Pragmatism in Education

One answer to the suggestion, that we may somehow overcome philosophy, is that philosophical issues spontaneously arise from the tensions of human society. No one is likely to claim that struggles over resources, or moral disputes such as that about abortion, are inventions of some philosopher's overheated brain. And the philosophical disputes about truth and knowledge in which Rorty has participated, have their social correlate in a crisis of purpose afflicting our educational system.

But the crisis in our educational system, as in every aspect of our culture, has a history in whose light it needs to be understood. Some people would trace our difficulties to the French Revolution, some to the Thirteenth Century, some to ancient Athens, and some to the expulsion from Eden. I here choose a more manageable approach, and shape my discussion of the problems of education in terms of their roots in the Sixties.

Two obstacles stand between us and an accurate appreciation of the turbulence of that decade. One is a tradition of sentimentalism and nostalgia, even among authors well aware of the political failure of the Sixties movements and the elements of raw will to power they contained. The other is the tradition of uncritical Sixties-bashing to be observed in journals like Commentary and *The New Criterion*. Tidal waves of culture do not take place without reason -- however misguided some of those who participated in them might have been. And the movements of the Sixties in fact contained many strands, ranging from a heartbreakingly naive belief in the capacity of mere good will to solve difficult human problems through a humanism derived chiefly from the

early Marx, and a Leninist dismissal of the desires of most men and women as the result of "false consciousness," to a nihilistic attack on moral, intellectual, and aesthetic standards of all sorts. It is thus necessary to look at the academic and educational culture of the Fifties, to see what features of it made it vulnerable to attack by Sixties radicals. I here ignore the larger historical context -- the simultaneous occurrence of a bloody and unpopular war and an awkward stage in the development of the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassination of those who might have offered needed leadership -- in order to focus on cultural and intellectual issues. (And, for the same reason, I shall not attend to the recurrent cultural and economic crises of a capitalist political economy, except as they affect education specifically.)

An academic dissident of an earlier generation, Thorstein Veblen, could take it for granted that American society valued the higher learning, even as he lamented the dominant role of business interests in the institutions supposedly devoted to it. But, after Veblen wrote, universities abandoned even the pretense of promoting knowledge for its own sake, and their presidents came to speak unashamedly about *The Uses of the University*.~ Clark Kerr, in his book of that title, iv is careful to insist that he is speaking descriptively only. But the facts to which he points remain, as does his implicit argument that academics had best co-operate with the inevitable. And an institution for sale to the highest bidder quickly becomes vulnerable to every possible application of the "squeaky wheel" principle.

Robert Nisbet has chronicled^v the many ways in which the university, as an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, has been eroded in the name of purposes (admirable or not) alien to it. It has been asked to serve as a political engine (or arena of political struggle), as a physician for the ills of society, as a therapeutic community for troubled young people, and as the research arm of the federal government or corporate America -- for every purpose, that is, except

the pursuit and transmission of knowledge as such. And the erosion of purpose observable at the upper reaches of the educational world is, if anything, even more visible at the primary and secondary levels.

This erosion took place well before the turmoil of the Sixties made the political character of the university evident to the least observant. Thus, when accused of politicizing scholarship, Staughton Lynd was able to respond:

I am employed by Yale University, the institution that produced the architect of the Bay of Pigs, Richard Bissel; the author of Plan Six for Vietnam, W. W. Rostow ... and McGeorge Bundy [presidential assistant and vigorous defender of the Vietnam War]. vi

But an approach to education that subordinates the life of the mind to the ends of a given society, is tolerable only so long as consensus about those ends, and at least the broad outlines of the pertinent means, can be taken for granted. When differences arise that put the goals of a society into question, -- and when the dissidents include (as did those of the Sixties) the best students -- pragmatic educators are left without persuasive arguments why dissidents should sacrifice even marginal political advantages to protect the integrity and the autonomy of the university.

"Relevant" education initially meant education that could be defended against this short of challenge. But the slogan soon degenerated, first, into a nihilistic attack on cultural and intellectual standards of all sorts (or else a patricidal politics without even that much content); and, then, into a vision of education as a service industry in which students are consumers, faculty entertainers, and administrators guardians and interpreters of the Nielsen ratings. Or else both curriculum and the selection and retention of faculty became a matter of placating various constituencies -- whether defined in ethnic, gender, ideological, or psychological terms.

