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Richard Rorty. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. 159 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00311-8.

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Richard Rorty is a philosopher and professor of humanities at the University of Virginia and a grandson of Walter Rauschenbusch, an influential exponent of the Protestant Social Gospel of the early twentieth century. He took as his theme for the William E. Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization, delivered at Harvard in 1997, the somber condition of the Left in contemporary America and what can be done about it. A clue to the book's central argument is its dedication to two distinguished and deceased members of the American Left—Irving Howe, the literary critic and co-founder of the socialist magazine *Dissent*, and A. Phillip Randolph Jr., the socialist president of the Sleeping Car Porters, an all-black union. These two men symbolize for Rorty that cooperation between middle-class intellectuals on the one hand and the working class and the labor movement on the other, which once made the Left into a force to be reckoned with on the American political scene. In this thin book, Rorty explains why this entente was sundered and how it can be restored. Absent this, he concludes, the Left will remain ineffective during an era when even putative liberal Presidents such as Clinton find it necessary to display their conservative credentials.

Rorty dates the split between the Left's intelligentsia and the labor movement to the 1960s, when the intelligentsia became fascinated with the cultural politics of gender, race, and sex and came to believe that the working class and labor unions were reactionary and part of the enemy camp. Rorty is certainly correct that the average union member had little sympathy with the flower children or the Woodstock generation, and that their disdain for philosophies of individual and group liberation was a major reason why they became known as "Reagan Democrats." Nor was the working class part of the "hate

America" clique, that was spawned by the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement. If America was irredeemably evil, as many left-wing intellectuals concluded, then it became impossible to say anything good about the Johnson administration's plans for an expanded welfare state. They preferred to contemplate the possibilities for a political revolution fomented on the campus or to retreat into a personalized world of drugs, sex, and rock and roll. In either case leftists moved from being activists to spectators.

The central assumption of left-wing historians such as Rorty is that the Left has logic on its side and that under normal conditions should govern. The historian's task is to explain why the glass of American leftism is half empty, never half full. He resembles a doctor seeking to discover and destroy the germs that have invaded his sick patient's formerly healthy body. Thus Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has proposed a cyclical interpretation of American politics, which asserts that periods of activist government, such as during the 1930s and early 1960s, are inevitably followed by periods of conservative lassitude. If for Schlesinger the return to left-wing dominance requires that the body politic be purged of its physical exhaustion, for Rorty it requires the American Left eradicate its fascination with cultural politics. And who belongs to this cultural Left? Those who think "more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed" (p. 77). The reformist Left, by contrast "thinks more about laws that need to be passed than about a culture than needs to be changed" (p. 78).

Historians who don't share Rorty's (and Schlesinger's) political commitments, however, will ap-

proach the matter differently. They refuse to join the dominant historiography of American radicalism, which continues to ask the question posed early in the twentieth century by the German sociologist Werner Sombart, “why is there no socialism in the United States.” They believe that, in contrast to the assumption behind Sombart’s query, it is not the Left’s failures which are deviant and in need of explanation but its successes. From their perspective, the popular rejection of the Left makes perfectly good sense, and they prefer to wonder why, in the face of the Left’s manifest failures, there should have been any socialism at all in America. Why does the Left continue to appeal to segments of the American population? Why is the glass of the American Left half full rather than half empty?

Are cultural politics, as Rorty believes, the source of the American Left’s current difficulties? Will American intellectuals renounce their pessimism regarding America and once again ally with the working class? Will they leave their hallowed halls of ivy and the writing of their books in order to reinvigorate the tradition of democratic labor? There is nothing on the political horizon indicating that this will in fact occur. Instead of working to insure that democratic institutions serve social justice, Rorty laments, leftists now devote energy to “discussing topics as remote from the country’s need as were [Henry] Adams’ musing on the Virgin and the Dynamo. The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms ... The American civic religion seems to them narrow-minded and obsolete nationalism” (pp. 14-15).

This alienation from reformist politics is particularly rife in academia. A typical graduate from an American university, Rorty says, “may well emerge from college less convinced that her country has as future than when she entered. She may also be less inclined to think that political initiatives can create such a future. The spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action, may already have entered such a student’s soul” (p. 11).

In three chapters and two appendixes, Rorty calls

upon the Left to reject this spirit of detached spectatorship and mocking, to become once again the party of hope that it was during the Progressive era of his grandfather. Certainly Rorty is correct that the Left, if it is to have any influence, must purge itself of the “hate America” mentality, its tendency to focus on apocalyptic goals such as participatory democracy and the destruction of capitalism rather than piecemeal reforms, and its disaffection from the vision of democratic life which had animated its ideological precursors such as Walt Whitman, Herbert Croly, and John Dewey. Absent this, we will continue to have a Left which speaks to cultural discontents, but has no role in American politics. This would be tragic both for the Left and the nation.

An America transformed by the politically reinvigorated Left envisaged by Rorty would be a secular republic with a passion for social justice, economic egalitarianism, and the elimination of all artificial social distinctions. Those who disagree with this vision will not be persuaded by Rorty’s arguments, bolstered as they are by leftist clichés. Thus he questions whether conservative intellectuals deserve to be called intellectuals at all since the essence of an intellectual is to speak out on “issues of social justice” (p. 82); claims that since the Vietnam War America has been “proletarianizing its bourgeoisie” (p. 83); argues that, contrary to the statistics on home ownership, it is now more difficult to own a house than in 1973; and at a time when average family income is approximately \$38,000 per year, wonders whether the average family will ever be able to earn more than \$30,000 a year. *Achieving Our Country* is more than an analysis of the status of the Left in today’s America. It is also an example of the reasons for its current malaise, and why many are unable to take the Left seriously. The future of America is too important to be left to the philosophers.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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