and practices without reference to traditional sources of authority: ‘Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself’. Moral frameworks such as those of Abrahamic religions were for centuries taken to be the fixed background against which men and women lived their lives, but this is no longer the case. Freed from traditional sources of authority, modern societies must create their own standards. However, this raises the question of whether, and how, those standards might be justified.

For Habermas, one response to the modern situation is what he calls contextualism. Contextualists move from the uncontroversial view that justification is relative to a particular audience to the mistaken conclusion that there is nothing more to truth but justification. According to Habermas, however, the historical contingency of social practices does not preclude identifying a standpoint which transcends them and which can be used to judge them. Rorty contrasts contingency with necessity, but for Habermas, this is to miss an important dimension, one which has political consequences. In a critical exchange with Rorty in which he draws on Habermas’ work, Thomas McCarthy writes that ‘contingency is opposed to necessity, not universality, and so one might well ask whether there are any contingent universals relevant to thinking about morality and politics’. Rorty argues that social criticism is a matter of comparing and contrasting different social practices, denying that there is a non-contingent standpoint from which to do so; his social critics are ‘the poet and the revolutionary’, people who protest ‘in the name of the society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image’. Habermas in contrast thinks that without a universal (though not ‘necessary’) standpoint, any judgements social critics might make are relative, with none being better than another.
According to Habermas, the capacity of social critics to make judgements about contingent social practices demonstrates that they must presuppose the existence of something independent of those contingencies. He writes:

Reaching understanding cannot function unless the participants refer to a single objective world, thereby stabilizing the intersubjectively shared public space with which everything that is merely subjective can be contrasted. This supposition of an objective world that is independent of our descriptions fulfils a functional requirement of our processes of cooperation and communication. Without this supposition, everyday practices, which rest on the (in a certain sense) Platonic distinction between believing and knowing unreservedly, would come apart at the seams.27

The key move Habermas makes is to locate the transcendent and universal within the local and particular. He claims that if we inspect our social practices, it will be seen that everyday communication contains invariant structures, structures which are, he claims, not empirical but conceptual, built into the very idea of communication. And, once identified, these provide the standards by which social critics might assess social and political arrangements.

Inasmuch as communicative agents reciprocally raise validity claims with their speech acts, they are relying on the potential of assailable grounds. Hence, a moment of unconditionality is built into factual processes of mutual understanding – the validity laid claim to is distinguished from the social currency of a de facto established practice and yet serves it as the foundation of an existing consensus.28

Habermas points out that when a person speaks, they are committed to aiming at reaching agreement with the person to whom they address. However, he claims that not just any form of agreement will do. Moral agreement is of a supposedly ideal kind, the conditions for which Habermas’ identifies in what he famously calls ‘the ideal speech situation’:

Whoever enters into discussion with the serious intention of becoming convinced of something through dialogue with others has to presume
performatively that the participants allow their “yes” or “no” to be determined solely by the force of the better argument. However, with this they assume – normally in a counterfactual way – a speech situation that satisfies improbable conditions: openness to the public, inclusiveness, equal rights to participation, immunization against external or inherent compulsion, as well as the participants’ orientation toward reaching understanding (that is, the sincere expression of utterances)\(^{29}\)

If successful, Habermas has shown how we might give up on metaphysics and foundationalism without giving ourselves over to relativism; following Habermas, Richard Wolin remarks that ‘one can be a nonrelativist, a believer in rationality and truth, without being a metaphysician or a foundationalist in the traditional sense, a possibility that Rorty refuses to consider’.\(^{30}\) In our contrasting view, Rorty has succeeded in demonstrating why this is not a possibility. To see why, we can ask precisely what Habermas means by ‘the force of the better argument’. There are two possible meanings. A better argument might be one which succeeds in persuading a particular audience. But if that is what Habermas means, he is, despite his intentions, a contextualist. If in contrast an argument is said to be ‘better’ independently of whether or not it succeeds in this way, Habermas has relapsed into traditional metaphysics, despite what he claims. To take the latter view, as Rorty writes,