Veblen observes that

in the apprehension of the group in whose life and esteem it takes effect, this esoteric knowledge [the higher learning] is taken to embody a systemization of fundamental and eternal truth; although it is evident to any outsider that it will take its character from the habits of life of the group.^{vii}

Whether the disinterested pursuit of knowledge even makes sense must therefore be our first concern.

The pragmatic tradition within which Rorty writes suffers from a number of ambiguities.

James writes that "the true ... is only the expedient in our way of thinking." And Rorty proposes to replace questions of truth with questions of what beliefs will help us cope (CP xvii). We must ask what counts as coping, and how we know what ideas help us do so. These are issues about which assertion is easy and proof difficult.

But when pragmatism is used as a philosophy of education, most of these ambiguities disappear. "Coping" will defined in terms of the goals of the society that maintains the school or university, and which ideas help us cope will be decided by that society's conventionally accepted decision procedures (in our society, elections, the market, and the agendas of the educational bureaucracy; in other societies the will of the dictator or the party in power). For it is not possible to run an educational system in the hope that a revolutionary upheaval will dislodge existing ways, even if this hope should turn out to have a lot more substance than it has in the contemporary West. Hence pragmatism turns Marx's complaint, that the ruling ideas of an epoch are always the ideas of its ruling class, into a methodological imperative.

Or, at most, a space is created in which some minority can create its own brand of orthodoxy and impose it on students and colleagues, as long as the larger society is prepared to tolerate such behavior. If persons who do not share the goals of the larger society nonetheless find a niche

within our educational system, they will naturally pursue their own goals. But progress toward success will still be judged in ways parasitic on the institutions off which such persons live. Hence the slogan of one sort of academic: truth is what gets you tenure.

Let us now look more closely at Rorty's role in this story. He proposes that we drop the notion of truth, at least in any sense implying any correspondence with reality, and hence also the notion of its disinterested pursuit. Instead, he proposes to evaluate ideas, in science as much as in ethics or religion, by whether they help us cope (CP xvi-xvii)^{ix}, among other things, he undermines the dogmatic secularism which permeates his writings: religious belief helps at least some people cope, and should for that reason win Rorty's approval.

Rorty suggests that we might judge between our ways of thinking about ourselves and those of his "Antipodeans" "by proposing that we raise some of our children to speak Antipodean and see whether they don't do as well as the control group" (PMN 87). But the inevitable question is, "As well by what standard?" Again, he describes a "post-Philosophical culture" (CP xxvii-xliv)-- a culture which, he admits, will strike many of his readers as decadent (CP xxxix, 108). Faced with such a claim, we need some way of answering the question whether such a culture, if possible, is also desirable. Many people would find themselves entirely aliens within it.

Rorty praises Dewey and Foucault for their attempt

to free mankind from Nietzsche's 'longest lie,' the notion that outside the haphazard and perilous experiments we perform there lies something (God, Science, Rationality, or Truth) which will, if only we perform the correct rituals, step in to save us. (CP 208; at CIS 8n.2 Rorty may take back the word *lie*.)

(The phrase about correct rituals is a slander on objectivism of any plausible sort.) But he prefers Dewey to Foucault, on the ground that Dewey allows room for an unjustifiable hope, and a groundless but vital sense of human solidarity (CP 203-8) -- a hope of which he writes, "I would not know how to write a scenario for its return" (PP 2:179n.8).^x

«USIX»In a recent article, Rorty disavows the slogan "the end of philosophy" (PRM 446-7 n.7), and develops his thought further in the following way. "I hope that we never stop reading, e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Dewey, and Heidegger, but also hope that we may, sooner or later, stop trying to sucker freshmen into taking an interest in 'the problem of the external world' and 'the problem of other minds'" (PRM 447 n.7). A quick answer is that there is no reason to teach philosophical problems that one does not find compelling, since there are many others that are of both great practical and great theoretical interest. One of these is the problem of free will and responsibility; another is the problem of relativism -- a problem that the pragmatist tradition (and Rorty's writings in particular) persistently poses.

I doubt, however, that such a shift of topics would placate the hostility toward the philosophical tradition expressed in such phrases as the "longest lie." Nor does Rorty, in the passage cited or elsewhere, ever explain what it is about Plato, for example, that makes him worth reading.

