

Limits of the Liberal Utopia: Žižek as a Critic of Rorty

by

Gregory A. Slack

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
December 2014

© Copyright by Gregory A. Slack, 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Prologue.....	1
Last Men and Working Men.....	3
The Truth Is Out There.....	12
Hunting History.....	23
Chapter Two	30
How Do You Like Your Capitalism?.....	30
Revisionism Then and Now.....	35
Marxism? What Is It Good For? Absolutely Something!.....	43
Retrieving Marx.....	49
Lenin’s Marx: The Politics of Truth.....	56
Chapter Three	61
Philosophy as Actual Politics.....	61
Rorty as Prophet and Profiteer.....	69
Essentialize This.....	77
Chapter Four: Conclusion	88
The Public Use of Dialectical Reason.....	88
Hegel Young and Old.....	92
Revolution at the Gates.....	97
Final Thoughts.....	100
Bibliography	102

Abstract

This essay takes as its starting point the belief that Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek are two of the most popular, accessible and important recent philosophers writing on the Left. Its ultimate aim is to bring their texts – with the help of some mediators – into explicit dialogue. I hope to demonstrate in the process that – on the whole and all things considered – with Žižek’s help we can see that Rorty’s philosophy is a ladder that, once surmounted, we ought to throw away. But the implication is that we can then throw away Žižek’s ladder as well, for he is at his best as a critic of Rortian positions. The reader will find – to their horror, no doubt – that what remains when the dust has settled is none other than the ‘spectres of Marx’: the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and other faithful 20th-century Marxists, all awaiting not – as one might have expected – their burial, but their transubstantiation.

Chapter One: Introduction

Prologue

This essay takes as its starting point the belief that Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek are two of the most popular, accessible and important recent philosophers writing on the Left. Its ultimate aim is to bring their texts – with the help of some mediators – into explicit dialogue. I hope to demonstrate in the process that – on the whole and all things considered – with Žižek’s help we can see that Rorty’s philosophy is a ladder that, once surmounted, we ought to throw away. But the implication is that we can then throw away Žižek’s ladder as well, for he is at his best as a critic of Rortian positions. The reader will find – to their horror, no doubt – that what remains when the dust has settled is none other than the ‘spectres of Marx’: the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and other faithful 20th-century Marxists, all awaiting not – as one might have expected – their burial, but their transubstantiation.

Lenin gives a kind of disclaimer at the outset of his famous essay on “The State and Revolution”: “...in view of the incredibly widespread nature of the distortions of Marxism, our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx on the state. For this purpose it will be necessary to quote at length from the works of Marx and Engels. Of course, long quotations will make the text cumbersome and will not help to make it popular reading, but we cannot possibly avoid them” (272). The essay you are about to read does not deal with Marx’s views on the state. But, *mutatis mutandis*, Lenin’s warning about long quotations is apt. In quoting Rorty, Žižek, and others at length here I

hope to conjure up a productive agonistic dialogue – suitably weighted in favour of positions I unequivocally endorse, of course – as if the various characters I invoke were speaking to one another directly. I feel that limiting the mediation that occurs with paraphrases, especially when most of the thinkers I quote are so lucid and straightforward, and their prose styles so beautifully biting, will make things as vibrant and clear as possible, even if cumbersome and unpopular.

In chapter one I lay out what I take to be the salient similarities and the ultimate difference between Rorty and Žižek, and how this difference frames their respective projects. Without giving too much away, I will just say that everything hinges on Truth and History.

Chapter two pits Rorty’s pragmatic liberalism against Žižek’s revolutionary Marxism on some of the recent history of capitalism and politics; with the aim of showing that Rorty’s position is hopelessly inadequate for understanding these phenomena. In doing so I attempt to restore Marx to his rightful pride of place in the philosophical canon, while at the same time taking Žižek’s advice that if we do not want him to collect too much dust there we will need to put Lenin beside him.

Chapter three examines how Rorty’s linguistic historicism buoys his liberalism, but is nonetheless insufficient for screening off those ‘inconvenient truths’ that undermine the liberal order Rorty takes for granted. As a result, Rorty is forced to recognize these truths but in a distorted way, so that he deprives himself of the understanding that would allow him a vision of the future beyond the one steeped in catastrophe. Finally, I put

Rorty on Žižek’s couch and try to get him to face up to his own essentializing biases.

In the fourth and final chapter, I employ Žižek’s take on the German Idealist tradition to show that another world is indeed possible, if only we force ourselves to think dialectically and embrace the speculative identity of the two truly ‘universal’ classes that are emerging in our globalized world.

Last Men and Working Men

Slavoj Žižek can be read as one of Richard Rorty’s harshest critics, even if most of the criticism is only implicit. Žižek discusses Rorty only a handful of times in his dozens of published works, and the discussion is always brief, bordering on dismissive. But despite the dearth of explicit engagement with Rorty’s views, there are signposts visible on almost every page of Žižek’s polemics that point in Rorty’s direction. And although Rorty never got around to paying Žižek much attention (beyond cursory refutations in a couple of telling footnotes), it’s no secret that Žižek fits the figure of the ‘Radical’ committed to a tradition of “German *Ideologiekritik*” (Rorty, *Truth and Progress* 324) – one of Rorty’s favorite whipping boys – to a tee. The latter is characterized by Rorty as gripped by “the ‘German’ longing for some destiny higher than that of Nietzsche’s ‘last men’” rather than “the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ desire to avoid the infliction of unnecessary pain and humiliation” (Rorty, *Truth* 324).

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty declares that “One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal. A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a

postreligious one, and equally desirable” (Rorty, *Contingency* xv-xvi). He helpfully defines his senses of liberal and ironist:

I borrow my definition of “liberal” from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use “ironist” to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease. (Rorty, *Contingency* xv)

This liberal utopia would be one in which “the desire for ‘radical’ social theory [was] absent” (Rorty, *Truth* 323). Further, it would be a society consisting of an “endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth” (Rorty, *Contingency* xvi). Rorty says of his pragmatist ilk and the liberal utopia they strive to realize, “If we have an Idea (in the capitalized Kantian sense) in mind, it is that of Tolerance rather than Emancipation” (Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 213).

Compare this liberal dream with Žižek’s *Ideologiekritik* – for Žižek, Rorty is “the great contemporary liberal *par excellence*” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 104) and the first chapter of *Living in the End Times* is entitled “Denial: The Liberal Utopia” (since, for Žižek, ideology is nearly all-pervasive, and because liberalism is more or less

the rallying cry of the powers that be, the Liberal Utopia is by definition an ‘ideological obfuscation’). Aligning himself both with St. Paul and the former Maoist Alain Badiou, Žižek declares:

“Our struggle is not against actual corrupt individuals, but against those in power in general, against their authority, against the global order and the ideological mystification which sustains it.” To engage in this struggle means to endorse Badiou’s formula *mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désêtre*: better to take the risk and engage in fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in catastrophe, than to vegetate in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called the “last men.” What Badiou rejects is thus the liberal ideology of victimhood, with its reduction of politics to a program of avoiding the worst, to renouncing all positive projects and pursuing the least bad option. Not least since, as Arthur Feldman, a Viennese Jewish writer, bitterly noted: the price we usually pay for survival is our lives. (Žižek, *Living in the End Times* xv)

Attacking the prevalent notion of tolerance as an example of pure ideological mystification (rather than an obvious good to be pursued), Žižek bellows:

Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation, or injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, or even armed struggle? The source of this culturalization is defeat, the failure of directly political solutions such as the social-democratic welfare state or various socialist projects: “tolerance” has become their post-political *ersatz*... “Ideology” is, in this precise sense, a notion which, while designating a real problem, blurs a crucial line of separation. (Žižek, *End Times* 5)

So, with his talk of the Liberal Utopia (and its accompanying defining value of Tolerance) as ideology, his commitment to obscurely metaphysical-sounding notions like Truth-Event, the importance he attaches to emancipation, and his association of Rorty's negative project of avoiding the infliction of unnecessary pain and humiliation with Nietzsche's "last men", Žižek seems to situate himself in stark opposition to just about everything Rorty stands for. But despite these loud differences, there are subtle similarities between the two men that make it difficult getting straight the precise practical and theoretical relations they bear to one another.

We might begin by simply noting the way they both take it as a sign that they are 'on the right track' that they are attacked from both the political right and left: "If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one which is attacked with equal vigour from the political right and the political left, then I am in good shape" (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* 3); "When, in 1948, Sartre saw that he was likely to be maligned by both sides in the Cold War, he wrote: 'if that were to happen, it would prove only one thing: either that I am very clumsy, or that I am on the right road.' As it happens, this is how I often feel... So maybe, just maybe, I am on the right path, the path of fidelity to freedom" (Žižek, *End Times*, xiv). This latter quote from Žižek counter-intuitively echoes Rorty's own invocation of capital-F Freedom, and when Rorty laments that "critics from both ends of the political spectrum... suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everyone else" (Rorty, *Social Hope*

5), it would not be a stretch to imagine Žižek making a similar complaint.

The key factor that might be responsible for their shared experience of full-spectrum scorn is their *seemingly* mutual rejection of metaphysical guarantors of meaning and their acknowledgement of radical historical contingency. Rorty groups these metaphysical guarantors under the heading of Something Larger, while Žižek refers to them as so many manifestations of an ideological mechanism known (in Lacanian terms) as the ‘big Other’. For instance, Rorty criticizes Habermas’ adherence to the notion of ‘universal validity’ on the ground that it is

a species of the same temptation that made Plato, Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger try for affiliation or incarnation – for a relation to something larger than themselves and the contingent circumstances in which they find themselves (e.g., the Good, God, the Moral Law, the Will to Power, Being)...On my view, Humanity and Critical Reason are (like God, the Good, the Subject, Language, *Ereignis* [Event for Heidegger], and *différance*) just more dubious candidates for this position of Something Larger. (Rorty, *Truth* 321) ¹

¹ And yet, in a videotaped discussion with Davidson, Rorty – after praising Davidson for the interesting things he and his followers have done in analytic philosophy – reveals his desire for an ideological cover from some figure of the ‘big Other’: “...and yet, what I want to do is sort of relate these things [Davidson and others have done] to, you know, some great big something or other” – Davidson: “yeah” – R: “and that’s what I can’t do and that’s what sometimes makes me feel, um...” – D: “why do you think it should be related to some great big something or other?” – R: “I’m a Romantic.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6DtYC9N8RM> (see 51:45-53:00). This can be linked to what Neil Gross calls Rorty’s “self-narrative...centred on the identity ‘leftist American patriot’” (*Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, 1) [translation: he’s a liberal with a guilty conscience who can’t bring himself to endorse any political project other than one led by the American Empire. A useful corrective for this malady comes from Eric Hobsbawm: “Those for whom a great human cause is central can be in a relationship of alliance or opposition with a state, but never of permanent identification. Even the rare case of young revolutionary states genuinely seeking to spread their universal message – France after 1792, Russia after 1917, but not, as it happens, George Washington’s

And Žižek criticizes Marxists who think we can count on the inevitability of Revolution for their (similar) adherence to the Something Larger of History that will do all the revolutionary work for them: “Waiting for someone else to do the job for us is a way of rationalizing our inactivity. But the trap to be avoided here is that of perverse self-instrumentalization: ‘we are the ones we have been waiting for’ does not mean that we have to discover how it is we are the agent predestined by fate (historical necessity) to perform the task – it means quite the opposite, namely that there is no big Other to rely on” (Žižek, *Tragedy* 154). But how do we reconcile these anti-metaphysical claims with the aforementioned adherence to Freedom and Tolerance (for Rorty), and the Truth-Event (for Žižek)?

Rorty has this to say about those “ungroundable desires” for which in previous eras philosophers sought to provide metaphysical justifications:

the pragmatist answer to the question Lyotard raises in “Universal history and cultural differences” – “Can we continue to organize the events which crowd in upon us from the human and nonhuman worlds with the help of the Idea of a universal history of humanity?” – is that we can and should, as long as the point of doing so is to lift our spirits through utopian fantasy, rather than to gird our loins with metaphysical weapons. We Deweyans have a story to tell about the progress of our species, a story whose later episodes emphasize how things have been getting better in the West during the last few centuries, and which concludes

isolationist America – is always short-lived. The default position of any state is to pursue its interests” (xiv-xv *On Empire: America, War, and Global Supremacy*).

with some suggestions about how they might become better still in the next few.
(Rorty, *Objectivity* 212)

So what we need if we are to advance the aims we derive from our “ungroundable desires” are powerful fantasies, rather than metaphysical justifications. For Rorty, although there may be no Something Larger in a strict metaphysical sense, there does seem to be an optimistic ‘hope’, of sorts, in a History construed as progressively realizing liberal-utilitarian-reformist values: “The ideal liberal community will be one in which respect for...particularity and idiosyncrasy is widespread, one in which the only sort of human liberty that is hoped for is Isaiah Berlin’s ‘negative liberty’ – being left alone” (Rorty, *Truth* 322). For Žižek, on the other hand, the faith is pessimistic – the existing liberal formula of “negative liberty” or ‘freedom from’ is inextricably tied up with a capitalist end-run on the very values of liberalism we do and ought to hold dear: “In contrast to classical Marxism where ‘history is on our side’ (the proletariat fulfils the predestined task of universal emancipation), in the contemporary constellation, the big Other is *against* us: left to itself, the inner thrust of our historical development leads to catastrophe, to apocalypse” (Žižek, *Tragedy* 154); “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its ‘four riders of the apocalypse’ are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw

materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions” (Žižek, *End Times* x); and, in an interview on BBC’s HardTalk (I paraphrase) – “Q: You’re a man who represents the very best of liberalism – an individual free-thinker, free to think whatever the hell he likes. A: My answer would be a Hegelian one. Precisely if we want, in the face of all these threats, to save what is the best in liberalism, we must move further. We will have to move further – otherwise, we are slowly approaching a new apartheid...” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vI7FMM21Qxg> – just the first minute). Žižek’s answer is pure paradox – we must transform or reject core liberal values if we are to rescue their ‘essence’ from the onslaught of capitalist expansion. But in what does this ‘moving further’ than liberalism consist?

We get a clear insight into Rorty’s relative conservatism when he characterizes his disagreement with the feminist-socialist philosopher Nancy Fraser:

I suspect my differences with Fraser are concrete and political rather than abstract and philosophical. She sees, and I do not see, attractive alternatives (more or less Marxist in shape) to such institutions as private ownership of the means of production and constitutional democracy, attractive alternatives to the traditional socio-democratic project of constructing an egalitarian welfare state within the context of these two basic institutions. (Rorty, “Feminism and Pragmatism” 11)

We have already seen that for Žižek, “the failure of directly political solutions such as the social-democratic welfare state” has brought about the post-political ersatz of discourses of ‘tolerance’. Unlike Rorty, who views the social-democratic welfare state project as the

only viable political project on offer, Žižek is convinced that adherence to this project can only entail its own dissolution. Like Fraser, Žižek hints at vaguely Marxist alternatives to this project, but ultimately he tends to emphasize the need for ‘something different’ rather than ‘anything specific’. Like Rorty, Žižek wants to emphasize the importance of “creative experimentation” (Žižek, *Tragedy* 155) in the fashioning of utopian fantasies, but unlike for Rorty this fantasizing must take place outside the more fundamental fantasy-frame of the liberal utopia itself. Because Rorty’s liberalism dictates that “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” he is understandably fearful of opening up the possibility of another Holocaust or Gulag by committing himself to any kind of ‘radical’ project of turning existing institutions in the West ‘upside-down.’ But Žižek’s speculative point is that we may be deluding ourselves with a false choice: it is not a matter of choosing between the banal but safe tradition of the Western liberal-democratic-social-welfare state and the exciting but risky wager of overthrowing these established institutions – the risk is the same in both cases. To Žižek, making the former choice is actually to count on the ‘big Other’, while making the latter one is to recognize that “the big Other is *against* us”. Insofar as it exists at all, the big Other just *is* partial, biased, class interest.

Of course Rorty would have no truck with such class-based analysis of social phenomena – Žižek is just like those “postmodernists [who] continue to indulge the bad habits characteristic of those Marxists who insist that morality is a matter of class interest, and then add that everybody has a moral obligation to identify with the interests of a particular class” (Rorty, “Feminism” 12). Rorty’s criticism seems to be that if all

moral positions are a by-product of class interests, it makes no sense to try to unite everyone on the basis of any moral position, because by definition the various class positions are incommensurable. But while it is surely true that there is this dimension of incommensurability, and thus that morality inevitably consists in the taking of sides in a (perhaps violent) struggle, this criticism misses the further element that one always has the choice (in Žižek's view, at least) to *voluntarily change one's class identification*: with the big Other against us, "what alone can prevent such calamity is, then, *pure voluntarism*, in other words, our free decision to act against historical necessity" (Žižek, *Tragedy* 154). But just *how could* one be brought to forsake the morality of one's own class? It seems to me that the answer to this question lies in Žižek's attempt to rehabilitate talk of Truth in the face of Rorty's attempt to deflate any theory of Truth.