….. is to presuppose the existence of a natural order of reasons to which our arguments will, with luck, better and better approximate. The idea of such an order is one more relic of the idea that truth consists in correspondence to the intrinsic nature of things, a nature which somehow precedes and underlies all descriptive vocabularies’.\(^{31}\)

Habermas would of course not accept that he is committed to the Cartesian natural order of reasons, and is keen to insist that he has set it aside while avoiding the relativism to which he takes to follow from contextualism. But has he succeeded in steering this course? Habermas sometimes describes his position as quasi-transcendentalism, and as we saw above, Platonic ‘in a certain sense’. Exactly what it means to be a quasi-transcendentalist, or a Platonist in some (but only some) unspecified senses, is not explained. Such ambiguities are
also on display by Wolin when he responds to Rorty who, in a particularly vivid passage, writes:

\[\text{… when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.”}^{32}\]

Commenting on this, Wolin claims that:

\[\text{The self-justifications of torturers and inquisitors become self-negating as soon as they are put into language: for they fail to measure up to the context-transcendent, moral idealizations inherent in the linguistic expectations of a posttraditonal culture based on universalizable – hence, non-particularistic – norms. According to this logic, as soon as such particularistic worldviews partake of the language-game of “justice and validity” – a necessity for all modern, as opposed to traditional despotisms – they have lost – which does not of course mean that they automatically cease to exist.}^{33}\]

There is a lot going on in this passage, but to try to get a grip on it, consider: what is the force of the word ‘necessity’? By definition, necessity is not contingent on the particular views and intentions a person might happen to have. But what is it? Wolin combines history (traditional, post-traditional, modern), logic and morality. We have no idea how these different ideas are supposed to fit together, though their cumulative rhetorical effect is clear enough. They enable Wolin (and Habermas) to have it both ways. He can claim to avoid moral relativism by laying claim to something which transcends local practice, but he can also receive credit for avoiding what he calls the ‘old style metaphysics’, which, as he notes, Habermas and Rorty are both keen to avoid.\(^{34}\)

As we have said, what lies behind the differences between Habermas and Rorty is their view of the relationship between philosophy and politics. According to Habermas, the
problem with Rorty’s attempt to separate them is that it prevents social critics from identifying and excluding instrumental reason.

A … de-differentiation between the strategic and the nonstrategic use of language, between action oriented toward success and action oriented toward reaching understanding, robs Rorty of the conceptual means for doing justice to the intuitive distinctions between convincing and persuading, between motivation through reasons and causal exertion of influence, between learning and indoctrination.\(^{35}\)

Rorty replies by pointing out that the difference between the strategic and non-strategic is itself context dependent:

Habermas and I can agree that certain desirable social practices and institutions could not survive unless the participants could deploy these latter, commonsensical, distinctions. But I see these distinctions as themselves just as context-dependent as the distinction between sufficient and insufficient justification.\(^{36}\)

As we’ve seen, what alarms Habermas, Wolin, McCarthy and others is relativism, that our values are merely historically contingent, and therefore no better than any other. Wolin writes of Rorty’s contextualism that the ‘logical consequence of this move is the adoption of a thoroughgoing relativism -- which Rorty (and here, one can only admire his consistency), freely embraces.’\(^{37}\) But in the absence of a standpoint outside of culture and history, there is no perspective from which we could declare our beliefs and practices relative.\(^{38}\) The force of the Habermasian position lies in the way in which it trivialises our everyday practices and renders them something in need of support from some independent grounding. But there is no need to join him in doing so. Rorty diagnoses in writers such as Wolin the tendency to read their own views into his, and criticise him by reference to their own presuppositions rather than his, and then criticise him for the consequences of holding his position once it is recast in this way. Rorty makes this point in a discussion of how realists tend to project their ‘own habits of thought upon the pragmatist’, criticising pragmatists for holding the views that they do were they to express them in the manner of realists.\(^{39}\) We think that
Rorty would agree with Wolin when he writes that ‘to say that there is no [suprahistorical] ground does not mean that there are no grounds’. Beliefs are not grounded in a (quasi) transcendental order of reasons of the kind that are said to be established in a supposedly ideal speech situation, but this does not mean that there are no reasons for those beliefs, only that those reasons are grounded in the contingencies of history.

