

The Philosopher of Hope and Social Justice

by Drucilla Cornell

Richard Rorty, one of this country's most influential public intellectuals, died last fall after a battle with cancer. When we lost Rorty we lost a great American. Rorty would be proud to be called a great American because he was an avid defender of one version of the American dream. The America that Rorty was proud of was the America of egalitarian ideals like public education. His America was the America of working men and women of the union movement, who not only fought to unionize the great industries of auto and steel in the CIO but also struggled for progressive legislation like social security and worker's compensation. His was the American dream that gave everyone his or her shot to realize their dreams without being bogged down by entrenched class hierarchies. For Rorty, the egalitarian spirit also infused the movements of Afro-Americans for civil right and the feminist movement that insisted on the rights of women. His was not the Horatio Alger American dream, the dream that anyone can be a rich capitalist no matter how poor their beginnings. It was the America of the CIO, of John Lewis, of Martin Luther King, of Katharine Mackinnon, who fought for sexual harassment to be recognized as a matter of gender equality, and of John Dewey, his favorite American philosopher. These were his prophets precisely because they fought to realize the egalitarian ideals of his version of the American dream. Rorty was proud to be part of this America and he promoted this egalitarian version of the American dream in all of his later writings.

Richard Rorty proudly called himself an American pragmatist in the style of John Dewey who, he believed, lived up to the great demand on the philosopher proclaimed by Marx. The point of philosophy was to change the world, to advocate progress rather than just sit back and engage in arcane debates about the nature of reality. He admired Dewey as much for his battle to win public education for the working man and woman as for his philosophical writings. It wasn't just what Dewey wrote, but what he did and what he fought for that made him one of Rorty's prophets.

But Rorty was not always a pragmatist, even though he grew up in a progressive family where Dewey was a frequent guest for dinner. Both of Rorty's parents were progressives. Rorty's mother was involved in the labor movement. Unionists and progressives were part and parcel of his childhood and he grew up listening to the debates about how America should realize her egalitarian ideals. But he went off to the University of Chicago at the age of 16 to enter the world of analytic philosophy. What he was to later call arcane debates on the nature of reality and how we could know

what that reality was dominated philosophy departments during his years as a student and later as a young philosopher teaching at Princeton University. Rorty became increasingly dissatisfied with this way of doing philosophy in the late 1970s. He started to question the whole analytic philosophy enterprise.

His re-thinking of philosophy and what it should be culminated in his classic study *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. He carefully criticized the actual work of philosophers who were, to his mind, obsessed with the question of how the mind comes to know reality and how we can develop tests for objective truth when we make claims to know that reality. In other words, he critiqued the major thinkers of what is called the philosophy of the mind, a project that dominated the philosophical circles of the late 70's and still plays a dominant role in many of the elite philosophy departments. His book, as he often mentioned, went over like a lead balloon in most philosophy departments precisely because it challenged the hegemonic idea of what philosophy is.

Hegemony is an idea developed by the Marxist philosopher and socialist activist Antonio Gramsci. The basic idea of hegemony is that certain ideas become identified as just the way the world is and any challenges to the dominant ideas of philosophy are simply wrong or worse yet ridiculous. In analytic philosophy, the philosophy of mind wasn't just one of many ways of doing philosophy; it was what philosophy was and anyone who said other wise wasn't a philosopher at all. At the end of his book Rorty defended philosophy as really being about hermeneutics – a way of interpreting the world that was always ethical and political. And he argued that this was what philosophy should self consciously be about: interpreting the world so as to make it a better place. Yes, this way of thinking about philosophy has a Marxist ring. But Rorty himself was never a Marxist, even though he respected Marx as a philosopher and said so. Rorty's book was attacked as not being philosophy at all. But Rorty stood up for his critique of the philosophy of mind and indeed his advocacy of a different way of doing philosophy. Ultimately, he left Princeton to join the literature department at the University of Virginia. He ended his illustrious career as a professor emeritus at Stanford.

