



Samuel Abrahám, Richard Rorty

Without illusion, but with conviction

The pragmatism of Richard Rorty

"The goal of establishing a world federation, a 'Parliament of Mankind', seemed much more realistic fifty years ago than it does now. Then it was thought that the United Nations might evolve into something like a world government. Now nobody has this dream, even though the need for such a government has grown much more urgent", says Richard Rorty in this 1999 interview.

Samuel Abrahám: Dear Professor Rorty, Slovakia, as you surely know, has got rid of its chief "snake-oil-salesman," Vladimír Mečiar, an event which I consider to be one of the few positive signs on the otherwise troubled surface of this planet. Despite the millions of crowns spent by the government in the pre-election campaign, and despite the demagoguery and threats issued by the Mečiar government, the great majority of Slovaks said "NO" to populism and nationalism.

If ever there was a proud moment in our history, then surely this is it. Inevitably, we are now in for some boring if nasty politics, nevertheless, even "politics as usual" is a move in the right direction. More than the efforts of particular politicians, the third sector and the independent media deserve much of the credit for the election outcome — suggesting, yet again, that perhaps all positive historical shifts come down to the determination of a few thousand individuals deciding that they have nothing to lose. (A sad footnote to this observation is that, in the past, such brave minorities were — more often than not — crushed.)

I did not have a chance to get hold of your latest book, *Achieving our Country*, but from what I have read about it, you continue to deal with the idea that you laid out so forcefully in your lecture in Bratislava during the conference about the role of intellectuals.

In that lecture, instead of searching for some special role or destiny of intellectuals, you spoke about the seemingly insoluble problems of the Blacks in the inner city ghettos of the USA. You saw no point in talking about those (intellectuals) who have neither the resources nor perhaps even the will to resolve this continuing disaster. You seemed to be fed up with the intellectuals of today, whether of the right or the left, who are preoccupied with the culture wars in the tenure trenches of academia or are choosing causes, those they feel really worth defending, like housepets...

I might be quite wrong about your current position, but reading the article *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids* and combining this with my knowledge of your other works and others' reviews about your recent books, this is the impression that I have.

Still, we would not want to misrepresent your views in any way. If you would be so kind as to clarify this issue for us, we would be very appreciative.

First of all, the division between the developed and developing world is growing, as is the gap between rich and poor in the West and in the East. As the intellectual left has lost much of its enthusiasm and energy to tackle this issue, it has become increasingly hard to distinguish between the political left and the political centre–right. Why is today's left — academic and political — so detached from the problems of the real world?

Richard Rorty: I suspect that the left has excellent, realistic reasons for discouragement. Fifty years ago leftists in the West thought that they knew how utopia could be achieved, and how democracy and technology could be exported from the First World to the rest of the globe. But since then the population bomb has exploded, and the environment has been ravaged. Nobody now has any clear idea how to stop population growth in the Third World, nor how to stop the exploitation of the remaining natural resources of the planet in a way that will preserve the forests and the seas for our grandchildren.

The goal of establishing a world federation, a "Parliament of Mankind", seemed much more realistic fifty years ago than it does now. Then it was thought that the United Nations might evolve into something like a world government. Now nobody has this dream, even though the need for such a government has grown much more urgent. For only such a government could prevent dictators like Milosevic from fomenting genocide, prevent speculators from wrecking the global financial structure through the use of tax havens and unregulated investment markets, save the ozone layer, or find out where all the nuclear missiles are.

A left needs hope, and realistic hope is very difficult these days. This may explain why the left has divided into quasi–centrist reformists, on the one hand people who have no solutions to the big long–term problems but still feel able to do something about the little short–term ones, and cynics on the other. The cynics wax philosophical and world–historical about the hopelessness of our situation, and think that by doing so they are being more interestingly and usefully leftist than the reformers.

But philosophical reflections on "the nature of technological civilization" or "the nature of the postmodern era" are no substitute for leftist politics. Concrete, reformist, leftist initiatives may not help with the long–term problems, but there is a tiny chance that they might. Because of this tiny chance, we need to support Blair over the Conservatives, Clinton over the Republicans, Schröder over the CDU, and so on. Centrists they may be, but at least they are aware of the long–term problems.

The left will probably never again think that it has a single package, wholesale solution to the world's problems, a solution such as "the end of capitalism". So no future left will have the elan of the old revolutionary left. This is not to say that revolution may still not be needed in some countries (Myanmar and Zaire, for example). It is only to say that in the First World the left is going to have to content itself with working within the framework of constitutional democracy, which means taking one tiny step at a time. This prospect dampens the spirits of youthful idealists, but it is the only prospect we have.

SA: A friend of mine — a philosopher who, as a young man, left Hungary in 1956 for Canada and became first a Communist, then a Leftist and is now an admirer of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche — once told me that he felt no compassion, whatsoever, towards those who are suffering but whom he does not know personally. That was his response to — or rather his defence against — the intrusion of CNN images of violence into our living rooms. His position has a certain logic; for a sensible human being to internalize every image of suffering shown on TV would inevitably lead to some form of madness. At the same time, the coldness of this type of rationalization might easily lead to complacency, willful ignorance and cynicism, even while a person may yet insist that he or she still adheres to leftist ideals. How do you perceive or manage to cope with this maddening problem of mass suffering that not only surrounds us but is beamed at us from the TV every day?