While their politics of reformist social democracy coincided, Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is incompatible with the Habermasian project of finding ‘transcendent rules of communication’ which could ground liberalism in something more than historical contingency and our ever-changing vocabularies. For Habermas, redescriptions of our practices are possible but constrained by the transcendent rules of communication. To the extent that Habermas’s project is successful, any attempts at redescription are limited by liberalism. Only those descriptions which comport with the theory of communicative action are permitted. But once Rorty cuts liberalism adrift of its foundations, these constraints should also fall away. Rorty’s neo-pragmatism frees him from the dogmatic liberalism of philosophers such as Habermas. As actually-existing liberalism moved further and further away from the utopia of ‘inspirational liberalism’ that Rorty envisages, he should have come to believe, with Marx, ‘that human emancipation must proceed not by repudiating the liberal tradition but by transcending its limitations’. While Stalin is of course reviled and rejected by Rorty for his abject failure to achieve human emancipation, no reasonable vision of socialism (including Marx’s) does not already include the liberal utopia Rorty envisaged, but instead sees utopia being achieved by other and additional means. As Rodney Peffer notes, Marx’s ideal of ‘self-determination in the sense of having control over one’s own life obviously excludes…unwarranted interferences with one’s person and privacy and one’s actions and activities’ and so protects the negative liberty and rights which also characterise liberalism. In particular, socialists emphasise the need for structural economic change, which has rarely featured in contemporary liberal political philosophy. The task for political philosophers, then, is to redescribe utopia with both new and old tools. Rorty was, despite himself, beginning that project in Achieving Our Country.

4. Utopia after liberalism

When Rorty claims that ‘Mill’s suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering...
seems to me pretty much the last word’ (Rorty, 1989, 63), it seems that his commitment to liberalism is unwavering. But this endorsement leaves open many questions, including that of whether liberal ideals are best met through socialism or capitalism. Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, which holds that ‘there is no distinction between what is useful and what is right’ suggests that the final vocabulary of liberalism is only right insofar as it is useful. Regardless of whether one thinks that liberalism offers a coherent set of ideals, it has become increasingly clear that the liberal vocabulary now struggles to motivate political action, inspire citizens of liberal democracy to support liberal institutions, or remedy the social ills of racism, inequality, alienation, and resentment which underly the success of nationalist and illiberal politicians. In other words, liberalism seems less and less capable offering satisfactory solutions to the social and political problems of modern democracies. But, as Talisse’s criticism suggests, the liberalism which follows from Rorty’s anti-foundationalism is tentative and provisional. As such, it can be revised much more radically than Rorty himself allowed in the light of the failure of liberal practices and the liberal vocabulary.

Our argument here is not only that there are radical resources in Rorty, but also that his philosophy should commit him to a radicalism that goes beyond what he proposed. Rorty’s liberalism is a political creed, not a philosophical one. On his view of liberalism, its defining feature is democracy, and what is ‘unachieved’ in America is the democratic ideal set out by Whitman and Dewey. But it has become increasingly clear that liberalism, with its emphasis on the public/private distinction, its embedded defence of private property, and its deep suspicion of radical social change now often impedes the democratic ideal Rorty dreamt of. While our claim here is speculative, Rorty expressly supported this conjecture, writing in 1990 that the ‘rich North Atlantic democracies, including the US’, are presently under the control of an increasingly greedy and selfish middle class – a class which continually elects cynical demagogues willing to deprive the weak of hope in order to promise tax cuts to their constituents. If this process goes on for another generation, the countries in which it happens will be barbarized. Then it may become silly to hope for reform, and sensible to hope for revolution.