The Truth Is Out There

In the first chapter of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, titled "The Contingency of Language", Rorty gives a version of his deflationary account of truth. He starts out by saying that the idealists were on the right track when they insisted that the world was a made mental product, rather than an antecedently existing thing with a determinate nature of its own. But they only went halfway in their destruction of 'intrinsic natures', reserving the study of 'the mind' – as a thing with a distinctive nature of its own – for the philosopher and his peculiar 'method': "This meant that only half of truth – the bottom, scientific half – was made. Higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy, was still a matter of discovery rather than creation" (4). Rorty insists that "What was

needed, and what the idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything – mind or matter, self or world – having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented” (4). They failed to imagine this perspective, he thinks, because they “confused the idea that nothing has such a nature with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatiotemporal world to exist” (4). The latter, Rorty seems to be implying, is idealism pure and simple, and neither he nor common sense will have any truck with it. By contrast, he wants “to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there” (4-5). We do not make the world, it is not our creation – common sense is right that “most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states” (5). On the other hand, *truth is not* ‘out there’: this “is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations” (5). This is because truth and falsity are simply *properties of sentences*: “Truth cannot be out there – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot” (5). If we take this approach to truth, “we shall not be tempted to confuse *the platitude that the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence true* with *the claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called ‘facts’*” (5 my emphases).

It’s here, however, where things get tricky. First of all, which of the two foregoing

statements is the platitude? Of course, because of the way that Rorty phrases these two conceptions of the world's relation to the truth of our claims about it, we are encouraged to think the former is the platitudinous one. For common sense certainly does not believe that "the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called facts" – the formulation is patently nonsensical. But neither does common sense think that 'the world causes us to be justified in believing certain sentences to be true' *for no good reason*. Indeed, frequently we believe sentences to be true because of the way the world is without *justification* even entering into it. But even when it does, common sense endorses Rorty's 'platitude' because it knows the real world consists of real things that we really interact with, and that we ourselves – our hands, brains, language, etc. – have all evolved as and in interaction with part of that reality. Rorty wants to preserve this intuition so as to not do violence to common sense, but he does so in a rather limited and paradoxical way.

He says that the problem for this kind of realism arises when it moves from matching *single sentences* to an external reality to entire *vocabularies*:

we often let the world decide the competition between alternative sentences (e.g., between 'Red wins' and 'Black wins' or between 'The butler did it' and 'The doctor did it'). In such cases, it is easy to run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some nonlinguistic state of the world is itself an example of truth, or that some such state 'makes a belief true' by 'corresponding' to it. (5)

At this point, it looks as though Rorty would be ready to admit that in such cases of single sentences – in suitably mundane contexts, it seems – we would be perfectly justified in holding some kind of correspondence theory of truth. “But”, he goes on,

it is not so easy when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes... When the notion of “description of the world” is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense. It becomes hard to think that that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. Attention... to the vocabularies in which sentences are formulated, rather than to individual sentences, makes us realize, for example, that the fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian. (5-6)

As before when Rorty implied that it would be nonsense to believe that what we say and think could be true because “the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called facts”, so here again he employs the same rhetorical exaggeration but now at the level of ‘vocabularies’ or ‘language games’ rather than merely sentences. For by characterizing a correspondence take on truth as saying things like “the world speaks Newtonian”, he makes it to sound absurd and counterintuitive. So he goes on: “The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that” (6). Notice where Rorty places all the

emphasis here: the world can cause us to hold beliefs, sure – but only after *we* have *programmed ourselves with a language*. And even then, it can only help us decide between relatively trivial *sentences* whether red or black won, or the doctor or the butler did it. This approach amounts to setting up a hard realism with its attendant correspondence take on truth as the ultimate nonsensical bogey to be avoided, and in its place installing what I can only describe as a social-subjectivist linguistic idealism.

We can bring out the substance of this accusation with an example provided by Michael Hymers in his defense of Rorty's account of truth:

It is true that gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies. But it has not always been true that gravity has influenced the motions of heavenly bodies. First, there was a time when there were no truths or falsehoods. Secondly, there was a time when there were many truths or falsehoods, but the statement "Gravity influences heavenly bodies" was— at best—a metaphorical utterance. (Hymers, "Truth and Metaphor" 10)

First, to avoid any misunderstanding, we should change the wording of Hymers' formulation a bit, for the way he puts things obscures the paradoxical character of this position. To be consistent, it should be: "*It is [now] true that 'gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies'*. But *it has not always been true that '[gravitation] has [always] influenced the motions of heavenly bodies'*". That is, at a certain point, once the use of words like 'gravitation' – in specific contexts such as this one – ceased to be merely metaphorical and became standardised, *it became true that*

‘gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies’. Is this linguistic idealism or not? Well, if it is true that ‘gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies’ then *gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies* – full stop. Did gravitation influence the motions of heavenly bodies even when saying so would have been greeted with perplexity? You bet. And did it do so even when there were no human beings around to say that it did? Indeed. So naturally we want to say that *it has always been true that* ‘gravitation has always influenced the motions of heavenly bodies’. But it is just here where Rorty and Hymers dig in their heels. To highlight the truly paradoxical nature of this position, and to demonstrate the violence it in fact does to common sense, we might ask: Is it now true that ‘truth is merely a property of sentences’? Or might we be content rather to view such claims as mere metaphor for the indefinite future, and prevent their dying and passing into common parlance? I take it that the jury of common sense is, at the very least, still out on this one.

The forgotten British Marxist Maurice Cornforth put it well in his own polemic against the pragmatism of Dewey back in the 1950s:

Herein appears the essential trickiness of the pragmatic philosophy generally. Under cover of a polemic against idealism, pragmatism always directs its main polemic against materialism, in order to restate the idealist position in different words.

This tricky characteristic of the pragmatist ‘method’ was pointed out by an American philosopher, Harry Wells, who named it ‘the three step argument.’ First an attack on idealism; then the assertion of the pragmatic conception of truth as

that which ‘works,’ [or, in the case of Rorty’s linguistic pragmatism, that which has been accepted by the relevant linguistic community as working] in place of the conception of the task of scientific thought to produce a faithful reflection of objective reality; thirdly, the restatement of idealism in different words.
(Cornforth, *Science Versus Idealism* 382)

Again the following words from Cornforth could, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to Rorty:

“Thus when Dewey speaks of ‘the existence of the world,’ which, he says, is ‘not in doubt,’ he is referring to the existence only of a quite ‘indeterminate’ world. All determination, all distinction and composition is somehow introduced into the world by ourselves. We are in fact presented with something like a new version of the idealism of Kant” (403). But what is this ‘materialist’ alternative at which Cornforth and I – and, I think, Žižek in his own roundabout way – are waving?

Bracketing for a moment the academic language game that is the conceptual apparatus of late-twentieth century philosophy of language, let us just listen to Cornforth contrast part of the basic ‘metaphysics’ – if one wants to call it that – of materialism with that of pragmatist idealism:

We ourselves construct our own idea of an object, but we construct it as the image of an object which exists independently. All that is contained and involved in the actual existence of material objects surpasses at every stage of the development of knowledge that which we have come to know about them and to express in our ideas. The real object of knowledge always contains infinitely *more* than is expressed in our knowledge of it.

For Dewey [and Rorty, I would add], on the other hand, it contains infinitely *less*. For him the real object of knowledge, which exists independently of our knowing it, is nothing, a mere state of indeterminateness. All that he recognises is the process of the construction of our idea of an object. He recognises that we can go on indefinitely adding fresh determination to our idea of an object. He does not recognise that these determinations constitute knowledge only in so far as they reflect the real and inexhaustible properties of the real object, which exists independently of our idea of it.

‘Nature is infinite,’ wrote Lenin, ‘but it infinitely *exists*. And it is this sole categorical, this sole unconditional recognition of nature’s *existence* outside the mind and perceptions of man [and, to suitably update this doctrine – outside human language and our descriptions] that distinguishes dialectical materialism from relativist agnosticism and idealism.’ [cited in a footnote as “Lenin: *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, ch. 5, section 2.”]

And it is the non-recognition of nature’s existence that constitutes Dewey’s [and Rorty’s] philosophy, and pragmatism in general, as a system of idealism. (406)

We can, for starters, see the analogy with Kantian idealism if we remember that Kant called himself, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, an ‘empirical realist and a transcendental idealist’. That is, he claimed to take for granted, much like Rorty, a common sense empirical reality that affects us from without while at the same time holding that we could know nothing about it ‘as it is in-itself’, or apart from the picture of it we get as a result of the operation of the ‘transcendental’ categories of our own mind. Because, like Rorty’s view, Kant’s view is shot through with fundamental inconsistencies, a strict idealist interpretation of Kant is and always has been contentious. But nonetheless, his

whole doctrine puts the emphasis on the way these categories or ‘conditions for the possibility of experience’ penetrate our world-picture *all the way down*, with the upshot that the world ‘out there’ is only relatively so – at the end of the day, it remains ‘in here’. Similarly with Rorty, although his view strikes the pose of having ‘naturalized’, ‘historicized’, and even ‘socialized’ in an important way Kant’s idealistic doctrine, it nonetheless falls into the same closed circle.

Rorty describes how modern philosophy of language was intended to save us from idealistic traps: “This turn toward language was thought of as a progressive, naturalizing move. It seemed so because it seemed easier to give a causal account of the evolutionary emergence of language-using organisms than of the metaphysical emergence of consciousness out of nonconsciousness” (10). “*But in itself*”, Rorty explains,

this substitution is ineffective. For if we stick to the picture of language as a medium, something standing between the self and the nonhuman reality with which the self seeks to be in touch, we have made no progress. We are still using a subject-object picture, and we are still stuck with issues about skepticism, idealism, and realism. For we are still able to ask questions about language of the same sort we asked about consciousness. (11 my emphasis)

How to reconcile subject and object, realism and idealism, etc.? – We should hear echoes of Kant’s project here, even if Rorty plugged his ears to them. So how to suitably modify the bare substitution of language for mind in order to avoid the same tired old disputes?

In essence, Rorty tries to get out of the Cartesian theatre and into the wide world by opting for Kant's Escher staircase, when he should have just made a beeline for the exit marked 'Marxist Materialism'. Truth gets reduced to a property of sentences, sentences are part of language games or vocabularies, and we should "treat alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle" (11). We language-using organisms called human beings wield the tools, and the tools either work or they don't. Whether or not they do depends on what *our* purposes are, and voila! – we've arrived back at our subject-centred starting point, suitably augmented along the way but in essence prey to the same solipsistic introversions of any idealism. For as we already explored apropos Hymers' example, on this view the world may be 'out there', but only insofar as *we assign* the value 'true' to such a claim. Remember: "Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there". The buck again stops with "the human mind".

Now it *is* the case that part of Rorty's definition of 'true' makes reference to something called the 'cautionary use of true'. That is, even when we believe something to be true we can also admit that we 'might be wrong' – it could turn out that we had a false belief despite the fact that we might have been justified in thinking our belief was true. This proviso makes sure we stay good fallibilists and always remember that vocabularies and thus 'criteria of assertibility' of sentences can *change*, changing assessed truth-values of sentences in tow. In fact, then, "the idea that *truth* goes beyond, or 'transcends' our current *criteria of truth*'—is a doctrine *endorsed* in the recognition that 'true' has a

cautionary use” (Hymers 16). One way of putting this would be to say that a given vocabulary or language game frames a certain kind of logical space, so that there are certain imaginable ways a sentence within that frame could be imagined to turn out false despite its being held – by everyone, let’s say – as true. For instance, maybe all the evidence points to the butler having ‘done it’, and the butler has even confessed, etc. but nonetheless we could imagine some elaborate scenario in which all the evidence proves faulty after all and it was really the doctor who ‘did it’. But in addition to this we must be ready to admit that at some time or other a more radical change in vocabulary itself might render logical space altogether different, or at least so different that the self-evidence of holding certain even mundane claims to be true would go by the wayside. Thus, if what the butler did was commit murder, we would have to be alive to the possibility that some future vocabulary would not only not make use of the concept of ‘murder’, but it might not even make use of the concept of ‘death’. For instance, we devise a language game where human responsibility is unthinkable and ‘death’ no longer means the end of our earthly existence as human organisms but the beginning of our further existence as ‘star-children’. That is, in consequence of a dramatic shift in our criteria of truth not only have truth-values changed, but clearly the underlying ontology upon which they rest has also changed: the emphasis falls squarely on the shoulders of our words making the world, rather than the other way round. The important point to take away from all this is that the cautionary use of true in no way saves Rorty’s position from being a brand of idealism. For everything hinges on *our criteria of truth*, whether past, present or future – truth

remains 'in here'.

Hunting History

But if I am wrong, and the linguistic community that represents my audience has standardised the claim that “truth is simply a property of sentences” – that is, this claim has indeed *become true* – then it seems I am out of luck. For my pronouncements in favour of a spooky doctrine called ‘dialectical materialism’ will sound old-fashioned and outmoded. Instead I ought to be employing zesty new metaphors in order to grab the attention of my listeners. For as Rorty puts it, in defense of his distinctive ‘method’ of philosophy:

On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the ‘intrinsic nature of reality.’ The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are ‘inconsistent in their own terms’ or that they ‘deconstruct themselves.’ But that can *never* be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or ‘merely metaphorical’ is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For such use is, after all, the paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal, speech. Such arguments are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for, claims that a better vocabulary is available. Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.

The latter ‘method’ of philosophy is the same as the ‘method’ of utopian

politics or revolutionary science (as opposed to parliamentary politics, or normal science). The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions. (*Contingency* 8-9)

I think Rorty is right-on here. Showing some established position to be ‘inconsistent in its own terms’ means little if its adherents are not offered something better in its place. After all, every position has its weak links – those places in the argumentative chain of reasons justifying it that break under too much strain. And light chains can be very useful for certain purposes, even if their flimsiness means they fall apart when used for tethering bigger game. So I am going to take something like Rorty’s advice in what follows. But with an important difference – I am going after bigger and stronger game, and so will need a much bigger and stronger chain. I am not particularly interested here in the skirmishes that consist in redescribing “lots and lots of things in new ways”, but with an overriding struggle that frames them. Like Rorty, “I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics” (*Contingency* 9); “my strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which [the objections to my view] are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head on” (*Contingency* 44). But the variety of topics I will touch on are importantly framed by the truth of a doctrine that it would be counterproductive and flat *wrong*, given my

purposes, to imagine could be mistaken. This means that it would be *too hazardous*, given my purposes, to retain the cautionary use of true as far as this doctrine goes.

Cornforth's orthodox formulation of this doctrine, from his own bygone polemic against those whom he called "the semantic apologists of capitalism", suits my purposes just fine:

The truth about social affairs is discovered by those who are trying to change society, and who for that very reason are not content to talk [in terms of any methodological individualism], but seek to formulate accurate concepts of social and economic relations and of the contradictions contained within them. The objective truth about capitalist society cannot be 'impartial' and cannot serve to 'dissolve' the basic contradictions and conflicts of that society. For to seek for that truth, i.e., to investigate capitalist society in its real existence and movement in order to change it, is by its very nature a partisan activity, which uncovers the contradictions and does not cover them up. The truth belongs to the revolutionary working class movement and is expressed in the 'high-order abstractions' of the theory of that movement.

...In their time those who have theorised about society from the point of view of the capitalist class have invented many 'high-order abstractions' of their own, which served to obscure the real issues of the social struggle and to paint over the ugly facts of capitalist exploitation with a coating of verbal whitewash. Some of this whitewash is wearing a bit thin. The semantic apologists of capitalism have now come forward with a new scheme. Examine words, they say. Give the facts a double coating of whitewash, not only with words but with words about words. ...[this new scheme] prescribes a way of speaking about social affairs which renders the real movement of society, its structure and the causes which operate unknowable and inexplicable. For that very reason it is perfectly adapted to express the viewpoints of the capitalist class at a period when that class has

nothing left to contribute to human progress, but is helpless in the throes of a general crisis of its own making and from which it cannot possibly escape. And it does all this while posing as the very latest scientific method of thought, opposed to useless or harmful abstractions and refusing to be taken in by them. (*Science* 324-5)

This approach will presumably be at least entertained by anyone less than content with Rorty's linguistic non-theory of historical change, which gets him saying improbable things like the following: "Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, *Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others*" (*Contingency* 6, final emphasis mine). This *absolute* eschewal of meaningful explanation in the domain of historical change verges on bad faith.

Brian Lloyd maintains that this bad faith can be explained as the same kind of willful blindness that gripped royalists and antirepublicans during the restoration following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, which they wrongly imagined symbolized the historical "death of republicanism—and of the scientific materialism viewed by victors and vanquished as an ally of those challenging the old regime" (*Left Out* 1). Analogously, those intellectuals who, after the decisive defeat of the Soviet Union, proclaim the death of Marxism and dialectical materialism and find it impossible to

imagine a social order beyond liberalism fail to remember that “The bourgeoisie rose to dominance not by proceeding smoothly from one quick, painless victory to another but by lurching through stages of a protracted contest that saw republics and monarchies savagely leapfrogging, bloodying at each phase of the game participants and bystanders from every social class and nationality in every corner of the globe” (*Left Out 2*). That is, they fail to remember that many of the doctrines they take for granted are historical products, the result of long struggles and many seemingly decisive defeats. At the same time they do not wish to acknowledge the historical forces undermining those doctrines and potentially favoring others. As Lloyd puts it, “Many of these intellectuals can be found rushing headlong down the same dusky road that after 1815 carried progressive and reactionary alike into the domain of various anti-Enlightenment idealisms” (2).