RR: The Christian commandment that all men and women be treated as brothers and sisters is psychologically impossible to carry out if it means that there should be no difference in our reaction to the sufferings of our intimates and to those of people we shall never meet. We all have a system of priorities: we would, if forced to choose, sacrifice the welfare of certain people (distant acquaintances) to that of other people (family and close friends). Our sense of community will always be exclusionary, to some degree or other. When things are tough the circle of those for whom we can feel concern, narrows. When things are going well — when we have enough money and freedom — it expands.

The increased prosperity of the middle class of the industrialized nations has produced a considerable expansion of this circle. Well-off Americans send checks totalling millions of dollars, typically, in contributions ranging from \$10 to \$100 apiece, whenever there is a famine in Bangladesh or an earthquake in Guatemala. They would not have done this a century ago. A sense of global community has developed gradually in the course of the last hundred years. If we have a few decades of peace and prosperity left, it may well continue to grow.

Another factor which might bring about a sense of global community is intermarriage. To paraphrase Warren Beatty, we may all keep on making love to more and more different sorts of people until all the worlds' babies are born the same color. But even unimaginably great prosperity and unimaginably widespread intermarriage will not change the fact that, when a choice has to be made when there is not enough to go around we will discriminate in favor of those we already know and love. We shall turn off our TV sets when they tell us about the misery of strangers.

SA: A conference called Forum 2000 was held in Prague in October 1998 under the auspices of Václav Havel. A number of interesting presentations were given on various topics, yet very little by way of original ideas emerged to deal with the problems of the future. Quite often, the buzzword Globalization was variously interpreted and a number of intellectuals talked about the need for regulating global financial markets(!). Although religious leaders talked mostly in general terms about the need for love and caring, their perception and analysis was yet the most sober and succinct. In a way, it was understandable — they talked about human beings and the common humanity they have shared for thousands of years. The only difference seems to be that the people of today possess the tools with which they can destroy civilization many times over. How do you, as a concerned human being, and as a thinker who realizes that the "saving power" that Heidegger talks about is nowhere in

sight (and perhaps for the better?), cope with the imminent disasters of human conflict that the people of today apparently cannot or will not stop?

RR: I don't have much to say to this that does not repeat what I said in response to the first question. But I can at least remark that people nowadays not only have the tools to destroy civilization many times over, they also have the tools which might, just possibly if very improbably, save civilization.

The same technology which has made it possible to blow ourselves up or pollute ourselves to death could, just conceivably, be used by the government of a world federation to save us. I would not sneer at a discussion of how to regulate global financial markets; since I suspect George Soros might agree with me that the lack of such regulation is one of our biggest current problems and that this lack may lead to a global economic depression which will make the 1930s look like a picnic, and which may bring about the end of the surviving democratic governments.

I have nothing against universal love, spiritual renewal, the saving power, and all that sort of thing. But I don't know how to do anything to promote any of these things. I do, on the other hand, have some vague ideas about how we might regulate global financial markets. So I prefer to think about the latter sort of topic rather than the former.

SA: It is a strange thing. The majority of intellectuals in central Europe today are centre-rightists who believe in the omnipotence of the market economy — a solution for every pain, the right way to world prosperity. A functioning market economy would help indeed, but the faith paid to this theoretical formula leaves me aghast. One reason — as you mentioned during your Bratislava lecture in 1996 — for the stubborn problem of poverty among inner-city American Blacks was that the market has produced no economic interest in addressing that problem. This minority represent an economically insignificant segment of the population, and the surrounding economy is so big and robust that their poverty does not make any difference to the bigger picture. This state of affairs is the price paid in America for its particular way of coping — or ignoring — the inner tension that exists in even the most just liberal democracy: that between political and economic inequality. Do you think there is a message here for central European intellectuals?

RR: A market economy is great for creating a middle class, but it can hardly be relied upon to bourgeoisify the entire working class. When I was young, I thought that my own country would in fact succeed in doing the latter. But since 1973 the gap between the middle class and the poor in the US has grown. It has become clear that much of the population of my country is simply surplus to its economic requirements. I would hope that intellectuals in Central Europe and elsewhere would learn from the example of the recent history of the US.

One lesson to be learned is that the rich can, and will, buy up a democratic government behind the back of the voters. This is what has happened in my country: our legislators are bribed to ignore the needs of everybody except those who are already comfortably off.

Revulsion against Communism has led to the idea that you do not need a welfare state to protect the poor against the operations of the market. Everything that has happened in America since the early 1970s shows how misguided that idea is. The more robust a market economy grows, the more

important it is for the least well-off people to organize and vote for their own interests.

Unfortunately, the poor in my country neither organize nor go to the polls. I hope the voters of Slovakia will have more sense, and their rejection of Meciar suggests that they may well have.

Published 1999-03-24
Original in English
Contribution by Kritika & Kontext
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