Although we must re-enter the realm of speculation, it seems likely that the last thirty years of American politics would have led Rorty to conclude that ‘it may become silly to hope for reform’. In the case of the US, it is useful to take a concrete reform that Rorty endorsed as
a way of assessing his commitment to reformism as a political strategy for the left. One proposal is a ‘People's Charter’ comprising ‘a list of specific reforms’ around which the American left might unify.\textsuperscript{45} He explains:

The first item on such a list would obviously be truly radical reform of campaign financing—the issue on which there is, at present, the greatest unanimity among American voters. Everybody knows that nothing much will change in America as long as the votes of our legislators can be bought, and that those accustomed to buying those votes will fight like tigers against public financing of campaigns: our legislators will be bribed to continue letting themselves be bribed.\textsuperscript{46}

Rorty was right: US legislators have been bribed to continue letting themselves be bribed. In 1998, the year Rorty published \textit{Achieving Our Country}, the total cost of Congressional race was $1.6bn (at 2018 prices this would be £2.5bn). By the 2018 Congressional race that cost had ballooned to $5.7bn.\textsuperscript{47} Accounting for inflation, the price of running for a seat in Congress has more than doubled in twenty years, despite the ‘greatest unanimity among American voters’. Not only has Rorty’s reform not been realised, but the situation has become dramatically worse. The economic and political inequality that troubled Rorty in 1998 has deepened, embodied in the current President who is, among other things, a billionaire. As liberal political orders have unravelled since \textit{Achieving Our Country}, Rorty’s mantra of ‘take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself’, no longer seems best served by liberalism or by capitalism. Rorty self-deprecatingly closed an interview following the publication of \textit{Achieving Our Country}, by approvingly noting that ‘Richard Posner has always said that philosophically I’m on the right track, it’s just that I had no sense of concrete economics or socioeconomic policy: “Rorty is still talking about ‘oligarchy’ and ‘the bosses’”’.\textsuperscript{48} There is some truth in Posner’s claim, but on our re-reading of Rorty’s late radicalism, he was right to turn his attention to the relationship between liberalism and capitalism and to recognise the possibility that both liberalism and capitalism in practice had shown themselves to be incapable of achieving the democratic utopia he sought. The American turn to oligarchy and the ever-growing strength of ‘the bosses’, the deepening of plutocracy, the open resurgence of racial politics and nationalism, the continued dominance of the culture wars and the attendant polarization of American politics all point towards liberalism’s failure to provide workable solutions to the social problems it has endured and produced. These passages also support the previous point: Rorty’s liberal reformism was
rightly tentative. If Rorty would have come to question the likely efficacy of liberal reformism, as we claim, what would follow from this? We identify two features of Rorty’s radical criticism: utopianism and practicality.

Despite his pragmatism and his emphasis on practice, Rorty was a utopian. This realistic and materialist utopianism is another feature common to both Marx and Rorty. Part of Rorty’s critique of Foucault was that Foucault’s philosophy was merely negative, succeeding in exposing the incoherence of modern practices, but offering no positive programme for social change. Foucault’s critique of liberalism was not limited to actually-existing liberalism, but extended to the liberal ideal itself. A liberal utopia was, for Foucault, oxymoronic. For Rorty, this negative critique indicated ‘antiutopianism’ and Foucault’s ‘apparent loss of faith in liberal democracy’.[49] But, as Andrew Cutrofello notes, Rorty ‘seems to assume that to critique one Utopian vision without explicitly recommending an alternative is equivalent to critiquing all utopian visions’.[50] This only holds if we assume that liberal utopianism is the only game in town, but as we have argued, the game is constantly changing, and so to imagine that a liberal utopia was the only utopia available to us contradicts Rorty’s commitments to contingency and to pragmatism. This is not to suggest that Rorty would have ceased to be a liberal, but instead to suggest that radical criticism of liberalism is compatible with the tentative liberalism Rorty endorsed. The point of social criticism is not only to expose the contradictions and inconsistencies of certain traditions, but also to open up new ways of describing the world. Geuss makes this Rortyan point when he contrasts social and political criticism with criticism in literature. The literary critic is not ‘trying to sharpen, restrict, and discipline the language but to enrich it, change it, reconfigure it so that it is able to…permit us to see the point of new forms of human experience’.[51] Geuss is making a wider argument against ‘constructive’ criticism here by arguing that criticism does not demand ‘substitutivity’. It is perfectly legitimate to expose the frailties of a system of thought without also offering a substitute. Geuss’s frequent target, although he makes no mention of it in the course of this particular argument, is liberalism. But Geuss is insistent that it is justifiable to reject liberalism and fail to offer an alternative. It this conception of criticism is precisely the one that Rorty adopts. Neither universalism, nor relativism, is the consequence of the refusal that Rorty defends against his Habermasian critics. But it can also be seen in his political philosophy: neither actually-existing liberalism, nor Stalin. That sensible rejection has attracted the criticism of both liberals and radicals,
but this is what pragmatist utopianism should look like. Rorty’s politics reflects his philosophy here. Just as he rejects the claim that the social critic needs non-contingent and suprahistorical grounds for criticism, so too can he reject the claim that one needs an alternative to liberalism to criticise liberalism. That liberalism has failed to live up to its own ideals should concern liberals. This does not mean giving up on liberal ideals altogether, but it may mean radically revising our ideals in light of reality.