In a world where “oppression, if measured against even the simplest standards of decency and justice, is a real thing—the primary condition, in fact, of the great majority of the world’s people, with the form, severity, and duration of that condition determined primarily by their position in the international ‘free market’ economy”, and where it is simply “inevitable that these people will at some point fight, under one banner or another to change their condition” (2), idealistic doctrines come in handy for those not desirous of facing the facts: “The repertoire of idealism has come to be so well regarded in an age of diminished historiographical expectations because it supplies handy techniques for averting one’s eyes from the forces that drive historical development and talking cordially about what is left to see” (3). On the other hand, our position is that: Marxism is “the only

trustworthy weapon for analyzing and transforming complex, and seemingly well defended, systems of oppression” (*Left Out 2*); that “the tangibles of history are governed by ‘underlying’ dynamics or a ‘deeper’ logic...that history ‘can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in it’” (3); in other words, that “the struggle for freedom needs a reference to some unquestionable dogma” (Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real 3*) – and this is ours.

We can be fallibilists about some of our knowledge-claims, but certain truths are, for lack of a better word, *sacred*. As Žižek puts it, in his uniquely French-poststructuralist-Continental way:

truth, as opposed to knowledge, is, like a Badiouian Event, something that only an engaged gaze, the gaze of a subject who “believes in it,” is able to see. Take the case of love: in love, only the lover sees in the object of love that X which is the cause of his love, the parallax-object; in this sense the structure of love is the same as that of the Badiouian Event, which also exists only for those who recognize themselves in it: there can be no Event for a non-engaged objective observer. Lacking this engaged position, mere descriptions of the state of things, no matter how accurate, fail to generate emancipatory effects – ultimately, they only render the *burden of the lie* still more oppressive. (Žižek, *End Times* xiv, my emphasis)

This is to say: ‘We are Marxists, this is *our* Truth, and any view that would deny this Truth is just so much ideology’. From such a vantage point, one can begin to detect behind Rorty’s progressive façade the unabashed reactionary tendencies of a staunch

anticommunist and Cold War liberal. Similarly one can discern that behind the veil of Žižek's sometimes obscure Continental prose there churns the heart of an old-fashioned revolutionary Marxist. This is the reality behind appearances I want to highlight in what follows, and in order to dispel some of the postmodern fog Žižek wanders into (and that Rorty cloaks himself with) I enlist the help of a few old Commie Brits – and sundry others – along the way.

Chapter Two

How Do You Like Your Capitalism?

But how can we hope to revive Truth by understanding its structural role vis-à-vis ideology? Didn't the end of ideology coincide with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall? As Rorty explains, in a piece that was originally written for a conference entitled "The End of History" held in 1991 and centered around the ideas of Francis Fukuyama: "the leftist use of the terms 'capitalism,' 'bourgeois ideology,' and 'working class' depends on the implicit claim that we can do *better* than a market economy, that we know of a viable alternative option for complex technologically oriented societies. But at the moment, at least, we know of no such option" (*Truth* 234). He goes on: "The old large blurry fantasies are gone, and we are left with only the small concrete ones – the ones we used to view as symptoms of petit bourgeois reformism" (235); "we shall have to drop the 'ideology' idea... This will mean giving up the claim that philosophical or literary sophistication is important because it prepares us for the crucial, socially indispensable role that history has allotted us – the role of 'critic of ideology'" (*Truth* 239-240). Rorty may have seemed unequalled in his prescience back in the early 90s, but our following considerations will show that he actually buckled under the weight of his own unacknowledged subservience to *capital-H* History.

We can turn to former chief economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, for some words of wisdom about the continuing importance of the notion of ideology in today's political world – from his 2012 book, *The Price of Inequality*; Chapter six, "1984

Is Upon Us”:

In contradistinction to the reality that perceptions and preferences can be shaped, mainstream economics assumes that individuals have well-defined preferences and fully rational expectations and perceptions. Individuals know what they want. But in this respect, traditional economics is wrong. If it were true, there would be little scope for advertising. Corporations use recent advances in psychology and economics that extend our understanding of how preferences and beliefs can be shaped to induce people to buy their products. (Stiglitz 146-7)

[This is one illustration of] the fight over perceptions in the context of [a] quite specific battle, but the battles rage most intensely in the field of big ideas. One such battle involves on one side those who believe markets *mostly* work well on their own and that most market failures are in fact government failures. On the other side are those who are less sanguine about markets and who argue for an important role for government. These two camps define the major ideological battle of our time. It is an *ideological* battle, because economic science – both theory and history – provides a quite nuanced set of answers. (Stiglitz 172)

Because this “nuanced set of answers” is sufficiently rich and diverse in its detail and suggestiveness, “Devoted ideologues on each side will cherry-pick examples and draw from them broad generalizations...many individuals will perceive or remember only the evidence that is consistent with their initial beliefs” (Stiglitz 186). And in a brilliant passage that echoes Thomas Kuhn’s description of the recalcitrance of paradigmatic normal science in the face of a rising tide of anomalies and the crisis they herald, Geoffrey Ingham paints a troubling picture of blinkered cherry-picking and willful

ignorance:

...academic economists and their alumni in the regulatory authorities should have been aware of the impending disaster [the 2007-8 global financial crisis]. After all, the history of capitalism could be written in terms of the increasing frequency and severity of manias, panics and crashes. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, however, most mainstream academic analysis tends to see these as aberrations or deviations from equilibrium, caused by irrational errors or random shocks, rather than the result of the normal operation of capitalism. Academic orthodoxy has persisted in its allegiance to the ‘invisible hand’ and a belief in the market’s capacity for long-run self-correction. Recruited to government finance ministries, treasuries and regulatory authorities, its graduates form an ‘epistemic community’ of shared beliefs about the operation of the economy. *They are not intellectually predisposed to anticipate extreme disequilibrium.* Imperfections are acknowledged, but, as we have noted, it is firmly believed that these can be remedied by advances in economic theory. (Ingham 2013, 253 my emphasis)

This narrow mindset culminates in absurdities such as the following:

For modern finance theory, disturbances in the asset markets could only come from random events and factors external to the model. In astonishing ignorance of history, the banks’ ‘quants’ (from mathematical ‘quantifiers’) calculated that crashes of the kind that had been occurring over the past twenty years were highly improbable. If crises in financial markets followed normal distribution, it was calculated that the 1987 stock market crash and 2007-8 crisis would be expected only once in the lifetime of the universe (*The Economist*, ‘The gods strike back’, 13 February 2010). It was an astounding illustration of Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophical ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ [or reification] by which

abstract models are believed perfectly to represent the complexity of the phenomena to which they are applied (Whitehead 1997 [1925]). (Ingham 2013, 239)

Whitehead's fallacy dovetails nicely with Hymers' definition of ideology for Marx as "*an abuse of abstraction*: an ideological belief or claim is one that unjustifiably abstracts or generalizes from a claim that might well (but need not) have local validity, where this abstraction implicitly serves the interests of a group at the expense of the interests of others outside that group and in positions of social, economic and political disadvantage" ("Truth and Metaphor" 13). Or put another way, from the capitalist liberal reformer Stiglitz: "The powerful try to frame the discussion in a way that benefits their interests, realizing that, in a democracy, they cannot simply impose their rule on others. In one way or another, they have to 'co-opt' the rest of society to advance their agenda" (Stiglitz 186). The spokespersons of that society may even be frequently unaware that they are being so co-opted, that the views they espouse are in fact serving the forces of reaction. But the very rich, as Warren Buffet reminds us, know full well what is going on: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." (Stein, "In Class Warfare, Guess Which Class Is Winning?" 2006).

One might object here that the talk about ideology only muddies the waters. After all, Stiglitz seems to just be referring to what we would straightforwardly call varying political views or alignments. But giving up this ghost would rob of us of the connection between having a political view and seeing political realities in an irreducibly biased way.

Beyond the two positions mentioned by Stiglitz – basically, market fundamentalism vs. Keynesian interventionist-reform² – are those that would perhaps reject market mechanisms altogether, and we could imagine any number of other variations here. The point is that the “nuanced set of answers” provided by economic science lend themselves to a range of incommensurable interpretations, and because with each interpretation comes prescriptions about how to run economies, we end up with competing *political economies*. The reason the end of the Cold War seemed to some to coincide with the “End of Ideology” was because it seemed as though the political economy of capitalism had triumphed once and for all, disproving and/or discrediting any other possible interpretation of those ‘answers’ provided by ‘economic science’. It’s no surprise, then, that Rorty counsels the abandonment of the terms that gave voice to the conflict (“‘capitalism,’ ‘bourgeois ideology,’ and ‘working class’”). In this connection, it’s worth noting that the very expression ‘political economy’ itself fell out of favour between the fall of the Wall and the recent global economic crisis. But a corollary of this is that in a certain sense, insofar as your political view or alignment commits you to a specific *political economy*, from the perspective of *Marxist* political economy – an interpretation that foregrounds class-interests as being of absolutely central importance to the functioning of capitalism – it also commits you to a distortion of social reality in the service of class-interests. But the crucial thing to note here is that the ‘distortion’ in

² But even here Stiglitz is right in designating the rivalry of these two positions as “the major ideological battle of our time” – things have become so polarized in mainstream American politics that the slightest attempt on the part of the Democrats and/or Obama to redress income inequality are met with denunciations by right-wing pundits screaming the bloody murder of ‘Marxism’ and ‘class warfare’ (!)

question can only appear as such from one side of the conflict – the political economy of the ruling classes tends to view Marxists as having misunderstood how capitalism functions, while Marxists inevitably hurl the very same complaint back. The fact that even Stiglitz – a towering figure in mainstream economics – is ready to admit the utility of ‘ideology’ as a politically charged but crucially *explanatory* concept shows that the discourse of the epistemic community of *liberal* economic science is itself riddled with enough contradictions to give the lie to what below I refer to as Rorty’s ‘fickle historicism’³.

Revisionism Then and Now

When Rorty dreams, as in the following passage, he does so with a kind of armchair smugness, content to sit back and let History take its course:

I think the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy. This was the business the American Left was in during the first two-thirds of the century.

Someday, perhaps, cumulative piecemeal reforms will be found to have brought about revolutionary change. Such reforms might someday produce a presently unimaginable nonmarket economy, and much more widely distributed powers of decisionmaking. They might also, given similar reforms in other countries, bring about an international federation, a world government. In such a new world, American national pride would become as quaint as pride in being from Nebraska or Kazakhstan or Sicily. But in the meantime, we should not let

³ For a wonderful Marxist account of the most recent global economic crisis, one that puts it into the larger context of the history of capitalism, see David McNally’s *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011).

the abstractly described best be the enemy of the better. We should not let speculation about a totally changed system, and a totally different way of thinking about human life and human affairs, replace step-by-step reform of the system we presently have. (Rorty 105, *Achieving our Country*)⁴

This happy confidence in reformism seems to rely on the highly speculative historical point that because “Liberal representative democracy did not appear anywhere until the development of capitalism, and this has led to widespread agreement that there is an affinity or even a necessary connection between them” (Ingham 185), we all ought to join in the chorus of agreement about the ‘necessity’ of this connection. From here we merely have to extend the benefits of liberal democracy as far as possible, until – presto! – we have arrived at a classless society. Here, no doubt, Rorty would violently object to my

⁴ In similarly taking postmodernists and deconstructionists of the Cultural Left to task for failing to pay adequate attention to class concerns, Žižek approvingly quotes Wendy Brown and then says:

One can describe in very precise terms this reduction of class to an entity ‘named but rarely theorized’: one of the great and permanent results of the so-called ‘Western Marxism’ first formulated by the young Lukács is that the class-and-commodity structure of capitalism is not just a phenomenon limited to the particular ‘domain’ of economy, but the structuring principle that overdetermines the social totality, from politics to art and religion. *This* global dimension of capitalism is suspended in today’s multiculturalist progressive politics: its ‘anti-capitalism’ is reduced to the level of how today’s capitalism breeds sexist/racist oppression, and so on. (“Class Struggle” 96)

In a footnote he adds:

Am I not thereby getting close to Richard Rorty’s recent attack on ‘radical’ Cultural Studies elitism (see Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*...)? The difference none the less is that Rorty seems to advocate the Left’s participation in the political process *as it is* in the USA, in the mode of resuscitating the progressive Democratic agenda of the 1950s and early 1960s (getting involved in elections, putting pressure on Congress...), not ‘doing the impossible’, that is, aiming at the transformation of the very basic co-ordinates of social life. As such, Rorty’s (political, not philosophical) ‘engaged pragmatism’ is ultimately the complementary *reverse* of the ‘radical’ Cultural Studies’ stance, which abhors actual participation in the political process as an inadmissible compromise: these are two sides of the same deadlock. (“Class Struggle” 130)

imputing to him a view that claimed any kind of *necessary* connection. This would obviously go against the grain of his proclaimed commitment to the contingency of all things. And yet, as Hymers has put it, “he thinks that experience shows that the kinds of efforts he is praising have been more effective than calls for total revolution” (personal correspondence). But this is simply to *translate* an ‘essentialist’ discourse about social change into a ‘pragmatist’ one. This means that although perhaps no ‘deep’ connection can be found between capitalism and liberal democracy, one nonetheless behaves as if such a connection holds good. Thus our cherished democratic freedoms can only be safeguarded by a benign capitalist order. Rosa Luxemburg combated a startlingly similar form of reformism at the beginning of the twentieth century, when she attacked the ‘revisionism’ of Bernstein in her *Reform or Revolution*. Her view was that

It is not true that socialism will arise automatically from the daily struggle of the working class. Socialism will be the consequence of (1) the growing contradictions of capitalist economy and (2) the comprehension by the working class of the unavailability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation. When, in the manner of revisionism, the first condition is denied and the second rejected, the labour movement finds itself reduced to a simple cooperative and reformist movement. We move here in a straight line toward the total abandonment of the class viewpoint. (31).

Her position was not that reform should be eschewed in favour of revolution, but that reform was an essential tool in the struggle for revolution. Bernstein also relied on new

‘experience’ or facts, which he thought proved that the contradictions of capitalism were becoming less severe and would make possible the gradual and relatively peaceful overcoming of the system. Sadly such pronouncements always fall flat on their faces whenever a new economic crisis hits and/or an imperialistic war breaks out. Mary-Alice Waters explains as much in her sketch of the conflict at the time within the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) – “the unquestioned ‘great’ party, the model looked up to by the whole [Communist] International” (“Introduction” to *Reform or Revolution* 6):

As Ignaz Auer, SPD secretary, wrote to Bernstein in 1899, ‘My dear Ede, one does not formally make a decision to do the things you suggest, one doesn’t *say* such things, one simply does them.’

Auer’s formula was unwittingly followed by the majority of the SPD, as was demonstrated fifteen years later for all the world to see when the party formally voted to support its own imperialist government in World War I, a betrayal of the most elementary principles of proletarian internationalism and revolutionary Marxism. (7)

That is, one can *say* that one’s belief in reformism is contingent, the result of clear-headed pragmatic calculations, but when the chips are down and the ruling classes threaten to embark on another one of their catastrophic crusades of aggression, one is forced to put one’s money where one’s mouth is. And that means *postponing* the revolution.

Rorty was an unfortunate victim of the same kind of ‘revisionism’ that led Bernstein to a conciliation with the Powers That Be. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty

confesses to having been a “teenage Cold War liberal” (58) – that is, “militantly anticommunist” enough to “believe that the war against Stalin was as legitimate, and as needed, as the war against Hitler” (57). That means that, for example, “Granted the Vietnam War was an atrocity of which America must always be ashamed” (57), it was nonetheless part of a ‘just war’. Those American intellectuals were right who did not attempt to make a ‘separate peace’ with their opposite numbers in communist countries by refusing to fight the Cold War. For, Rorty tells us,

Our Russian and Polish opposite numbers did not want a separate peace. They wanted liberation from a thuggish, cruel, and seemingly invincible tyranny. Unless America had fought the Cold War, they now believe, they would never have been freed. People on my side of the argument think these Russians and Poles are right. Despite the suggestions of revisionist historians of the Cold War, we do not believe the liberation of 1989 would ever have occurred if the United States had come to terms with Stalin in the late 1940s in the way these historians have suggested was possible. We think that history will see the Cold War as having been fought, like most wars, from thoroughly mixed motives, but as having saved the world from a great danger. (57-8)

But this view of history abstracts from the initial historical context that largely produced the Cold War conflict in the first place. As the great Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm explains of the period containing the two World Wars and after:

...a world economic crisis of unprecedented depth brought even the strongest capitalist economies to their knees and seemed to reverse the creation of a single universal world economy, which had been so remarkable an achievement of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism. Even the U.S.A., safe from war and revolution, seemed close to collapse. While the economy tottered, the institutions of liberal democracy virtually disappeared between 1917 and 1942 from all but a fringe of Europe and parts of North America and Australasia, as fascism and its satellite authoritarian movements and regimes advanced.