Rorty realizes that some of his readers will find his ideas alarming. For he acknowledges that they imply that «USSX»

«USBX»When the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form "There is something within you that you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you." (CP xlii)

Or as he puts it, more chillingly because less melodrmatically, when it comes to the choice between two ways of life such as liberalism and Nazism,

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I cannot appeal to such a "fact of the matter," any more than a species of animal that is in danger of losing its ecological niche to another species, and thus faces extinction, can find a "fact of the matter" to settle the question of which species has the right to the niche in question. (PRM 451)

Utterances of this sort concede the intellectual high ground to fascism, even as their author protests his liberal allegiances. And once liberals have made this fundamental concession, there is no limit to possibilities of combining professed liberalism with de facto authoritarianism. The only justification I can see for making them in public is a heroic devotion to Truth at all costs -- a sort of devotion that Rorty's doctrines exclude at every page. And even those who believe in Truth might exercise a certain discretion announcing the emptiness of our traditions of decency, especially in journals of opinion such as the *New Republic*, in a world where the practical issues such an announcement raises are only too real.

The issue here is directly pertinent to the dilemmas of contemporary education. When Congressional committees demand the dismissal of radical faculty, when student mobs pillage the library and the offices of faculty, when charges of "insensitivity" are used to suppress awkward facts, when teaching is evaluated by the standards of television programming, or when budgetary wizards demand that Dante scholarship justify itself in pecuniary terms, Rorty's views imply that there is nothing to be said to them of the form, "There is something within yourself you are betraying."

Such contentions have important civic implications. One urgent need in contemporary liberal democracies is for citizens who are able to evaluate the arguments and evidence presented on behalf of rival candidates and proposals. Without such citizens confirmation hearings, criminal trials of political importance, and Presidential races collapse into soap opera, and social conflicts of

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even moderate seriousness into civil war. But pragmatism, at least of Rorty's variety, undermines the distinction between good and bad argument, and the more fundamental distinction between arguments, good *or* bad, on the one hand, and slogans and sarcasm on the other.

Older pragmatists such as Dewey evaded these problems by massively assuming a progressive view of history. They assumed, that is to say, that history had a direction, that this direction was for the good, and that they themselves were in the vanguard of its progress. Hence it made sense for Dewey to propose himself as mentor for an educational system designed to instill in the rising generation, perhaps not the true, but at least the progressive, position on disputed issues. Sometimes Rorty himself appeals to this progressive tradition, as when he takes it for granted that the science of Galileo was an advance on that of Aristotle (CP 191). But this view of history is massively rejected by his European mentors. Even Wittgenstein, not normally given to worldhistorical pronouncements, remarks, in a passage quoted by Rorty as a motto to PMN, that history "moves not in a straight line, but in a curve, and that its direction constantly changes." XII Wittgenstein thereby rejects not only a progressive view of history, but also its "reactionary" opponent, which holds that human history since (say) 1300 has been the history of decline. There is no such thing as a lost (or a won) intellectual or cultural cause if this line of thought is correct. There is nothing in Rorty's writings to persuade someone skeptical of a progressive view of intellectual or other history It may be still possible to appeal to the idea of progress, if one does so in a sufficiently modest way. Thus Hilary Putnam writes: "We cannot prove that progress is possible, but our action is 'fantastic, directed to empty, imaginary ends' if we do not postulate the possibility of progress."XIII But articles of rational faith such as Putnam proposes are unacceptable to Rorty. » Even the most plausible example of intellectual progress -- "the fact that old bad [scientific] theories nonetheless present, as they approach our own time, better and better

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approximations of our present theories" Rorty treats as "an inevitable artifact of historiography" (PMN 282) rather an as evidence of anything out there.