In Achieving Our Country Rorty reaches the ‘judgment that we will do relatively more good if we work harder with the practical and descriptive political tools at our disposal, and spend less effort perfecting, or replacing, those tools’. Elsewhere, Rorty scolds those who think that ‘philosophical ideas are decisive for the destiny of peoples’. This spells, as some philosophers note with dismay, the end of political philosophy as we know it. Rorty’s re-imagining of the task of the philosopher has a slight ‘end-of-history’ ring to it. The development of liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries successfully identified the tools we need to realise human goods. For Rorty, the job of the philosopher is not to develop new tools, but rather to do the work of politics with the philosophical tools at our disposal. The task is to get ‘philosophy out of the way in order to let the imagination play upon the possibilities of a utopian future’. But climate change, rampant inequality, political stagnation, and automated unemployment make the future look increasingly dystopian. Limiting one’s political imagination to liberalism runs counter to Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism, his anti-foundationalism, and his repeated emphasis on the historical and contingent nature of philosophy and human life. Instead, Rorty he have insisted, as he did in Philosophy as Poetry that ‘the imagination is the principle [sic] vehicle of human progress’ and that the task of redescribing and reimagining the world is the only worthwhile task of the philosopher. But this re-embrace of imagination need not come at the expense of practical politics. That these two are deeply connected is one of Rorty’s crucial insights.

5. Conclusion

The priority of democracy to philosophy has an obvious consequence for Rorty’s thought. The failings of political institutions, such as the US Congress, and of democratic practices, are political rather than philosophical. Conflating criticism of liberal theory with criticism of liberal politics is widely opposed by liberal political philosophers. Stephen Holmes writes that to ‘criticize liberalism effectively, one must distinguish sharply between
two objects of criticism: liberal theories and liberal societies. This distinction is vital because liberalism will always be, to some extent, an unrealized aspiration’. But this distinction cannot be upheld by Rorty, because the failures of liberal societies will, albeit imperfectly, impugn liberal theory. If social practices go awry then the theories which inform those practices cannot claim immunity. Rorty’s political philosophy is therefore political and genuinely critical in ways which much liberal philosophy cannot be if it endorses Holmes’s distinction between the objects of criticism. It also follows, in a further step, that the remedy to social failures are political and not philosophical. No one, neither theorists nor politicians, needs to articulate the ‘quasi-transcendental’ grounds of belief in order to oppose the swill of corporate money in Congress. The foundationalist liberalism pursued by Habermas is at best scholasticism and at worst a philosophical masquerade which obscures political reality. Neither can be construed as radical. Fortunately, Rorty’s anti-foundationalist liberalism does not succumb to this flaw, and so his implicit radicalism remains intact, albeit implicit and unexplored.
Bibliography