Only the temporary and bizarre alliance of liberal capitalism and communism in self-defence against this challenger saved democracy, for the victory over Hitler's Germany was essentially won, and could only have been won, by the Red Army...the victory of the Soviet Union over Hitler was the achievement of the regime installed there by the October Revolution, as a comparison of the performance of the Russian Tsarist economy in the First World War and the Soviet economy in the Second World War demonstrates. Without it the Western world today would probably consist (outside the U.S.A.) of a set of variations on authoritarian and fascist themes rather than a set of variations on liberal parliamentary ones. It is one of the ironies of this strange century that the most lasting results of the October revolution, whose object was the global overthrow of capitalism, was to save its antagonist, both in war and in peace—that is to say, by providing it with the incentive, fear, to reform itself after the Second World War, and, by establishing the popularity of economic planning, furnishing it with some of the procedures for its reform. (*Age of Extremes* 7-8)

Thus, as Hobsbawm goes on to explain, it was the instability of liberal capitalism itself, its collapse into catastrophic economic and social crisis, that made the socialist alternative seem viable in the first place. So we should be wary of Rorty when it comes to understanding historical trajectories – his admission that his “term ‘reformist Left’ is

intended to cover most of the people who were feared and hated by the Right, and thereby to smudge the line which the Marxists tried to draw between leftists and liberals” and his blaming the Communist Party of the United States for the follies of Nixon and McCarthyism⁵ are corollaries of his rejection of Marx – who “thought that we should interpret the historical events of our day within a larger theory” – and his embrace of Dewey – who “thought one had to view these events as the protocols of social experiments whose outcomes are unpredictable” (*Achieving* 37). This is indeed what Rorty refers to as *eschewing* a “preference for knowledge over hope” (37). It is one of the ironies of Rorty’s position that in his haste to denounce pretensions to historical knowledge as somehow ‘theological’ he falls into a ‘blind faith’ in the promise of American manifest destiny: “Whereas Marx...claimed to know what was bound to happen” – in fact a crude oversimplification of Marxist theory – “Dewey denied such knowledge in order to make room for pure, joyous hope” (23); “Grand theories—eschatologies like...Marx’s...—satisfy the urges that theology used to satisfy. These are urges which Dewey hoped Americans might cease to feel. Dewey wanted Americans to share a civic religion that substituted utopian striving for claims to theological knowledge” (38). It is no use, Rorty seems to be telling us, looking “for a frame of reference outside the process of experimentation and decision that is an individual or a national life” (38). But a position so narrow-minded can only lead to travesties of massive historical falsification. Hence the inability of Rorty and other Cold War liberals

⁵ “...the most enduring effects of [the Communist Party of the United States’] activities were the careers of men like Martin Dies, Richard Nixon, and Joseph McCarthy” (*Achieving Our Country* 44).

to deal with world-views like Marxism that inherently take an international, global view of social relations.

The retreat of Cold War liberals into mostly unquestioning nationalism during the McCarthy years leads Anthony Arblaster to conclude, in his exceptional and excoriating study *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism*, that: “Given this climate of opinion [i.e. one where universal suspicion of communism made even left-leaning liberals suspect], it was only to be expected that the more timid liberals, above all those with a communist or radical past, should fall over themselves to prove that they were as loyal and as dedicatedly anti-communist as the heresy-hunters themselves” (315). “So”, Arblaster goes on, “they abandoned liberal principles in their eagerness to prove their anti-communist credentials” (315): “the liberal adoption of political empiricism and renunciation of utopianism and ideology brought liberalism into a much closer alliance with conservatism, and shifted the whole spectrum of Western politics to the Right” (325-6). I concur with Arblaster that “the best of liberalism is too good to be left to the liberals” (348). And I am perfectly capable, like him, of heartily endorsing his reading of Marx without for a second endorsing the worst atrocities perpetrated by ‘really existing’ socialist regimes that have ruled by wielding Marx’s authority. To Rorty’s conception of history, which relies on a kind of methodological individualism of persons and nations – his reconstructed position is that “one ha[s] to view [historical] events as the protocols of social experiments whose outcomes are unpredictable”, but one is not to seek beyond “experimentation and decision that is an individual or a national life” – we should oppose

Arblaster's clear understanding of Marx:

Marx, who was one of the fiercest critics of liberalism, and especially of liberal political economy, also saw socialism as a movement which would 'fulfil' liberalism – that is, give to liberal values such as freedom and rights a more complete and substantial content and meaning than liberalism itself could conceive of. That is the point of the distinction he makes, in his early essay, *On the Jewish Question*, between political emancipation and human emancipation. He did not deny that political emancipation was 'a big step forward'. But it was a limited one, and its limitations were rooted in the liberal individualist conception of human nature: 'not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires and separated from the community.' In the dialectic of history, the role of socialism was both to negate and transcend liberalism; and the relation of socialism to capitalism was to follow the same pattern. (348)

Marxism? What Is It Good For? Absolutely Something!

Rorty's 'justificationism', his disdain for any appeal to an important Truth beyond a perceived established consensus, makes him susceptible to the ideologies promulgated by powerful 'epistemic communities' (as Ingham put it) that share among them unshaking agreement in the rightness of the 'current system'. As he says:

One difference between truth and justification is that between the unrecognizable and the recognizable. We shall never know for sure whether a given belief is true, but *we can be sure that nobody is presently able to summon up any residual*

objections to it, that everybody agrees that it ought to be held.

There are, to be sure, what Lacanians [like Žižek] call impossible, indefinable, sublime objects of desire. But a desire for such an object cannot be made relevant to democratic politics. (Rorty 2, *Rorty and His Critics* my emphasis)

But this complacency means that Rorty and those like him will be unable to take seriously *what appear as* ‘mere’ speculations that do not kowtow to established consensus, and that yet might give us some important insight into the system as a whole: “Lenin, the founder of Russian communism, went so far as to say that representative democracy was capitalism’s ‘best political shell’, in which the spurious equality of democratic citizenship acted to mask the fundamental underlying inequalities of class and economic power” (Ingham 185). Rorty does not see the possibility that representative liberal democracy may itself be simply one more *mask* capitalism will be all too content to cast off when it sees fit to do so.

It is precisely Rorty’s exhaustion with, and disdain for, the appearance/reality distinction – which, he thinks, ultimately fueled so many of the tired debates in analytic epistemology and philosophy of mind and language he cut his teeth on – that leads him to a kind of ‘fickle historicism’. This renders him unable to countenance the theoretical possibility that liberal democracy may indeed be a mere *mask* for capitalist social relations. In praising Vaclav Havel (circa 1991) as a potential replacement for Lenin – a next-generation hero of social justice who could again irradiate “the collective imaginary

of the international left” (*Truth* 236) – Rorty approvingly cites Havel’s “lack of interest in underlying forces, historical trends, and large, conceptually graspable objects” (236). Accordingly, “The revolution over which Havel is presiding has had no better ideas than to give back the expropriated properties and to sell off the nationalized factories to whatever private entrepreneurs will buy them” (237). And this backslide into free-market capitalism is justified with the following strange claim: “One reason why all of us in the international Left are going to have to weed terms like ‘capitalism,’ ‘bourgeois culture’ (and, alas, even ‘socialism’) out of our vocabulary is that *our friends* in Central and Eastern Europe *will look at us incredulously if we continue to employ them*” (237-8 my emphasis). Who are these friends? And to what extent can we trust a brand of historicism that sweeps away any appeal to universality, Truth, etc. but leaves no conception of History thick enough to grapple with a *concrete* and *global* social form sufficiently powerful to topple Soviet Communism? The irony of this fickle historicism is that in its rush to embrace hard-headed pragmatism it ignores the very underlying historical trends that largely generate the very social problems it is supposed to alleviate⁶.

Take, for example, post-Soviet Russia, which ruthlessly embraced an extremely predatory form of free-market capitalism after the fall of the Wall in 1989:

⁶ For a corrective to this hagiographic take on Havel, see Žižek’s review of John Keane’s biography of Havel, “Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism” in the *London review of Books* (Vol. 21 No. 21, 28 October 1999, pages 3-6).

By the end of 1999, the Russian economy had shrunk to just over half its size a decade earlier. Russia, which just a few years earlier had counted itself a superpower, now produced less than Belgium and only 25 per cent more than nearby Poland.

The country's social and economic infrastructure, rudimentary but functional in the Soviet era, was collapsing. Schools and hospitals were regularly shut down in wildcat strikes by teachers and doctors who were not paid for months at a time; power blackouts and water shortages became commonplace, reaching even into strategic sites like nuclear submarine bases and humanitarian ones such as operating theatres; in 1994 the average male life expectancy had shrunk to 58 years, lower than anywhere else on the globe apart from sub-Saharan Africa.

The only people prospering in New Russia seemed to be a narrow layer of the super-rich. By 1999, the top 10 per cent of the population owned half of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 40 per cent owned less than a fifth. Between 30 and 40 million people lived below the poverty line, defined as a miserly \$30 a month. Russia's new capitalist elite had grown dizzyingly rich in a remarkably short time, but it had done so without lifting the rest of the country up with it. Its fortunes were not based on new technologies, more efficient services or more productive factories. Instead, they were built by capturing pieces of the collapsing Soviet state: the country's oilfields and nickel mines, its television channels and export permits and even the government's bank accounts. And once Russia's home-grown capitalist conquistadors had secured their loot, they whisked it away to safer havens abroad as quickly as they could. Between 1991 and 1999, experts estimated that between \$100bn and \$150bn in flight capital left Russia.

Russia had created a market economy, but of a distorted kind. With its ten-year economic depression, dying and increasingly deprived underclass and extravagant and parasitic elite, Russia had become a kind of capitalist dystopia, a Soviet ideologue's lurid fantasy of life in what they used to call the 'rotting West'. (*Sale of the Century* 15-16)

This description of capitalism at its worst comes from Chrystia Freeman, who worked as Moscow Bureau chief for the *Financial Times* from 1994 to 1998. In capping this portrait, she lets slip an intriguing morsel: “As one sardonic Russian friend confided: ‘Everything Marx told us about Communism was false. But it turns out that everything he told us about capitalism was true.’” (16) The ironic twist here is that, of course, Marx said very little about what the transformed social order of communism would actually look like. Primarily Marx was a harsh critical theorist of capitalism, seeking to understand its mechanisms and contradictory developmental tendencies. He was in no way interested in pie-in-the-sky utopias – his was an *immanent* critique of a dynamic system. That is, Marx saw in capitalism a social form or mode of production that, if left to its own regulating assumptions, tended to become more and more unstable and unsustainable. Despite what the reigning ideologists would have us believe, the historical record has proved Marx right in this respect. The profit motive knows no bounds, and, as we should realize by now, has little respect for regulatory authorities, who most of the time are only struggling to catch up with the elaborate market ‘innovations’ it incessantly engenders.

On the other hand, Marx was also a revolutionary, and certainly did believe that an improved global social order could be born out of the growing tensions generated by capitalism’s contractions and dilations:

‘The irresistible power of attraction that draws the socialists of all countries to this theory [Marxism],’ Lenin wrote in 1894, in his first published work, ‘lies precisely in the fact that it unites a rigorous and most lofty scientism [*nauchnost*’]

(being the last word in social science) with revolutionism, and unites them not by chance, not only because the founder of the doctrine combined in his own person the qualities of a scientist and a revolutionary, but unites them in the theory itself intrinsically and inseparably.’ (Joravsky *Soviet Marxism and Natural Science* 3-4)

How are these two threads woven together? Simply put, Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system is itself an expression of class consciousness. It implicates and at the same time assists in bringing into being working-class consciousness – it is a work of *consciousness-raising*. For in laying bare the system’s mechanisms, Marx at the same time reveals the antagonistic class interests that underpin those mechanisms, and so makes explicit the gap that separates the workers’ slave-like state from their potential future as members of a community of associated producers. This is not a flight of fancy. Rather, such a vision is implied by the capitalist system itself. For by unleashing the powers of production through intense cooperation, division of labour, scientific and technological innovation, etc. capitalism finally *makes possible* a world free from want *and yet* organizes production so as to impoverish, enslave and terrorize the majority of the human population whilst destroying the material basis of life on earth⁷. This immanent possibility comes through in the excuses of the system’s apologists themselves:

⁷ “...all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.” (Marx, *Capital Volume I* 638)

Chrystia Freeman's problem with the cancerously corrupted form of capitalism that seized the Russian economy at the beginning of the 90s was that "Its fortunes were not based on new technologies, more efficient services or more productive factories". Of course, there is nothing in these criteria that make them capitalistic by nature. Indeed, taken by themselves, they mean very little: something's being 'new' is no measure of its value; efficiency is relative – for what and whom?; and productivity means nothing if the value of what is produced cannot be realized (through purchase – consumption) on the market. There is no reason these virtues could not be wedded to a communistic society.

Retrieving Marx

But what would Rorty have to say about Marx's 'science'? In a 1995 review of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, after equating – via an absurd leap of historical counterfactual-ing⁸ – an imagined Nietzscheanism-Hitlerism with Marxism-Leninism, Rorty makes the following admission:

You get...shrugs at the mention of Marx from a lot of anglophones who never studied him very hard when they were young, and are not inclined to start now. I am one such. Until I was 40 or so, I still solemnly swore that some time (next summer, maybe) I would finally get around to finishing *Kapital*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and Richardson's *Pamela*. But as the usual middle-aged realization of the shortness of life came over me, I let the obligation to finish these books slide gently off my back.

⁸ Incidentally, Rorty uses the same technique to exonerate his poet-philosopher hero Heidegger for his Nazism. See "On Heidegger's Nazism" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

American leftists of my generation tend to think of Marx as having explained the injustices produced by nineteenth-century capitalism better than anyone else. But we regret that he mixed up sharp-eyed economic and political analysis with a lot of windy Hegelianisms. We think it a pity that the best political economist of the nineteenth century happened to major in philosophy, and never quite got over it. Like Sidney Hook, we suspect that Dewey filtered out everything that was worth saving in Hegel, and that all Marx adds to Dewey, Weber and the other philosophers of social democracy are some pungent details about exactly how the rich manage to keep the poor impotent, and some helpful hints for debunking the hypocrisy of the status quo. So a typical anglophone reaction to Althusser's claim that Marx discovered a new science was stark incredulity. We Anglophones had the same reaction to Sartre's claim that existentialism is just an enclave within Marxism. (*Social Hope* 211)

Here we have come to a sticking point, to say the least. Rorty, the master of eloquent hand-waving, reduces the philosophical importance of Marx's mature work – his magnum opus *Capital* (in 3 volumes, with a '4th volume' on historical *Theories of Surplus Value*) – to dustbin detritus with the implication that it is now about as important and interesting – its contents are about as *urgent* – as the popular eighteenth-century epistolary novel *Pamela* and the high scholasticism of Aquinas. Marx isn't even a philosopher, just a *mere* political economist whose insights into the functioning of the capitalist system can be safely confined to the bygone nineteenth century. 'All you need is Dewey!' Never mind that in Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach", working from his 'pitiable' philosophical education, he had already 'sublated' pragmatism in his stride: "the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but

is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, *i.e.*, the reality and power, the “this-sidedness” of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question” (“Theses on Feuerbach” 82). Or that Dewey himself was far more ‘radical’ than Rorty ever bothered to be.⁹ Rorty has always liked to bandy about Hegel’s slogan that true philosophy is “its time held in thought” (*Social Hope* 11 and *Truth and Progress* 233), which he seems to think is right as far as it goes – in the sense that it certainly cannot *escape* its own time and discover *timeless* and eternal truths. As he put it in his conclusion to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

To drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well would be to drop the notion that his voice always has an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation. It would also be to drop the notion that there is something called “philosophical method” or “philosophical technique” or “the philosophical point of view” which enables the professional philosopher, *ex officio*, to have interesting views about, say, the respectability of psychoanalysis, the legitimacy of certain dubious laws, the resolution of moral dilemmas, the “soundness” of schools of historiography or literary criticism, and the like. Philosophers often do have interesting views upon such questions, and their professional training as philosophers is often a necessary condition for their having the views they do. But this is not to say that philosophers have a special kind of knowledge about knowledge (or anything else) from which they draw relevant corollaries. *The useful kibitzing they can provide on the various topics I just mentioned is made*

⁹ See fn. 15 in “The End of Leninism”

possible by their familiarity with the historical background of arguments on similar topics, and, most importantly, by the fact that arguments on such topics are punctuated by stale philosophical clichés which the other participants have stumbled across in their reading, but about which professional philosophers know the pros and cons by heart. (Mirror of Nature 393, my emphasis)

Rorty's Hegel may not be 'windy', but then he isn't much of anything: apparently "Hegel helped us to start substituting hope for knowledge"¹⁰ (*Truth and Progress* 233). And Rorty's ignorance of the mature Marx – his lack of a "*familiarity with the historical background of arguments on similar topics*" – is exactly the reason why his "*arguments on such topics are punctuated by stale philosophical clichés*". Rorty's philosophy is indeed 'its time held in thought', but only as the ideological appearance to capitalism's essence. Take, for instance, a later vision of the philosopher from the Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*:

...a post-Philosophical culture would agree with Hegel that philosophy is "its own time apprehended in thoughts."