On one interpretation, Rorty has not made up his mind about the habit of writing history as an apology for the present state of affairs (or for a desired future conceived as the culmination of trends rooted in the past and continuing into the present). For the most part Rorty's references to Whig history are disparaging (see for example PMN 268, 349 [twice], 391). But at one point (PMN 287) he is prepared to endorse Whig historiography in order to "assuage the skeptic." His final word on the issue seems to be that hermeneutics, while it is inevitably Whiggish in its approach, nonetheless, in some unspecified fashion, "insofar as it proceeds nonreductively and in the hope of picking up a new angle on things, [can] transcend its own Whiggishness" (PMN 321) -though how this can be done remains a mystery. C.G. Prado, xiv offers the following interpretation: "Rorty thinks 'better' just means doing something new; 'better' is when the new is taken up and the old is forgotten. The story of progress is the narrative told in the new vocabulary about the old vocabulary." By this account Nazi Germany would have been "better" than Weimar Germany. Nor does it help matters to say that the "better" must be a response to the deficiencies of its predecessor, for that is true of Nazi and Weimar Germany as well.» On another interpretation, Rorty is constructing an arbitrary narrative, designed among other things to establish the legitimacy (and moral authority) of the modern age. xv. (This reading of Rorty shows the influence of Hans Blumenberg.) But of course such a narrative is only a narrative: if someone wishes to tell another narrative in which the movement from St. Thomas Aquinas (or St. Augustine) one is one of decline, or in which progress toward a postmodern future of Catholic (or

Buddhist) hegemony is the human future, there is nothing in Rorty's thought to justify its rejection.

Moreover, there are as many accounts of modernity as there are people giving them: David Hall is surely right when he observes that

We are in a desperate situation with respect to the idea of "the modern age" if it is a definition or a coherent characterization that we seek.... On the other hand, it is quite clear that any one of these characterizations of modernity [he has just cited a number] could appeal to a particular audience whose members will resonate with the interpretation espoused.^{xvi}

Rorty's best attempt to deal with this issue can be found in an essay on Heidegger, where he writes: "Pragmatists like Dewey hope that things may turn out well in the end, but their sense of contingency does not permit them to write dramatic narratives about upward or downward escalators" (PP 2:49). But the pragmatic tradition presumes, at least in its rhetoric, that an upward escalator is somewhere in the background, and that the pragmatists' opponents are resisting its movement. What remains of Dewey's belief in Rorty's writings is the exploitation of progressive language in order to conceal the fact that Rorty lacks any rationale for education (or politics) -combined with an appeal to irony as a fig-leaf to cover the inadequacies of this position. In short, the crucial problem for pragmatism, in education and elsewhere, is the danger of uncritical acceptance of the agenda of the powerful, especially when the powerful adopt, as they often do, a progressivist rhetoric. And the claims of the modern age are often little more than the claims of whatever outcome happens to result from the interaction of the market with the political process. Dewey brought to this problem a belief that history was on the right track, and that conflicts between the perceptions of individuals and the rules of society would turn out to be resoluble in the long run. Rorty's ironism represents both a loss of faith in this solution, and an abandonment of any other basis for a solution. Hence he distances himself from regnant institutions, while at the

same time avoiding serious challenge to them. When such a position confronts questions of educational practice and policy, pragmatism of the most cynical sort moves into the resulting vacuum.

At least this is my reading of the recent history of American education. Other narratives are possible -- in fact, an indefinitely large number. Further progress in evaluation of Rorty will therefore require reasoning of a more traditionally philosophical sort.

NOTES

¹ I use *nostalgia* in Christopher Lasch's sense for a habit of oversimplifying the past, not as an all-purpose derogatory word for backward-looking politics. See his *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991).

ii E.g., W. J. Rorebaugh, Berkeley at War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). .

iii See *The Higher Learning in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

iv The Uses of the University (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), esp. pp. 146-149.

^v The Degradation of the Academic Dogma (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

vi Nonviolent Alternatives to American Violence." In *Teach-ins USA*, L. Menashe and R. Radosh eds. (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 54. Quoted in Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), p. 121.

vii The Higher Learning, p. 11.

viii Pragmatism (Cleveland: Meridian, 1955), p. 196.

ix My discussion draws on my book, *Relativism, Nihilism, and God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1989), chap. 3.

^x I assume that hope and "newness" (a word Rorty takes from Irving Howe, *American Newness* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986]) amount to at least roughly the same thing. On the connection between hope and newness, see for example Lamentations 3:25-6 (RSV): "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness."

xi For one example of the possibilities here, see Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech* and *It's a Good Thing, Too* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

xii Vermischte Bemerkungen (Frankfurt: 1977), p. 14.

xiii Realism with a Human Face (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 191.

xiv The Limits of Pragmatism (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), p. 106.

xv See David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994), ch. 1, esp. pp. 23-29.

xvi Ibid, p. 30.