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3 Rorty, 1991a, p. 23.
5 Rorty came to lament that ‘I now regret ever having used this term’. Rorty, ‘Thugs and Theorists’, p. 578, n. 23. See also Richard Rorty, *Truth, Politics and “Post-modernism”: the Spinoza Lectures* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1997), p. 13, where Rorty says that the term has been ‘ruined by over-use’.
6 Rorty later claimed that his self-description as a ‘postmodern bourgeois liberal’ was ‘supposed to be a joke. I thought it was a cute oxymoron – but no one else seemed to think it was funny’ (Rorty, 1995, p. 64).
8 Geuss, 2008, p. 94.
9 Ramberg, 1993, p. 244.
13 Shapiro, 1990, p. 55.
16 Rorty, 1989, p. 22.
17 Midgley, 2018, p. 15.
18 Talisse, 2005, p. 72.
24 Habermas 1987: 7, emphasis in original.
25 McCarthy, p. 649.
26 CIS, p. 60.
27 Habermas, 2000, 41.
29 Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 46.
31 Rorty, ‘Reply to Habermas’, p. 60.

Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, p. 156, emphasis in original.

Wolin, p. 152. Wolin assures us that ‘orthodox believers in old-style metaphysics are today few and far between’ (p. 152), but goes on to claim that every day practices ‘would literally collapse were they to be suddenly deprived of the basic assumption of metaphysical realism – the existence of an independently existing, external world’ (p. 154, emphasis in original). Here Wolin offers another instance of the familiar Habermasian evasion. For, as Rorty remarks, ‘if all it takes to be a realist is to grant that “human practices and languages are conditioned by determinate features of the world”, then I certainly count as a realist’.

Richard Rorty, ‘Response to Kate Soper’, in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 130 – 133 at 130. So does everybody else. To be a realist is to say more than this, that there is a way that the world really is which lies behind our various attempts to cope with it, and which determines the accuracy of these different attempts. Realism is a form of representationalism, the view that the world might be represented in its own terms. Wolin would presumably deny that he is a representationalist, but if so his comment about ‘an independently existing, external world’ is trivial.

Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn, p. 52.

Reply to Habermas, p. 58. The context-dependence of these practices is illustrated in Wolin’s chapter. Over the course of twenty pages, Wolin describes Rorty ‘as a self-satisfied, ethnocentric Westerner’ (p. 153), ‘a prisoner of his own epistemological cynicism’ (p. 156), that his thought risks ‘shallow narcissism’, that ‘its credo is a pathetic and timorous hedonism’, that his work is ‘teeming with dinner-party metaphors’ (p. 158), and that he ‘has very little to say to us apart from a timorous reaffirmation of the basic tenets of bourgeois liberalism’ (p. 160). Of the very little that Wolin thinks Rorty does say to us, it amounts only to ‘the resignation of the traditional philosophical skeptic who wears his epistemological perplexity like a scout merit badge’ (p. 160), a ‘complacent contextualism’ (p. 161), a ‘parochialism [which] risks both arrogance and moral complacency’ (p. 162), ‘an elaborate exercise in bad faith’ (p. 164), ‘a vindication of moral complacency’ (p. 165). Lest the reader have missed the point, Wolin concludes that Rorty’s is an ‘attempt to reduce philosophy to a drawing-room pastime, to the civilized pursuit of aesthetic frivolity’ (p. 166).

Wolin, p. 152.

Indeed, Rorty suggests that normative philosophy is itself a local practice, and that ‘the temptation to believe that [social practice] is ... structured [around what McCarthy calls “transcultural notions of validity”] is just a professional deformation of us philosophy professors’. Rorty, ‘Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy’, p. 635.

Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30. In a footnote placed at the end of his sentence asserting that Rorty ‘freely embraces’ relativism, Wolin notes that Rorty consistently seeks to show that he is not a relativist and that his position amounts to *ethnocentrism*. Wolin claims that ethnocentrism amounts to cultural relativism, but it is important for Rorty to deny this, for the reason that the latter renders the former impossible.

Wolin, p. 159, emphasis in original.

Oakes, 1996, p. 82.

43 Rorty, 1999, p. 73.
44 Rorty, 1991b, p. 15.
47 Center for Responsive Politics, ‘Most expensive midterm ever: Cost of 2018 election surpasses $5.7 billion’.
50 Cutrofello, 1993, p. 140.
52 Ramberg, 2000, p. 244.
54 Rorty, 1999, p. 239.
55 Rorty, 2016, p. 11.
56 Holmes, 1993, xiv-xv.