In a post-Philosophical culture it would be clear that that is all that philosophy can be. It cannot answer questions about the relation of the thought of our time – the descriptions it is using, the vocabularies it employs – to something which is not just some alternative vocabulary. So it is a study of the comparative

¹⁰ At least in the preface to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty fesses up to his dilettantism when it comes to Hegel: "Part of this book skates on pretty thin ice – the passages in which I offer controversial interpretations of authors whom I discuss only briefly. This is particularly true of my treatment of Proust and Hegel – authors about whom I hope someday to write more fully" (xi). Unfortunately he never made good on the IOU.

advantages and disadvantages of the various ways of talking which our race has invented. It looks, in short, much like what is sometimes called “culture criticism”—a term which has come to name the literary-historical-anthropological-political merry-go-round I spoke of earlier. The modern Western “culture critic” feels free to comment on anything at all. He is a prefiguration of the all-purpose intellectual of a post-Philosophical culture, the philosopher who has abandoned pretensions to Philosophy. He passes rapidly from Hemingway to Proust to Hitler to Marx to Foucault to Mary Douglas to the present situation in Southeast Asia to Ghandi [sic] to Sophocles. He is a name-dropper, who uses names such as these to refer to sets of descriptions, symbol-systems, ways of seeing. His specialty is seeing similarities and differences between great big pictures, between attempts to see how things hang together. He is the person who tells you how all the ways of making things hang together hang together. But, since he does not tell you about how all *possible* ways of making things hang together *must* hang together—since he has no extra-historical Archimedean point of this sort—he is doomed to become outdated. Nobody is so passé as the intellectual czar of the previous generation — the man who redescribed all those old descriptions, which, thanks in part to his redescription of them, nobody now wants to hear anything about. (“Pragmatism and Philosophy” 57-8)

This is indeed ‘Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (as Fredric Jameson coined the phrase in the title to his book on this curious phenomenon) — philosophy begins to sound like it can do little more than provide the instant gratification of unmoored channel flipping, and must conform to a kind of *planned* obsolescence. Rorty can attempt to ‘redescribe’ Marx’s historical materialism right out of the philosophical canon all he likes — an example of the futility of ‘linguistic idealism’, if there ever was one — but he had better be careful to leave standing the capitalist

infrastructure necessary to prop-up his merry-go-round.

Contra Rorty, I maintain that it was precisely Marx's *philosophical* training (specifically his radicalized Hegelianism) that led him to his critique of political economy. History can be viewed as the progress of freedom, yes – this Rorty takes for granted and makes into the foundation for his 'social hope'. But freedom, like history, is a dynamic process that by its very nature bursts the limits that have been set for it by thought and social institutions. The growing 'tensions' that characterize a given epoch point the way forward to what lies beyond current historical imagination. This was Hegel's hypothesis. But his story was an intellectual theodicy, the journey of a spiritual essence through forms of consciousness. Marx very clearly saw that this was a violent abstraction from those forces that alone could make plausible such a hypothesis. Thus he inverted Hegel, put him right side up again by telling the other side of the story, the side that foregrounded material reality. Thus *historical materialism* was born. With this working hypothesis in place, the cornerstone of which was nothing less than Hegel's dialectical method, Marx set about acquainting himself – at great length and with great care – with the history of political economy. At the time, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the field was still an adolescent science whose fundamental concepts, thought Marx, had yet to be precisely delineated and delimited. But without going into too much detail – it would take us too far afield to examine Marx's deep critical engagement with the likes of Adam Smith, Ricardo, etc. – what was it about Marx *as philosopher* that made him uniquely suited to undertake such a daunting task? My answer is that it was his

intellectual *courage*, his fearlessness in the face of entrenched presuppositions and a willingness to go back to the drawing board that drove him back to the search for first principles. It was Marx as philosopher that led him to political economy, the science of the reproduction of the material basis of social life, and it was Marx as philosopher that led him to a critique of its governing assumptions or presuppositions. It's a good thing Marx had the good fortune to study philosophy, for without those 'windy Hegelianisms' the science behind Rorty's 'social hope' would never have taken shape.

Nevertheless, in sketching the opposition between the analytic and continental (or 'conversational') traditions' self-images a few years before he died, Rorty couldn't help but *repress* this missing link:

I prefer conversational to analytic philosophy, so defined, because I prefer philosophers who are sufficiently historicist as to think of themselves as taking part in a conversation rather than as practicing a quasi-scientific discipline... Those who believe in [permanent structures of thought, or consciousness, or rationality, or language or *something*, for philosophers to reveal, and about which the vulgar may well be confused] tend to think of analytic philosophy as continuous with the Descartes-to-Kant sequence. They treat the Hegel-Nietzsche-Heidegger sequence as an unfortunate divagation, one that can be safely neglected. (*Philosophy as Cultural Politics* 126-7)

Introducing Marx into the discussion would reveal this as a false dichotomy: Marx was as rigorous a historicist as they come, but that hardly prevented him from engaging in scientific inquiry; he most certainly believed in structures that needed revealing – except

they were *historical* as opposed to permanent and thus *doomed to perish*; and, finally, what about the Kant-Hegel-Marx sequence?!

We might wonder where this ignorance or unconcern originates, and we'd go a good deal of the way towards answering such a query by consulting Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, where Engels forgives Feuerbach's ignorance of dialectical/historical materialism and blames it on "the wretched conditions in Germany". So, replacing the terms "Germany", "Feuerbach", and "village" – in that order – we get the following *historical* explanation of what Rorty represents: "The blame for this falls solely upon the wretched conditions in [American analytic philosophy departments], in consequence of which cobweb-spinning eclectic flea-crackers had taken possession of the chairs of philosophy, while [Rorty], who towered above them all, had to rusticate and grow sour in a little [humanities department]" (*Feuerbach* 29). We can thank Rorty for clearing away many of the cobwebs spun by analytic philosophy departments, but we can also leave the 'flea-cracking' to him.

Lenin's Marx: The Politics of Truth

What, then, is to be done? Lenin's answer (one must state the facts [*aussprechen was ist*], admit the truth that there is opinion in the Central Committee) is not a reference to a *different* set of objective facts, but the repetition of an argument made one decade earlier by Rosa Luxemburg, against Kautsky: those who wait for the objective conditions of the revolution to arrive will wait forever. The objective observer's position (and not that of an engaged agent) is itself the main

obstacle to the revolution. (Žižek, “Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!” *Critical Inquiry* 189)

What does it mean to say that “The objective observer’s position (and not that of an *engaged agent*) is itself the main obstacle to revolution” (my emphasis)? The answer is that for Žižek and the revolutionary Marxists, truth and objectivity *sometimes* – if one is working with Rorty’s conception of objectivity as that generated by the agreement of a linguistic community – pull in different directions. Objectivity is a fallible knowledge-commitment based on an imagined consensus that takes the ruling order for granted, whereas Truth is the readiness to stake everything on the redemption of those necessarily excluded from the process that generates the imagined consensus in the first place. The tension between these two commitments is summed up beautifully by Susan Buck-Morss: it is “the undeniable political experience of guilt that we humans feel when witnessing something deeply wrong with the principles that govern our everyday world” (*Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 83). She elaborates:

Something in the official order – evident but not acknowledged, spoken about but not known – contradicts its own sense of moral right. But because the authorities who speak for the whole tolerate¹¹, practice, and benefit from it, this order continues. The truth, available to conscious perception, is at the same time “disavowed,” to use Sibylle Fischer’s felicitous term, and moral imagination finds

¹¹ And ‘tolerate’ is the perfect word, for here we see the limits of the logic of tolerance thrown into sharp relief.

itself in conflict with social obedience. Political guilt has its own ambivalence, because refusing to do your socially prescribed duty in order to do right entails being a traitor to the collective that claims you (through nation or class, religion or race) and risking the loss of the collective's protection as a consequence. (Hegel 83)

Marx understood this *risk* all too well when he wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*:

In the domain of political economy, free scientific inquiry does not merely meet the same enemies as in all other domains. The peculiar nature of the material it deals with summons into the fray on the opposing side the most violent, sordid and malignant passions of the human breast, the Furies of private interest. The Established Church, for instance, will more readily pardon an attack on thirty-eight of its thirty-nine articles than on one thirty-ninth of its income. Nowadays atheism itself is a *culpa levis*, ['venial sin'] as compared with the criticism of existing property relations¹²." (*Capital* 92)

Little of *this* Marx comes across, however, in the minimal attempts that Rorty makes to recoup the Marxist legacy for his own pragmatic purposes:

Just as the New Testament is still read by millions of people who spend little time wondering whether Christ will some day return in glory, so the Communist

¹²And this insight from 1867 should alert us to the hypocrisy of the so-called 'brights', who denounce the fallacies of ignorant religious belief while playing deaf and dumb when it comes systemic *economic* inequalities.

Manifesto is still read even by those of us who hope and believe that full social justice can be attained without a revolution of the sort Marx predicted: that a classless society, a world in which ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ can come about as a result of what Marx despised as ‘bourgeois reformism’. Parents and teachers should encourage young people to read both books. The young will be morally better for having done so.
(*Philosophy and Social Hope* 203)

What we are left with is Marx-lite, politically neutered and safe enough to be taught in the schools of the American Empire. As Lenin put it, apropos “great revolutionaries” like Marx: “After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to surround their *names* with a certain halo for the ‘consolation’ of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping them, while at the same time emasculating the revolutionary doctrine of its content, vulgarizing it and blunting its revolutionary edge” (“The State and Revolution”, 272).

Žižek incisively diagnoses the most recent version of this moralistic retreat and accordingly counters by going on the offensive:

Today, even self-proclaimed post-Marxist radicals endorse the gap between ethics and politics, relegating politics to the domain of *doxa*, of pragmatic considerations and compromises which always and by definition fall short of the unconditional ethical demand. The notion of a politics which would not have been a series of mere pragmatic interventions, but the politics of Truth, is dismissed as ‘totalitarian.’ The breaking out of this deadlock, the reassertion of a politics of Truth today, should take the form of a *return to Lenin*. Why Lenin, why not

simply Marx? ... Today, 'returning to Marx' is already a minor academic fashion. *Which* Marx do we get in these returns? On the one hand, the Cultural Studies Marx, the Marx of the Messianic promise; on the other hand, the Marx who foretold the dynamic of today's globalization and is as such evoked even on Wall Street. What both these Marxes have in common is the *denial of politics proper*; the reference to Lenin enables us to avoid these two pitfalls. (*On Belief* 1-2)

The return to Lenin is the endeavour to retrieve the unique moment when a thought already transposes itself into a collective organization, but does not yet fix itself into an Institution (the established Church, the IPA, the Stalinist Party-State). It aims neither at nostalgically *re-enacting* the 'good old revolutionary times,' nor at the opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old program to 'new conditions,' but at *repeating*, in the present world-wide conditions, the Leninist gesture of initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order, and, furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth. What Christianity did with regard to the Roman Empire, this global 'multiculturalist' polity, we should do with regard to today's Empire. (*On Belief* 4-5)

Chapter Three

Philosophy as Actual Politics

When Žižek says,

the problem for me is *how to historicize historicism itself*... the passage from metaphysician to ironist in Richard Rorty, is not a simple epistemological progress but part of the global change in the very nature of capitalist society... one needs a kind of metanarrative that explains this very passage from essentialism to the awareness of contingency:... a more Marxist account in which this passage follows the dynamic of capitalism (Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?” 106)

he is talking about Rorty’s peculiar brand of linguistic historicism coupled with liberal ironism – since, after all, Žižek himself is a Marxist, and Marxism is *some kind of* historicism. Žižek’s fundamental premise consists in a rejection of Rorty’s belief that the substance of one’s respective political and philosophical positions do not essentially influence one another¹³ (that Rorty only *contingently* decided to combine them): “Rorty ... concludes ... that philosophical differences do not involve, generate, or rely on political differences – politically, they do not really matter. What, however, if philosophical differences *do* matter politically, and if, as a consequence, this *political*

13 “...I do not think that you can tell much about the worth of a philosopher’s views on such topics as truth, objectivity and the possibility of a single vision by discovering his politics, or his irrelevance to politics.” (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 18)

congruence between philosophers tells us something crucial about their pertinent *philosophical stance?*” (Žižek, “Class Struggle” 128).

To take a telling example of Rorty’s supposedly *merely philosophical* position directly making room for his political views, notice the way he characterises metaphysics: “Metaphysics – in the sense of a search for theories which will get at real essence – tries to make sense of the claim that human beings are something more than centerless webs of beliefs and desires” (Rorty, *Contingency* 88). Notice the way this characterisation is both human-centric and, as a consequence, mind-centric. This should come as no surprise if my initial argument that Rorty’s neo-pragmatism is in fact a disguised form of linguistic idealism was at all convincing. For this characterisation relies on Rorty’s assumptions about beliefs and desires being cashed out in terms of sentences, sentences being a product of the human mind, and truth being a mere property of sentences. All the emphasis is placed on the entrenched vocabulary or language-game that Rorty’s liberal audience takes for granted and which favors a particular distribution of truth-values to sentences viewed as meaningful relative to the vocabulary in question. Subtle modifications of that vocabulary can be tolerated as examples of innovative metaphorical uses of words, but a well-developed social theory that places this liberal language-game in a wider historical context of humans interacting with and transforming their material reality would no doubt be characterized as one of those crazy metaphysical “theories which will get at real essence”. Any historical analysis that puts the spotlight on ‘modes of production’ when it gives historical explanations for social or other phenomena

no doubt goes ‘too deep’. Why else would Rorty so wholeheartedly welcome Havel’s “lack of interest in underlying forces, historical trends, and large, conceptually graspable objects”? As Kate Soper has eloquently put it:

[Realists are not] after ahistoric verities in the manner that Rorty implies...It seems, to take but one instance here, quite mistaken to present Marx, along with other ‘radical critics’, as seeking to ‘penetrate to the true, natural, ahistorical matrix of all possible language and knowledge’. On the contrary, in seeking to reveal the ‘reality’ beneath the ‘appearances’ of capitalist society, Marx saw himself as exposing its essentially historical form; and it is in general a distortion to present realists as denying the historicity of knowledge or as adopting an absolutist position on truth. Rorty often seems to labour under the misapprehension that anyone looking for realities behind appearances is looking for something timeless or natural, which is not necessarily the case at all. (“Richard Rorty: Humanist and/or Anti-humanist?” in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* 118)

But Rorty cannot deny wholesale the existence or importance of the mode of production – this would be too glaring an omission – so he resorts to paying it a kind of lip-service. Žižek hits the nail on the head here:

deconstructionists usually start with the statement that production is also part of the discursive regime, not outside the domain of symbolic culture [– in other words, amenable to the analysis of the likes of Rorty’s ‘linguistic historicism’ –] and then go on to ignore it and focus on culture...Is not this ‘repression’ of production reflected in the sphere of production itself, in the guise of the division

between the virtual/symbolic site of ‘creative’ planning-programming and its execution, its material realization, carried out more and more in Third World sweatshops, from Indonesia or Brazil to China? This division – on the one hand, pure ‘frictionless’ planning, carried out on research ‘campuses’ or in ‘abstract’ glass-covered corporate high-rises; on the other, the ‘invisible’ dirty execution, taken into account by the planners mostly in the guise of ‘environmental costs’, etc. – is more and more radical today – the two sides are often even geographically separated by thousands of miles. (“Class Struggle” 129-130)

For instance, in “Back to Class Politics” (1996), Rorty states unequivocally that:

the wages of European and American workers are ridiculously high by world standards. There is less and less need to employ any of these workers, since the same work can be done elsewhere for a fifth of the cost. Furthermore, the globalization of the markets in capital and labour means that no nation’s economy is sufficiently self-contained to permit long-term social planning by a national government. So the American economy is passing out of the control of the American government, and thus out of the control of the American voters. (*Social Hope* 258)

Rorty thinks this is a situation to be deplored – “The fact that people are once again willing to cross picket lines, and are unwilling to ask themselves who makes their clothes or who picks their vegetables, is a symptom of moral decline” (257) – and recognizes unhappily that it “is fine with the 1 percent of Americans who own 40 per cent of their country’s wealth” (258). And yet, despite this “global overclass which makes all the major economic decisions, and makes them in entire independence of the legislatures,

and *a fortiori* of the will of the voters, of any given country” (*Social Hope* 233), whose accumulated money “is as easily used for illegal purposes, such as supplying land mines to the latest entrepreneurial warlord or financing gangster takeovers of trade unions, as it is for legal ones” (233), Rorty feels justified in scolding the Left for “thinking in world-historical, eschatological terms”. He observes disapprovingly that:

We have become impatient with anything smaller, discontented with patchwork solutions and temporary stopgaps. No sooner do we think we have an idea about what might help ghetto children in the United States than we realize that our idea has no relevance to the children in Uganda. Then we feel guilty for not having a theory that covers children everywhere...Part of our inheritance from Hegel and Lenin is that we feel guilty about having no planetary project under which to subsume our local hopes, no *global* leftist strategy. (*Truth* 238)

This last mission statement was published in 1995, but just a year later Rorty was saying:

The absence of a global polity means that the super-rich can operate without any thought of any interests save their own. We are in danger of winding up with only two genuinely global, genuinely international, social groups: the super-rich and the intellectuals, that is, the people who attend international conferences devoted to measuring the harm being done by their super-rich fellow cosmopolitans.