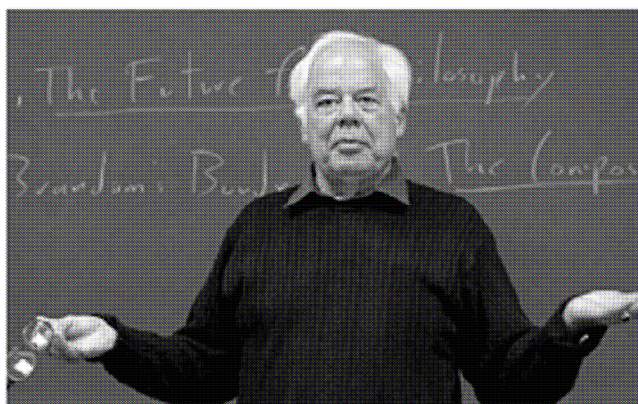
Although *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was not a hit in philosophy departments, it made Rorty famous. He took his life as a public intellectual seriously precisely because he felt there was a place for philosophy as long as it understood itself to be offering ethical interpretations about our shared world and how it should be. He read and took seriously philosophers who were completely

disregarded in American academic philosophical circles such as Hegel and Heidegger and, of course, Marx. He read and defended the French philosopher Jacques Derrida for offering us a powerful romantic version of the world: that we are not caught up in a dead world of known objects but a living reality that could always be changed because it could be deconstructed. He kept up his battle that different ways of doing philosophy should not simply be kicked out of philosophy departments, condemned as “not philosophy,” “not hard nosed,” but some airhead dreamy project that had no academic credibility. He credited Heidegger with teaching him that philosophy had no credibility. He also took seriously Heidegger’s critique of technology – a critique Rorty believed had to be taken seriously as our planet has become increasingly threatened by our own endless scientific “progress” Due to his role in defending philosophers who had been thrown out of the canon, he remained an important gadfly in American philosophy even though he never institutionally returned to a philosophy department.

Rorty shared a certain brand of Hegel’s optimism. Rorty did believe that we as a species had progressed even as he took Heidegger’s warnings about technology seriously. For Hegel, world history is about the common human struggle for freedom and Hegel believed that the modern European state represented the culmination of that struggle and realized at least on the level of the idea the actual of that freedom. Of course, Marx didn’t think that the German state with all of its class hierarchies represented the last word on freedom! Neither did Rorty. But Rorty, like Hegel, believed in progress and that America itself was a sign of that progress towards much greater egalitarianism than could be found in the German state of Hegel’s day. But what he shared with Hegel was his belief that progress was an actuality and therefore we could reasonably hope that progress would continue to take place.

If I have a criticism of Rorty it is that his optimism and hopefulness often made him take too lightly the profound criticisms of Eurocentrism and indeed of American imperialist politics. As I wrote earlier, he always kept the America of egalitarian ideals and the struggles of actual working men and women at the heart of his vision. That didn’t mean he wasn’t a critic of the Vietnam war, because he certainly was. But his profound Americanism kept him from accepting the more searing critiques of the American empire as he felt these often turned people against what was best in the U.S. Dewey always remained his example of how to do philosophy and how to defend and fight for what was best in the egalitarianism of the United States. Of course, Rorty believed that there was always more to be done. He was a progressive in the best sense of the word.

When I asked Rorty if he would be willing to join us as a member of the advisory board of the Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy and its journal, *Regional Labor Review*, he was proud to accept. He felt the work of the journal was exactly the kind of work that needed to be done to promote the interests of working-class men and women. To provide necessary critiques of anti-worker legislation, yes. But also to tell stories of inspiring



*Richard Rorty lecturing at Stanford [4/7/2005;
photo credit: Linda A. Cicero / Stanford News Service]*

examples of workers’ struggles. Rorty believed that our prophets were often ordinary men and women fighting for their rights in communities and workplaces and that we needed to continue to be inspired by those who on a daily basis fight to make the world, and particularly America, a better place. He was a philosopher of hope until the end. And in this too he went against the grain of a growing cynicism about meaningful social change among certain parts of the American academy. He believed that if we could stick in there and fight together for the ideals that America has stood for we could make this country a place where his version of the American dream could become ever closer to reality. Rorty was a brilliant, brave and compassionate man who never lost sight of what was the true heart of America-working class men and women. He will be sorely missed.

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