How can such cosmopolitan, jetsetting intellectuals help increase the chances of a global egalitarian utopia? I suspect that the most socially useful thing we can do is to continually draw the attention of the educated publics of our respective countries to the need for a global polity, which can develop some sort

of countervailing power to that of the super-rich. *We should probably be doing more than we are to dramatize the changes in the world economy which globalization is bringing about*, and to remind our fellow citizens that only global political institutions can offset the power of all that marvellously liquid and mobile capital.

I admit that the chance of revitalizing the United Nations, either for purposes of dealing with the warlords or for those of dealing with the conscienceless super-rich, is slim. *But I suspect that it is the only chance for anything like a just global society*. My own country is too poor and too nervous to serve as a global policeman, but the need for such a policeman is going to become ever greater as more and more warlords gain access to nuclear arms. No country can ask its own plutocrats to defend its interests, for any hard-nosed plutocrat will see economic nationalism as economically inefficient.

So much for my views on globalization. They are not views I hold in my capacity as a professor of philosophy, but simply the views of a concerned citizen of a country in decline. My native country has world-historical importance only because it cast itself in the role of vanguard of a global egalitarian utopia. It no longer casts itself in that role, and is therefore in danger of losing its soul. The spirit which animated the writing of Whitman and Dewey is no longer present (*Social Hope* 233-4 my emphases)

One should immediately grasp why I have resorted to quoting Rorty at great length here; his presentation of this constellation of concerns is emblematic of his method. The latter consists of running together a number of politico-philosophical positions informed by personal history and proclivity and then immediately disavowing them as un-philosophical. First there is the elitism he has often been accused of¹⁴. To be sure, it is an

¹⁴ See, for example, David L. Hall's *Richard Rorty: Poet and Prophet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994, p.37).

elitism that does not hesitate to encourage civil disobedience and trade union struggle at the local or, at most, national level, but all the same it is an elitism which is guiltily resigned to the reality that only elites are capable of acting on the world stage. Why else would Rorty restrict the duty of jetsetting intellectuals, so that “the most socially useful thing we can do is to continually draw the attention of the educated publics of our respective countries to the need for a global polity, which can develop some sort of countervailing power to that of the super-rich”? His underlying assumption is that bourgeois democracy is the ultimate horizon for this project, so instead of mobilizing the working classes to dispossess the super-rich and then wield the means of production in the *truly* general interest, he merely ‘reminds’ the middle and upper-classes (‘the educated publics’) of the need for the checks and balances of a ‘global polity’. Then there is the utopian posturing and ‘aw, shucks’ half-hearted attempt at political economy, the subtle whisper of admiration for financial manipulations (“*marvellously* liquid and mobile capital”), the fear of irrational Third World warlords (and not, as FDR would have had it, ‘fear itself’(!)), the ineradicable nationalism, and finally the abnegation of philosophical responsibility. In the pages that follow the above passage Rorty “revert[s] to [his] role as philosophy professor, and, more specifically, as a follower of John Dewey” (234). Accordingly he trots out the usual anti-metaphysical and anti-essentialist wisdoms, assures us that “Willingness to accept the liberal goal of maximal room for individual variation...is facilitated by a consensus that there is no source of authority other than the free agreement of human beings” and seals the deal with the glad tidings

that “This consensus, in turn, is facilitated by the adoption of philosophical views about reason and truth of the sort which are nowadays thought of as symptoms of ‘postmodern scepticism’ but which I think of as good old American pragmatism” (237). But after acknowledging the seemingly insurmountable odds facing any attempt to reach over that rainbow to “the goal that matters most: the classless society” (*Social Hope* 261), does Rorty *really believe* any of his proposals have *pragmatic* value? Or is it rather that they do have pragmatic value, but for a disavowed purpose?

There is a deep tension in Rorty between cynical realist and pie-eyed optimist – as he says in his brief response to Kate Soper: “I have no faith in human benevolence, though I have hopes for it. If I had to bet, I would bet that within a few centuries we shall have reverted to post-nuclear holocaust barbarism, and that all the good work done by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism will have to be done again. But I do not think such a reversion is inevitable, any more than I think that continuous progress is inevitable” (“Response to Kate Soper” 133). This is the schizophrenia of someone who desperately desires to “divide herself up into a private self-creator and a public liberal”, to “be, in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J.S. Mill” (*Contingency* 85). One might ask: “but what is *wrong* with such schizophrenia? Is it not simply what Gramsci was talking about when he referred to a ‘pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will’?” In Rorty’s case, however, I would turn this aphorism around. What Rorty wants is a *guilt-free* optimism of the intellect and a pessimism of the will: on the one hand, let there be no limits on self-creation – you can even imagine improbable utopias and get lost in daydreams; on the

other hand, be a ‘good citizen’ – do what you can to ‘make the world a better place’ – *but do not try to really change things*. Žižek puts it exceedingly well when he notes that

... Gilbert Keith Chesterton perspicuously detected the antidemocratic potential of the very principle of freedom of thought:

We may say broadly that free thought is the best of all safeguards against freedom. Managed in a modern style, the emancipation of the slave’s mind is the best way of preventing the emancipation of the slave. Teach him to worry about whether he wants to be free, and he will not free himself.

Is this not emphatically true of our ‘postmodern’ time, with its freedom to deconstruct, doubt, distantiate oneself? We should not forget that Chesterton makes exactly the same claim as Kant in his ‘What Is Enlightenment?’: ‘Think as much as you like, and as freely as you like, just obey!’ (*Welcome* 2-3)

I wonder: does not the ultimate pragmatic value of Rorty’s proposals lie in *absolving and protecting* those jetsetting, cosmopolitan intellectuals that find themselves unable to take seriously any substantial commitments beyond their own private ones to the enjoyment of aesthetic bliss? They can self-create with a clear conscience, whilst proving to the masses that they are paying their way with the modest contribution that is ‘pragmatism’ (for their own good, they had better call their ‘postmodern skepticism’ “good old American pragmatism”).

Rorty as Prophet and Profiteer

It is no surprise, then, that when Rorty took it upon himself to imagine – with a spoonful

of weary resignation – the broad strokes of the next American century he came up with the results he did: 2014 would see a revolution constituted by armed urban uprisings followed by a decades-long Second Great Depression and the so-called ‘Dark Years’; after military intervention righted things and restored some measure of order, a moral revolution over the course of 50 years would lead Rorty’s futuristic double to say: “Today morality is thought of neither as a matter of applying the moral law nor as the acquisition of virtues but as fellow feeling, the ability to sympathize with the plight of others” (*Social Hope* 249). But the precipitate of “fellow feeling” Rorty thinks will crystallize out of the chaos is far from being of the revolutionary variety. He takes the fraternal sentiments expressed by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* – in fact ones Steinbeck had married to revolutionary socialism – and tells us: “As long as people in trouble can sacrifice to help people who are in still worse trouble, Steinbeck insisted, there is fraternity, and therefore social hope” (248). Steinbeck was opposed to private property, but, writing from 2096, future-Rorty handily dissolves any apparent contradiction between revolutionary socialism and liberalism: “Late twentieth-century liberals no longer believed in getting rid of private ownership, but they agreed that the promise of American life could be redeemed only as long as Americans were willing to sacrifice for the sake of fellow Americans – only as long as they could see the government not as stealing their tax money but as needing it to prevent unnecessary suffering” (249).

Here again we have the same tired cant about redistribution, rather than even the faintest glimmer of class struggle over the means of production – the very means that

determine the social product that will be redistributed! But no matter: “Here, in the late twenty-first century, as talk of fraternity and unselfishness has replaced talk of rights, American political discourse has come to be dominated by quotations from Scripture and literature, rather than from political theorists and social scientists” (248). So we are back to a new moralistic opiate of the masses that stresses we abstract from the evils of political economy and focus instead on “Fraternity” as “*an inclination of the heart, one that produces a sense of shame at having much when others have little*” (my emphasis). “It is”, we are told, “not the sort of thing that anybody can have a theory about or that people can be argued into having” (248). And what is the party that trumpets the slogan of ‘Fraternity’?: “The Democratic Vistas Party, the coalition of trade unions and churches that toppled the military dictatorship in 2044, has retained control of Congress by successfully convincing the voters that its opponents constitute ‘the parties of selfishness’” (249). The ‘silent partner’ that obviously sits behind the scenes here is capitalism itself, seemingly suitably ‘mellowed’ by redistributive policies. But it’s not difficult to see that in fact it may be the population itself that has ‘mellowed’ – since no one has any interest in political or social science, it may instead be the case that, armed only with the de-theologized appeal to ‘fraternity’, the masses are incapable of any kind of social transformation that would alter economic relations. Thus when ‘times are tough’ (i.e. an economic crisis hits, austerity measures are implemented, etc.) they merely flock to their “union locals and religious congregations” (249) so as to ‘grin and bear it’. And because words like ‘class’, ‘capitalism’, ‘exploitation’ and the like will have been re-

described right out of existence by ‘progressive’ cultural critics like Rorty, effectively depriving the masses of the conceptual tools they might wield in order to improve their lot, we will have arrived at our longed-for classless society!

Most importantly, “Spared the equivalent of our own Dark Years, Europe, still, despite all that China can do, holds the position we lost in 2014: it still dominates both the world’s economy and its culture” (250). Saints be praised! Rorty’s precious Western canon escapes the apocalypse unscathed. As a counterpoint to this concealed triumphalism, we should invoke the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” of the great Marxist literary critic Walter Benjamin, whom Žižek is immensely fond of quoting – from Thesis VII:

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It [i.e. historicism] is a process of empathy whose origin is the *indolence of the heart*...which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness...The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called *cultural treasures*, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the

cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. (“Theses” 256-7 my emphases)

Rorty seems to take a certain objective drift of history for granted, for he is clearly unable to imagine *another world* beyond the one barreling towards catastrophe. But what would it mean to “brush history against the grain”? Žižek suggests a potential answer:

In a way, the Bolsheviks found themselves in a similar predicament at the end of the civil war in 1921: two years before his death, when it became clear that there would be no imminent European-wide revolution and that the idea of building socialism in one country was nonsense, Lenin wrote:

What if the complete hopelessness of the situation, by stimulating the efforts of the workers and peasants tenfold, offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilization in a different way from that of the West European countries?

Is this not the predicament of the Morales government in Bolivia, of the former Aristide government in Haiti, and of the Maoist government in Nepal? They came to power through “fair” democratic elections, not through insurrection, but once in power, they exerted it in a way which was (partially, at least) “non-statal”: directly mobilizing their grassroots supporters and bypassing the party-state representative network. Their situation is “objectively” hopeless: the whole drift

of history is basically against them, they cannot rely on “objective tendencies,” all they can do is to improvise, do what they can in a desperate situation.

Nevertheless, does this not give them a unique freedom? One is tempted to apply here the old distinction between “freedom from” and “freedom for”: does their freedom from History (with its laws and objective tendencies) not sustain their freedom for creative experimentation? In their activity, they can rely only on the collective will of their supporters. (*First as Tragedy* 154-5)

On the other hand, and in a strange reversal, Rorty often seems to assume that the thoroughly *Stalinist* idea of “socialism in one country” is perfectly plausible in an American context, as when he concurringly despairs that “the last few decades have witnessed the increasing inability to believe that some day we shall ever have a classless global society” (*Social Hope* 230) and yet simultaneously hopes:

It is time to revive the kind of leftist politics that pervaded American campuses from the Great Depression through to the early sixties – a politics that centres on the struggle to prevent the rich from ripping off the rest of the country. If the unions will help us to revive this kind of politics, maybe the academy and the labour movement can get together again. Maybe together we can help bring *our country* closer to the goal that matters most: the classless society. (*Social Hope* 260-1 my emphasis)

The same delusional tendency can clearly be seen in a breathtakingly elitist piece from 1992 called “Love and Money”:

Liberals...knew as well as Marxists that the soul of history...is economic, but they thought that history had to be guided from the top down, by the gentlefolk. The Marxists hoped that once those on the bottom seized control, once the revolution turned things upside down, everything would automatically get better. Here again, alas, the Marxists were wrong. So now Marxism is no longer much interest, and we are back with the question of what top-down initiatives we gentlefolk might best pursue. (*Social Hope* 225)

Of course, no mention is made of the fact that so-called Marxist governments have suffered precisely from a *lack* of bottom-up control. And what initiatives might our friendly neighborhood liberal have in store? Ones that amount to the *would-be* benign rule of a technocratic, bureaucratized, centralized North-Western Union:

This question looks manageable as long as we confine our attention to the northern hemisphere. If that part of the planet (suitably Gerry-mandered so as, for example, to include Australia and exclude China) were all we had to worry about, it would be plausible to suggest that there is, or soon will be, enough money to go around – that our problems are simply those of redistribution. All we need to do is to formulate effective...appeals to the tenderness of the gentlefolk who make up the electorates of the rich nations, appeals which will overcome greed. There seems to be enough money sloshing around the northern hemisphere to make it practicable, eventually...[to] end with the life chances of the Northerners roughly levelled out. Liberal hope, the hope for a decent world, a world in which Christianity's promises are fulfilled, nourishes itself on such scenarios.

The fear that is beginning to gnaw at the hearts of all us liberal gentlefolk in the North is that there are no initiatives which will save the southern hemisphere, that there will never be enough money in the world to redeem the

South. We are beginning to be at a loss for scenarios which cross the North-South border, largely because of the scary population growth statistics for countries such as Indonesia, India and Haiti. This part of the planet is becoming increasingly unthinkable. We are more and more tempted to turn it over to the statisticians, and to the sort of poet whom we call ‘the ethnologist’. (*Social Hope* 225-6)

It is clear that through the eyes of Rorty’s liberalism, those who people these populations are so far from being recognizable units of liberal individualism that they must become mere statistics and objects of study for the ethnologist. And wait a second – “we are more and more tempted to *turn it over*” (!?) – is this Rorty showing off his solidarity with global financial institutions that create unpayable debt obligations by engaging in neo-colonialist predatory loans to Third World countries? (*Social Hope* 225-6)

The only thing we know of which might help are top-down techno-bureaucratic initiatives like the cruel Chinese only-one-child-per-family policy (or, literalizing the top-down metaphor and pushing things one monstrous step further, spraying villages from the air with sterilizing chemicals). If there is a happy solution to the dilemma created by the need of very poor Brazilians to find work and the need of the rest of us for the oxygen produced by the Amazonian rain forest, it is going to be the result of some as yet unimagined bureaucratic-technological initiative, not of a revolution in ‘values’... Maybe technology and centralized planning will not work. But they are all we have got. (*Social Hope* 227-8)

Over Rorty’s Mill/Nietzsche schizophrenia I will gladly take “[Žižek’s]

discourse”, which Laclau disappointedly notes – and I happily admit! – “is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and insufficiently deconstructed Marxism” (“Structure, History and the Political” 205): “While his Lacanian tools, together with his insight, have allowed him to make considerable advances in the understanding of ideological processes in contemporary societies, his strictly political thought has not advanced at the same pace, and remains fixed in very traditional categories” (206). Of course, it is precisely from the standpoint of the largely traditional categories of Marxism that one can detect the way ‘deconstruction’ itself can become a tool of ideological mystification.

Essentialize This

This is why, lacking this Marxist perspective, even Rorty must slip a form of essentialism in through the back door via his linguistic historicist take on human nature: “We linguistic historicists think that there is no such thing as “humanity” to be emancipated... no common core to men and women of all ages and climes distinct from *their shared susceptibility to pain and humiliation*” (Rorty, *Truth* 320, my emphasis). Rorty thinks he is stating the most obvious anti-essentialist truism, but it is not hard to see how this ostensibly neutral claim already smuggles in the ground of the liberalism he hopes to combine with his linguistic historicism. For by putting all the emphasis on humans’ transhistorical “shared susceptibility to pain and humiliation”, he sets it up that the only transhistorical wrong that can be done is to maliciously play upon that susceptibility. Thus, given liberalism’s commitment to the inviolability of the individual and the

property that protects her, it only seems natural to combine such a view with the ethic of liberalism:

On the view of a naturalistic historicist like Dewey...*every* form of social life is likely, sooner or later, to freeze over into something the more imaginative and restless spirits of the time will see as “repressive” and “distorting.” What is wrong with these forms of life is not that they are “ideological,” but just that they have been used to justify the systematic administration of pain and humiliation. (Rorty, *Truth* 320)

In this passage Rorty slides imperceptibly from his historicism into his liberalism – the first sentence is purely predictive but makes no mention of the common core of ‘pain and suffering/humiliation’, while the second is evaluative but reads this common core back into the predictive analysis of the first. The kicker is that in today’s liberal societies, the ultimate bogey would be a political project that even *could* result in widespread ‘pain and humiliation’, even if its aim was to redress the fundamental economic contradictions at the heart of liberal societies that generate so much of the pain and humiliation we already take for granted. So under cover of being anti-essentialist, Rorty in fact *essentializes* – makes transhistorical – the overriding fear of ‘pain and humiliation’ endemic to liberal societies. The basic idea – if Žižek’s critique is to succeed – is that in Rorty’s case one’s political views inescapably condition one’s philosophical views¹⁵. As with Kant, our

¹⁵ In fact, Rorty himself takes something like this line (without realizing how it undermines his own position): “I [do not] think that postmodern skepticism and the fragility of universalistic conceptions play much of a role on [the political] scene. For these are merely *philosophical* matters, and I cannot

metaphysics is designed to accommodate our ethics.¹⁶

We need now to more precisely explore the nature of this implicit essentialism in Rorty's liberal ironism. Rorty says that the liberal ironist "takes the morally relevant definition of a person, a moral subject, to be 'something that can be humiliated'" (Rorty, *Contingency* 91); "she thinks that [the task of the intellectual] is to increase our skill at recognizing and describing the different sorts of little things around which individuals or communities center their fantasies and their lives" (Rorty, *Contingency* 93). An example of one of "the different sorts of little things around which individuals or communities center their fantasies and their lives" Rorty provides is the sentence "Do it to Julia!" from *1984* – the plea that the protagonist, Winston, is tortured into sincerely uttering, despite the fact that what he is asking is that Julia be tortured instead of him, and his love for

believe that the degree of utopian hope manifested by the public, or even that manifested among the intellectuals, is greatly influenced by changes in opinion among philosophy professors. I think of the causal influence as going the other way: philosophy is responsive to changes in amount of political hope, rather than conversely." (*Philosophy and Social Hope* 229)

¹⁶ "...Kantian formalism and radical historicism are not really opposites, but two sides of the same coin: every version of historicism relies on a minimal 'ahistorical' formal framework defining the terrain within which the open and endless game of contingent inclusions/exclusions, substitutions, renegotiations, displacements, and so on, takes place. The truly radical assertion of historical contingency has to include the dialectical tension between the domain of historical change itself and its traumatic 'ahistorical' kernel *qua* its condition of (im)possibility. Here we have the difference between historicity proper and historicism: *historicism* deals with the endless play of substitutions within the same fundamental field of (im)possibility, while *historicity* proper makes thematic different structural principles of this very (im)possibility. In other words, the historicist theme of the endless open play of substitutions is the very form of ahistorical ideological closure: by focusing on the simple dyad essentialism–contingency, on the passage from the one to the other, it obfuscates concrete historicity *qua* the change of the very global structuring principle of the Social." (Žižek, p. 111-112, *CHU* my emphasis) Hence Rorty's liberal version of historicism relies on the following "minimal 'ahistorical' formal framework: "I think the Left should get back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy" (*Achieving Our Country*, 105 my emphasis).

Julia is the very center of his being. According to Rorty, “If one can discover that key sentence and that key thing, then...one can tear a mind apart”; “presumably each of us stands in the same relations to some sentence, and to some thing” (Rorty, *Contingency* 179). As Žižek perspicuously points out, “Pain is here not primarily physical but above all ‘mental pain,’ [Rorty, *Contingency* 179] humiliation brought about by the intrusion into another’s fantasy” (Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 158). So the point for Rorty is that via the intellectual we can all become more aware of the various idiosyncratic ‘knots’ that tie together each of our respective fantasies, and then make sure that we do not tread too violently on them – thus satisfying our moral obligation by avoiding the infliction of the ‘mental pain’ that attends this specific form of humiliation.

In order to sustain this liberal utopian fantasy, Rorty relies on a robust (he hopes) distinction between the public and the private. Žižek sums up Rorty’s position fairly:

In what does this “liberal utopia” consist? Rorty’s fundamental premise is that we must “drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private” and be “content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.” [Rorty, *Contingency* xv] The ideal, utopian society would be then a society in which the domains of “public” and “private” are clearly differentiated, a society making possible to every individual and community the free pursuit of “the different sorts of little things around which [they] center their fantasies and their lives,” a society in which the role of social law is reduced to a set of neutral rules guarding this freedom of self-creation by protecting each individual from violent intrusions into his private space. (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 159)

Žižek's critique of this split – although he does not frame it in exactly these terms – amounts to a dialectical reversal that applies to the liberal utopian fantasy and its correlative public/private split the general logic of fantasy that Rorty himself adheres to. For the upshot of Rorty's proposed 'incommensurability' is that he himself must be left alone to *enjoy* his Liberal Utopia – a pure fantasy if there ever was one (remember Rorty's own statement of the matter): "we can and should [organize the events which crowd in upon us from the human and nonhuman worlds with the help of the Idea of a universal history of humanity], as long as the point of doing so is to lift our spirits through utopian fantasy" (Rorty, *Objectivity* 212). And Rorty's 'private' fantasy inherently incorporates an all-too-'public' dimension:

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us [hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision]. The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please as long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange. (Rorty, *Contingency* xiv)

It does not get much more ‘public’ than this – we are even told what “the aim of a just and free society” ought to be, along with general practical guidelines for achieving this aim.

Rorty’s purportedly ‘private’ fantasy aims to make possible a very specific form of *enjoyment*, one which already and necessarily goes hand in hand with an overt ‘intrusion’ into the fantasy spaces of others. That is, we live in a *class* society, one where the capitalist class effectively *enjoys* the power to determine the direction of public authority. Certain kinds of *enjoyment* – such as the freedom for certain limited projects of self-creation – are granted to subjects of such authority, but only on condition that they *renounce* the very enjoyment of the power to determine how their enjoyment is constrained. As Žižek puts it, in language that attempts to map psychoanalytic theory onto Marxism:

The problem with this liberal dream is that the split between public and private never comes about without a certain remainder...the very social law that, as a kind of neutral set of rules, should limit our aesthetic self-creation and deprive us of a part of our enjoyment on behalf of solidarity, is always already penetrated by an obscene, “pathological,” surplus enjoyment. The point is thus not that the split public/private is not possible, but that it is possible only on condition that the very domain of public law is “smeared” by an obscene dimension of “private” enjoyment: public law draws the “energy” for the pressure it exerts on the subject from the very enjoyment of which it deprives him by acting as an agency of prohibition. In psychoanalytic theory, such an obscene law has a precise name: the *superego*. (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 159)

Now according to Marx, the capitalist system runs on the surplus-value it extracts from wage-laborers forced to sell their labor-power – that is, workers are deprived of or forced to renounce a portion of the value their labor creates. This is what gives capitalist society its class character. Analogously, politics that pretends to eternally cleave the private and public can only do so on condition that its political subjects renounce their right to determine the fundamental structuring principle of society – this is where the *surplus enjoyment* comes from:

it is this renunciation, this giving up of enjoyment itself, which produces a certain surplus-enjoyment.

This surplus produced through renunciation is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the embodiment of surplus-enjoyment; here we can also grasp why Lacan coined the notion of surplus-enjoyment on the model of the Marxian notion of surplus-value – with Marx, surplus-value also implies a certain renunciation of ‘pathological’, empirical use-value. (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 82)

But by renouncing this enjoyment (or value, in the case of workers) political subjects engage in the ultimate ideological mystification – they presuppose the *neutrality* of the social substance they hypostatize. Of course, behind the veil of this automated social authority lie the very subjective (read *private*) interests that are appropriating the surplus enjoyment for themselves – thus determining, with the blessing given them by their dutiful subjects, what the fundamental structuring principle of society will be. As Žižek

puts it: “behind the statement of the moral law that imposes on us the renunciation of enjoyment, there is always hidden an obscene subject of enunciation, amassing the enjoyment it steals. The superego is, so to speak, an agency of the law exempted from its authority: it does itself what it prohibits us from doing” (*Looking Awry* 159). Thus, thinks Žižek, “We can now locate in a precise manner the flaw of Rorty’s ‘liberal utopia’: it presupposes the possibility of a universal social law *not* smudged by a ‘pathological’ stain of enjoyment, i.e., delivered from the superego dimension” (*LA* 160). One imagines Žižek is employing this psychoanalytic terminology in order to persuade us that Rorty’s utopian vision is itself based in a kind of *pathology* – one that, in the name of democracy and autonomy, ultimately renounces both in an act of fetishistic disavowal. That is, Rorty *fetishizes* liberal institutions, he mistakenly imagines they can swing free from the historical conditions that mark them as instruments of the ruling bourgeois or capitalist class.

Rorty retorts:

I do not see that political liberalism need presuppose anything of the sort. I imagine that *ressentiment*, as well as the mild form of sadism which is intrinsic to Kantian notions of obligation, will go on forever – or at least as long as there are judges, police, etc. But I should think the question is whether anybody has any better ideas for a legal and political system than the liberal, constitutional, social democratic one. I can find nothing in Freud, Lacan, Žižek, Derrida, Laclau or Mouffe which persuades me that anybody does. (“Response to Ernesto Laclau” 76)

From the preceding discussion we can see clearly that Rorty here seeks to dodge this bullet by quickly disavowing his own proposed private/public split. For the point of the split was to allow for private sublimity by keeping the public realm pragmatic and thus non-sublime (i.e. not too dangerous), but the force of Žižek's critique – what all his talk of surplus-enjoyment amounts to – is to point out that despite Rorty's professed 'hope' for a classless society, he has ultimately *renounced* the necessary means to that end, and thus the end itself. He has refused to endorse any political measures that would change the class relations of liberal societies by wresting the reins of power from the capitalist class and putting it in the hands of the working or non-capital-owning classes, and so his professed desire for a classless society can only be so much empty talk. And yet he clings to a utopian vision that imagines away the fundamental contradiction between a constitutional order that enshrines the right of profit-making, and the egalitarianism profit-making renders impossible. For Marxists, there is no capitalist class without a working class, and there are no incentives without competition for the surplus-value these antagonistic class-relations create. Thus, even in the supposedly neutral public realm of capitalist society, where we are 'equal before the law', a pathological sublimity operates that unleashes violent and dangerous forces well beyond those that drive down wages and decimate public spending. One merely has to remember that the arms trade is one of the biggest of businesses, or to google the origin of coltan – the metallic ore that contains elements indispensable for manufacturing expensive electronic products – to be cognizant

of the hair-raising dangers endemic to capitalist society. As Marx put it in *The Communist Manifesto*: “Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (225).

It is Žižek here who is the true historicist, and Rorty the closet essentialist: the latter’s liberal utopian dream is either too *abstract* (the *neutral* public realm is de-historicized in the sense that it is emptied of the contingent historical content of embodied and embedded human beliefs and desires – in other words, its perspectival *fantasy* element); or it is sustained precisely by its “relations to some sentence, and to some thing” – namely, a deathly aversion (like Winston’s towards “Do it to Julia!” and the ravenous rats that induce his innermost betrayal) to “nationalizing the means of production” (Postel, “Last Words from Richard Rorty”) and “attractive alternatives (more or less Marxist in shape) to such institutions as private ownership of the means of production and constitutional democracy, attractive alternatives to the traditional socio-democratic project of constructing an egalitarian welfare state within the context of these two basic institutions” (Rorty, “Feminism” 11). But since the “mental pain” Rorty seeks to avoid is not some ‘bad-in-itself’ (that would be pure essentialism), how do we know that what is needed in order to combat the impending capitalist catastrophe/apocalypse is not in fact just this kind of ‘innermost betrayal’? :

is not the very aim of the psychoanalytic process to shake the foundations of the analysand's fundamental fantasy, i.e., to bring about the "subjective destitution" by which the subject acquires a sort of distance toward his fundamental fantasy as the last support of his (symbolic) reality? Is not the psychoanalytic process, then, a refined and therefore all the more cruel method of humiliation, of removing the very ground beneath the subject's feet, of forcing him to experience the utter nullity of those "divine details" around which all his enjoyment is crystallized? (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 156)

Taking this 'leap of faith' *from* the comfort of liberal ironism and *to* the stark reality of 'dogmatic' revolutionary Marxism *hurts*, it can be painful and humiliating. But for those of us looking for a future, it may be our only hope.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The Public Use of Dialectical Reason

Unsatisfied with Rorty's public/private split, Žižek proposes that Kant's distinction between Public and Private uses of Reason should take its place: "It is Kant who should be read here as the critic of Rorty" (Žižek, *Tragedy* 105). For Kant, the private realm is where one uses one's Reason in an instrumental way, getting on with everyday matters and serving one's local or ethnic authority by engaging in means-ends deliberation. The public realm, by contrast,

refers to the transnational universality of the exercise of one's Reason...one participates in the universal dimension of the "public" sphere precisely as a singular individual extracted from, or even opposed to, one's substantial communal identification – one is truly universal only when radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities...In his vision of public space characterized by the unconstrained exercise of Reason, he invokes a dimension of emancipatory universality *outside* the confines of one's social identity, of one's position within the order of (social) being – precisely the dimension so crucially missing in Rorty. (Žižek, *Tragedy* 105)

What is interesting about this characterization of the Public Use of Reason is how much it sounds like the role of the public intellectual that both Rorty and Žižek have played on the 'transnational' circuit, "in the interstices of communal identities". Similarly, compare these two subtly diverging descriptions of the process of forming collectives that aim to overturn certain established norms or institutions:

in contrast to socialism, communism refers to singular universality, to the direct link between the singular and the universal, bypassing particular determinations. When Paul says that, from a Christian standpoint, “there are no men or women, no Jews or Greeks,” he thereby claims that ethnic roots, national identities, etc., are *not a category of truth*... This space of singular universality is what, within Christianity, appears as the “Holy Spirit” – the space of a collective of believers *subtracted* from the field of organic communities, or of particular life-worlds (“neither Greeks nor Jews”). (Žižek, *Tragedy*, 104-105)

I am suggesting that we see the contemporary feminist movement as playing the same role in intellectual and moral progress as was played by, for example, Plato’s Academy, the early Christian meetings in the catacombs, the invisible Copernican colleges of the seventeenth century, groups of working men gathering to discuss Tom Paine’s pamphlets, and lots of other clubs which were formed to try out new ways of speaking, and to gather the moral strength to go out and change the world. For groups build their moral strength by achieving increasing semantic authority over their members, thereby increasing the ability of those members to find their moral identities in their membership of such groups. (Rorty, “Feminism” 9)

For Žižek, forming a new collective that ‘subtracts’ itself from the dominant discourse or ideology of its society and strives to realize some radical, ‘new’ vision of society is to move in the realm of ‘singular universality’ – a seemingly ‘metaphysical’ space in which a one-of-a-kind entity nonetheless speaks and stands in for an entire class of entities as their exemplar or paradigm. The task of this singular universality is to create the contours of a new fundamental fantasy framework in which to pursue our aims as human beings.

But, even more than this, the singular universality of such collectives is able to get in touch with Truth *as such*, in just the way we explored earlier – only by dwelling in the “interstices of communal identities”, or in other words in the blind spot of the ruling ideology, can we access the Truth denied to those identities/ideologies as a consequence of their own abuses of abstraction. For Rorty, on the other hand, these collectives must remain tethered to the inescapable horizon of the fantasy frame of the Liberal Utopia, gradually refashioning the existing discursive tools of the liberal-democratic-social-welfare state with the aim of ever-more inclusive tolerance – ‘private’ languages are allowed to develop for their own sake, just as long as they do not upset the public/private split. Their “moral identities” must be fashioned within the ostensibly *neutral* frame of the public provided by the liberal utopian fantasy.

If, however, we have successfully problematized Rorty’s key distinction between the public and the private, what is to stop us from collapsing his pragmatism into Žižek’s metaphysics, or vice versa? Rorty’s wager is that a world without metaphysics will be more conducive to the amelioration of that very specific form of pain and humiliation involved in the disruption of a person’s fantasy frame. Žižek’s counter-wager is that individual fantasy-frames do not function in isolation from one another but are always already operative *within* a fundamentally *non-neutral* fantasy frame that circumscribes them in an inevitably *intrusive* way. Thus the choice between them comes down to a choice between two *theories* of fantasy and their respective correlative *fantasies*: Rorty’s Liberal Utopia (the macro-fantasy/universal medium) and its attendant private,

idiosyncratic worlds (micro-fantasies/particular instances); or Žižek's Communism (neither macro-fantasy/universal, nor micro-fantasy/particular, but the singular universal fantasy – the perspective from which even the macro-frame can be seen as contingent). If achieving our pragmatic aims is a matter of moving through linguistic innovation, to semantic authority, to moral identity, why should we not side with Žižek in reviving the so-called metaphysical categories of dialectical materialism, especially since they seem to give us a way of paradoxically historicizing stubbornly recalcitrant fantasy-frames that have become subtly essentialized and counter-productive?

It is thus crucial to insist on the communist-egalitarian emancipatory Idea, and insist on it in a very precise Marxian sense: there are social groups which, on account of their lacking a determinate place in the “private” order of the social hierarchy, stand directly for universality; they are what Rancière calls the “part of no-part” of the social body. All truly emancipatory politics is generated by the short-circuit between the universality of the “public use of reason” and the universality of the “part of no-part”—this was already the communist dream of the young Marx: to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat. (*First as Tragedy* 99)

Liberals who acknowledge the problems of those excluded from the socio-political process formulate their goal as being the inclusion of those whose voices are not heard: all positions should be listened to, all interests taken into account, the human rights of everyone guaranteed, all ways of life, cultures and practises respected, and so on. The obsession of this democratic discourse is the protection of all kinds of minorities: cultural, religious, sexual, *e tutti quanti*. The formula of democracy is patient negotiation and compromise. What gets lost here is the proletarian position, the position of universality embodied in the Excluded. That

is why, upon a closer look, it becomes clear that what Hugo Chávez has begun [this was written in 2008 – GS] doing in Venezuela differs markedly from the standard liberal form of inclusion: Chávez is not including the excluded in a pre-existing liberal-democratic framework; he is, on the contrary, taking the “excluded” dwellers of favelas as his *base* and then reorganizing political space and political forms of organization so that the latter will “fit” the excluded. Pedantic and abstract as it may appear, this difference—between “bourgeois democracy” and “dictatorship of the proletariat”—is crucial. (*First* 102)

Hegel Young and Old

A fascinating point of overlap between Žižek and Rorty is their shared proclivity for invoking Hegel as the philosopher of radical historical contingency. Rorty’s view of historical progress takes the following form:

There is no human nature which was once, or still is, in chains. Rather, our species has – ever since it developed language – been making up a nature for itself. This nature has been developed through ever larger, richer, more muddled, and more painful syntheses of opposing values... We see no reason why either recent social and political developments or recent philosophical thought should deter us from our attempt to build a cosmopolitan world-society – one which embodies the same sort of utopia with which the Christian, Enlightenment, and Marxist metanarratives of emancipation ended. (Rorty, *Objectivity* 213).

Rorty’s talk of “ever larger, richer, more muddled, and more painful syntheses of opposing values” is an obvious allusion to Hegel, and relies on a picture of his dialectical progression that foregrounds ‘synthesis’ – the bringing together of elements once thought

to be necessarily separate. Žižek, on the other hand, has always made a point of downplaying synthesis and highlighting the centrality of ‘negativity’ for Hegel – the way a new manifestation of Spirit emerges as a consequence of accepting ‘contradiction’ or some unbridgeable ‘gap’ as fundamental. To take one simple example: Žižek would say that the proper way to construe the progression from Kant to Hegel in metaphysical terms is as Hegel *asserting the gap between the phenomenal and noumenal as such*. That is, as negating the noumenal realm altogether, and elevating appearance to an absolute status. This move introduces a dimension of contingency which de-transcendentalizes (because it surgically removes the noumenal) and so makes the recognition of the contingency of the categories (and with them all imagined transcendental guarantors) possible:

It is Kant who goes only halfway in his destruction of metaphysics, still maintaining the reference to the Thing-in-itself as the external inaccessible entity; Hegel is merely a radicalized Kant, who takes the step from negative access to the Absolute to the Absolute itself as negativity. Or, to put it in the terms of the Hegelian shift from epistemological obstacle to positive ontological condition (our incomplete knowledge of the Thing turns into a positive feature of the Thing which is in itself incomplete, inconsistent): it is not that Hegel “ontologizes” Kant; on the contrary, it is Kant who, insofar as he conceives the gap as merely epistemological, continues to presuppose a fully constituted noumenal realm existing out there, and it is Hegel who “deontologizes” Kant, introducing a gap into the very texture of reality. (Žižek, *The Parallax View* 27)

This is exactly the line of interpretation Engels takes when he characterizes “the true

significance and the revolutionary character of the Hegelian philosophy”, which is “the close of the whole movement since Kant” (*Ludwig Feuerbach* 11):

...this dialectical philosophy dissolves all conceptions of final absolute truth and of a final absolute state of humanity corresponding to it. For it, nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher. And dialectical philosophy itself is nothing more than the mere reflection of this process in the thinking brain. It has, of course, a conservative side: it recognizes that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances; but only so far. The conservatism of this mode of outlook is relative; *its revolutionary character is absolute—the only absolute it admits.* (12 my emphasis)

Rorty and Žižek’s shared fondness for Hegel, but their slight difference of emphasis when interpreting him, seems analogous to the coming repetition of the Old/Young Hegelian split Žižek prophesies:

If communism really is an “eternal” Idea, then it works as a Hegelian “concrete universality”: it is eternal not in the sense of a series of abstract-universal features that may be applied everywhere, but in the sense that it has to be re-invented in each new historical situation. (*Tragedy* 6)

As Susan Buck-Morss has demonstrated in her essay “Hegel and Haiti,” the successful slave uprising in Haiti, which resulted in the free Haitian republic, was the silent...point of reference for (or the absent Cause of) Hegel’s dialectic of

Master and Slave, first introduced in his Jena manuscripts and developed further in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Buck-Morss's simple statement "there is no doubt that Hegel and Haiti belong together" concisely captures the explosive result of the short-circuit between these two heterogeneous terms. "Hegel and Haiti"—this is also, perhaps, the most succinct formula of communism. (*Tragedy* 111)

The future will be Hegelian – and much more radically than Fukuyama thinks. The only true alternative that awaits us – the alternative between socialism and communism – is the alternative between the two Hegels...Hegel's "conservative" vision uncannily points forward to "capitalism with Asian values": a capitalist civil society organized into estates and kept in check by a strong authoritarian state with managerial "public servants" and traditional values. (Contemporary Japan comes close to this model.) The choice is either this Hegel – or the Hegel of Haiti. It is as if the split into Old and Young Hegelians is to be re-enacted once again. (Žižek, *Tragedy* 148)

For Žižek, the only way out of the impasse of the inevitable erosion of democratic institutions is some kind of desperate gambit of collective action, where a national *minority* – one that nonetheless *stands in* for the oppressed classes, championing their material interests – comprised of Leftists tries for radical transformation of the existing social structure as soon as they are able to grab power. What is remarkable is that Rorty, towards the end of his life, prophesied the exact same fate for democratic institutions, but without taking into account the possibility of any truly emancipatory future. In the wake of 9/11, its correlative War on Terror rhetoric, and the attendant rise of the national security state with its projected rollback of all kinds of familiar liberal freedoms, Rorty's Old Hegelianism had this to say:

Such developments would gradually reduce the effectiveness of the various institutions that have made it possible for public opinion to influence the actions of democratic governments. At the end of this process of erosion, democracy would have been replaced by something quite different. This would probably be neither military dictatorship nor Orwellian totalitarianism, but rather a relatively benevolent despotism, imposed by what would gradually become a hereditary nomenklatura... That sort of power structure survived the end of the Soviet Union and is now resolidifying under Putin and his fellow KGB alumni. The same structure seems to be taking shape in China and in South-East Asia. (Rorty, "Post-Democracy")

But instead of suggesting any kind of Communist alternative, he retreated into a bitter pessimism. His initially weak positive proposal for buffering these developments – “The only thing I can think of that might make a difference is a willingness to challenge the culture of government secrecy” (“Post-Democracy”) – gave way, in the weeks before his death, to the belief that “the end of democracy is a likely consequence of nuclear terrorism, and I do not know how to guard against this danger. Sooner or later some terrorist group will repeat 9/11 on a much grander scale. I doubt that democratic institutions will be resilient enough to stand the strain” (Postel, “Last Words”). In the end, then, Rorty comes out looking more like Hegel’s Kant than Hegel himself: according to Sally Sedgwick, Hegel characterized the Kantian philosophy as “a metaphysic of grief and longing” (Sedgwick, *Hegel’s Critique of Kant* 85) – Rorty’s Liberal Utopia is Kant’s Noumenal realm for a new era, and still forever out of reach.

Revolution at the Gates

To Rorty's sorry excuse for a global Leftist strategy it is worth opposing one of Žižek's crazy speculations. Although it may come to nothing, it at least sets the mind turning in search of *real* alternatives to the concealed upper-class solidarity of Rorty's liberalism, and attempts to make the kind of global connections we so desperately need at a time when the clock is ticking ever closer to those 'Dark Years' (it's 2014, after all):

... what if the new proletarian position is that of the inhabitants of slums in the new megalopolises? The explosive growth of slums in recent decades, especially in Third World megalopolises from Mexico City and other Latin American capitals through Africa (Lagos, Chad) to India, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia, is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times... Since, sometime very soon (or maybe, given the imprecision of Third World censuses, it has already happened), the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural population, and since slum-dwellers will make up the majority of the urban population, we are by no means dealing with a marginal phenomenon. We are thus witnessing the rapid growth of a population outside state control, living in conditions half outside the law, in dire need of minimal forms of self-organization. Although this population is composed of marginalized labourers, redundant civil servants, and ex-peasants, they are not simply a redundant surplus: they are incorporated into the global economy in numerous ways, many of them as informal wage-workers or self-employed entrepreneurs, with no adequate health or social security cover. (The main reason for their rise is the inclusion of Third World countries in the global economy, with cheap food imports from First World countries ruining local agriculture.) They are the true "symptom" of slogans like "Development," "Modernization," and "World Market": not an

unfortunate accident, but a necessary product of the innermost logic of global capitalism. (*The Parallax View* 268¹⁷)

What we find in “really existing slums” is, of course, a mixture of improvised modes of social life, from religious “fundamentalist” groups held together by a charismatic leader and criminal gangs up to seeds of new “socialist” solidarity. The slum-dwellers are the new counterclass to the other newly emerging class, the so-called “symbolic class” (managers, journalists and PR people, academics, artists, and so on) which is also uprooted and perceives itself as directly universal (a New York academic has more in common with a Slovene academic than with blacks in Harlem half a mile from his campus). Is this the new axis of class struggle, or is the “symbolic class” inherently split, so that we can make the emancipatory wager on the coalition between the slum-dwellers and the “progressive” part of the symbolic class? What we should be looking for are the signs of the new forms of social awareness that will emerge from the slum collectives: they will be the seeds of the future. (269)

There is no time to waste here – the ideological battle over the meaning of the global explosion of slum populations has already begun, with capitalism firing the first shot:

In a speech to the financial elite of India delivered in Mumbai in 2010, president Barack Obama opted for an unusual form of flattery. He saluted “all the Mumbaikars who get up every day in this City of Dreams to forge a better life for their children—from the boardrooms of world-class Indian companies to the shops in the winding alleys of Dharavi.” It was a notable name-check. Despite the president’s mangled pronunciation, his audience of well-heeled Mumbaikars all

¹⁷ Žižek is merely reiterating Mike Davis’s “excellent report”, “Planet of Slums: Urban Revolution and the Informal Proletariat,” *New Left Review* (March/April 2004). This article was later expanded into a book, *Planet of Slums*.

knew what Obama was talking about. Dharavi is their metropolis's most famous slum.

Were Indian prime minister Narendra Modi to come to America and do the same—hail the impoverished workfare mothers of Anacostia while on a state visit to Washington, say, or give a shout-out to the tenants of Harlem's housing projects during a speech on Wall Street—it would be an uncomfortable moment. But, of course, it would never happen. If Modi's speechwriters tried to throw in a mention of a famous impoverished neighborhood, higher-ups would surely excise it. The American myth of equal opportunity is greatly cherished, they would inform the prime minister, so in the interest of being a gracious guest, let's not mention the places that call it into question.

But Obama's tribute to Dharavi went over remarkably well. Those present at the tony U.S.-India Business Council summit seem to have taken it as the compliment he intended it to be. By the time the president sang the praises of Asia's largest slum, as it's known (although these days Karachi's Orangi neighborhood is challenging it for that dubious distinction), the ideological precedent for this sort of thing was well established. Through a decade of academic apologetics and media mythologizing, Dharavi had been transmuted from India's most shameful urban space—the warren of exploitation, filth, and disease that it plainly is—to the pride of Mumbai. Prince Charles had visited Dharavi on a postcolonial inspection tour in 2003. (Prince Andrew would follow in 2012.) A cover story in *National Geographic* had presented Dharavi as a place of audacious dreamers. The *Wall Street Journal* had recommended Dharavi's "dusty, bustling" leather goods market to "adventurous shoppers in search of true bargains," and the *New York Times* had advised visitors to the Indian financial capital to take in Dharavi's "hives of entrepreneurship," where toil the "majority of Mumbaikars [who], of course, cannot afford nightclubs or cool boutiques." By 2010 Dharavi was a well-established symbol, and what it symbolized was the capitalist dream: a wonderland of innovation in which resourceful economic actors deftly evade the interference of an overbearing government.

Before long, the idea of the market-affirming slum went global. Shantytowns all

over the developing world were reconceived as industrious anthills of pluck and ingenuity, places that showed capitalism at its best. It was a stunning feat of intellectual alchemy, like a pundit using Soweto as an illustration of the wisdom of apartheid.

It caught on because it tapped into one of the most durable fantasies of the business culture—the notion that the poor make better, tougher capitalists than the rich. Durable because it delivers what all such fantasies aim to deliver: a balm for the middle-class conscience and the conviction that the poor enthusiastically support the system that keeps them poor. (Brook, “Slumming It”)

This fantasy cannot last long. Will we intellectuals continue to deny that our civilization is one supported by barbarism, conceiving those outside our gates as the barbarians¹⁸? Or will we assist in tearing down the gates themselves, fulfilling the promise of our civilization and embracing our species-being?

Final Thoughts

If the foregoing has been at all convincing, then I need not say more. You will already have set aside *Philosophy and Social Hope* and started reading *Capital Vol. 1*, or Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach*, or perhaps even Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*. But if you are

¹⁸ “Back in 2001, a UN investigation on the illegal exploitation of natural resources in Congo found that conflict in the country is mainly about access to and control and trade of five key mineral resources: coltan, diamonds, copper, cobalt and gold. According to this report, the exploitation of Congo’s natural resources by local warlords and foreign armies is ‘systematic and systemic’, and the leaders of Uganda and Rwanda in particular (closely followed by Zimbabwe and Angola) had turned their armed forces into armies of business. The report concludes that permanent civil war and the disintegration of Congo ‘has created a “win-win” situation for all belligerents. The only loser in this huge business venture is the Congolese people’. One should bear in mind this good old ‘economic-reductionist’ background when one reads in the media about primitive ethnic passions exploding yet again in the African ‘heart of darkness’... Beneath the façade of ethnic warfare, we thus discern the contours of global capitalism” (Žižek, xviii “Foreword” to *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* by Sophie Wahnich).

unconvinced, then you may be exhausted and sick to your stomach with what can only read like so much propagandistic drivel. Here I cannot help you, nor can I – it seems – help myself. Marxism is a world-view; it is a comprehensive doctrine capable of guiding both action and research. If it has a place for Rorty's pragmatism (or linguistic historicism, or whatever) it is as one move in a historical dialectic, useful for debunking philosophies unmindful of history, but useless for understanding history itself.

Bibliography

- Arblaster, Anthony. *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969: 253-264.
- Brook, Daniel. "Slumming It: The gospel of wealth comes for Dharavi." *The Baffler*. The Baffler, No. 25 2014. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.
- Cornforth, Maurice. *Science Versus Idealism: In Defence of Philosophy against Positivism and Pragmatism*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975.
- Engels, Frederick. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. Ed. C.P. Dutt. New York: International Publishers, 1941.
- Freeland, Chrystia. *Sale of the Century: The Inside Story of the Second Russian Revolution*. London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000.
- Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. London: Michael Joseph, 1994.
- . *On Empire: America, War, and Global Supremacy*. New York: The New Press, 2009.
- Hymers, Michael. "Truth and Metaphor in Rorty's Liberalism." *International Studies in Philosophy*. XXVIII: 4 (1996): 1-21.
- Ingham, Geoffrey. *Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008.

- Joravsky, David. *Soviet Marxism and Natural Science, 1917-1932*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
- Laclau, Ernesto. "Structure, History and the Political." *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek. London: Verso, 2000: 182-212.
- Lenin, V.I.. "The State and Revolution." *Essential Works of Lenin: "What is to Be Done?" and Other Writings*. Ed. Henry M. Christman. New York: Dover, 1987: 271-364.
- Lloyd, Brian. *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1922*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. *Reform or Revolution*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1976.
- . "Theses on Feuerbach." *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*. Frederick Engels. Ed. C.P. Dutt. New York: International Publishers, 1941: 82-84.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin Books, 2002.
- McNally, David. *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press, 2011.
- Postel, Danny. "Last Words from Richard Rorty." *The Progressive*. The Progressive Inc., 11 June 2007. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.
- Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- . *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.

- . "Feminism and Pragmatism." *Radical Philosophy*. 59 (Autumn 1991): 3-14.
- . *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991.
- . *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- . *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Twentieth-Anniversary Ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- . *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- . "Post-Democracy." *London Review of Books*. 26 No. 7 (1 April 2004): 10-11.
- . "Pragmatism and Philosophy." *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987: 26-66.
- . "Response to Ernesto Laclau." *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London: Routledge, 1996: 69-76.
- . "Response to Kate Soper." *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*. Eds. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson. Cambridge: Polity, 2001: 130-133.
- . *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.
- . "Universality and Truth." *Rorty and His Critics*. Ed. Robert B. Brandom. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000: 1-30.
- Sedgwick, Sally. *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Soper, Kate. "Richard Rorty: Humanist and/or Anti-Humanist?" *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*. Eds. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson. Cambridge: Polity, 2001: 115-129.
- Stein, Ben. "In Class Warfare, Guess Which Class Is Winning?" *New York Times*. The New York Times, 26 Nov. 2006. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.
- Stiglitz, Joseph E.. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.
- Waters, Mary-Alice. "Introduction." *Reform or Revolution*. Rosa Luxemburg. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973: 5-8.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Attempts to Escape the Logic of Capitalism." *London Review of Books*. 21 No. 21. (28 October 1999): 3-6.
- . "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!" *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žizek. London: Verso, 2000: 90-135.
- . *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London: Verso, 2009.
- . "Foreword: The Dark Matter of Violence." *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*. Sophie Wahnich. Trans. David Fernbach. London: Verso, 2012: xi-xxix.
- . *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso, 2010.
- . *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.
- . *On Belief*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- . *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.
- . *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.
- . *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London: Verso, 2002.