

## **Richard Rorty and Postmodern Theory**

**By Steven Best and Douglas Kellner**  
([sbest@elp1.rr.com](mailto:sbest@elp1.rr.com) and [kellner@ucla.edu](mailto:kellner@ucla.edu))

In theorizing the postmodern, one inevitably encounters the postmodern assault on theory, such as Lyotard's and Foucault's attack on modern theory for its alleged totalizing and essentializing character. The argument is ironic, of course, since it falsely homogenizes a heterogeneous "modern tradition" and since postmodern theorists like Foucault and Baudrillard are often as totalizing as any modern thinker (Kellner 1989 and Best 1995). But where Lyotard seeks justification of theory within localized language games, arguing that no universal criteria are possible to ground objective truths or universal values, Foucault steadfastly resists any efforts, local or otherwise, to validate normative concepts and theoretical perspectives. For Foucault, justification ensnares one in metaphysical illusions like "truth" and the only concern of the philosopher-critic is to dismantle old ways of thinking, to attack existing traditions and institutions, and to open up new horizons of experience for greater individual freedom. What matters, then, is results, and if actions bring greater freedom, the theoretical perspectives informing them are "justified." From this perspective, theoretical discourse is seen not so much as "correct" or true," but as "efficacious," as producing positive effects.

Continuing along this path, postmodernists have attacked theory per se as at best irrelevant to practice and at worst a barrier to it. Rorty assails both metatheory -- reflection on the status of theory itself which often is concerned with epistemological and normative justification of claims and values -- and theory, which he critiques in three related ways that emerge through his own articulation of the "end of philosophy" thesis. Rigorously trained in analytic philosophy, Rorty became turncoat and abandoned the professional dogma that philosophy was "queen of the sciences" or the universal arbiter of values whose task was to provide foundations for truth and value claims. Philosophy has no special knowledge or truth claims because it, like any other cultural phenomenon, is a thoroughly linguistic phenomenon. For Rorty, language is a poetic construction that creates worlds, not a mirror that reflects "reality," and there are no presuppositionless or neutral truths that evade the contingencies of historically shaped selfhood. Consequently, there is no non-circular, archimedean point for grounding theory. Language can only provide us with a "description" of the world that is thoroughly historical and contingent in nature.

Thus, the first plank in Rorty's assault on theory is an attack on the idea that theory can provide objective foundations for knowledge and ethics. Alleged universal truths are merely local, time-bound perspectives and masks for a "Real" that cannot be known. The second plank immediately follows: if there are no universal or objective truths, no neutral language to arbitrate competing claims, then "theory" has no power to adjudicate among competing languages or descriptions, a task which inevitably transforms theory into metatheory once the conditions of argumentation themselves become sufficiently problematic.

Hence, Rorty denies that the theorist can properly criticize, argue, evaluate, or even "deconstruct," since there is no fulcrum from which to push one claim as "right," "correct," or

"better" than another. The theorist is replaced by the ironist, one who is aware of the ineliminable contingency of selfhood and discourse. Accepting the new limitations, the ironist can only "redescribe" the older theories in new languages and offer new descriptions for ourselves and others. We adopt values and ideologies on emotive rather than rational grounds. Every vocabulary is incommensurable with another and there is no "final vocabulary" with which one can arbitrate normative and epistemological claims. Thus, for Rorty:

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 ... This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like 'try thinking of it this way' -- or more specifically, 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.' It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way ... Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look more attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics" (1989: 9).

One would think this would commit Rorty to relativism, but he denies the term on the grounds that it belongs to a discredited foundationalist framework, as the term "blasphemy" makes no sense within an atheistic logic. Whether or not we can say Rorty is a relativist in the sense of someone who cannot demonstrate one viewpoint is more true than another, he is not a "relativist" in the sense of someone who thinks all claims are equally good or viable. Clearly, Rorty is pushing for some descriptions -- those that celebrate contingency, irony, solidarity, and liberal values -- over others, but he claims that one cannot "argue" for the new description. On this level, the attack on theory means simply that it is useless to provide arguments for one's positions; the only thing one can do is to offer new descriptions and hope others will find them appealing and more useful for (liberal) society. Dethroning philosophy, Rorty claims that literature is a far more powerful mode of interpreting the world and offering the descriptions needed for self-creation and social progress. Fiction takes the place of theory. Of course, Rorty cannot help but argue for his positions, and is himself still writing philosophy not fiction.

From this step follows the third plank in Rorty's attack on theory. The "theorist" should abandon all attempts to radically criticize social institutions. First, as we have seen, "critique" has no force for Rorty and, ultimately, one description is as good as any other. But "theory" on this level also means for Rorty the attempt, classically inscribed in Plato's Republic, to merge public and private concerns, to unite the private quest for perfection with social justice. Here, Rorty is guided by the assumption that tradition and convention are far more powerful forces than reason in the social construction of life, in holding the "social glue" together.

Rorty holds that philosophical views on topics such as the nature of the self or the meaning of the good life are as irrelevant to politics as are arguments about the existence of God. He wants to revive liberal values without feeling the need to defend them on a philosophical level: "What is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue -- tolerance, irony, and a willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their 'common ground,' their unification, the 'intrinsic ideals' they suggest, or what picture of man they 'presuppose'" (1989:

168). Since philosophy can provide no shared or viable foundation for a political concept of justice, it should be abandoned, replaced with historical narratives and poetic descriptions. Ultimately, Rorty's goal is to redescribe modern culture and the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism in strongly historicist and pragmatist terms.

Taking a giant leap to the right of Foucault, Rorty claims not only that philosophy provides no foundation for politics, it plays no political role whatsoever. Despite his assault on foundationalism, Foucault was a tireless militant and "engaged intellectual" who used theory as a weapon for political struggle. For Rorty, however, philosophy has no public or political role. Reviving the classic liberal distinction between the public and private, Rorty claims philosophy should be reserved for private life, where it can be ironic at best, while leaving political and moral traditions to govern public life. Even Derrida, master of subversion and irony, insisted that deconstruction entails political commitments and at least made public and political gestures, however vague or problematic.

We agree with Rorty's initial premise that consciousness, language, and subjectivity are historical and contingent in nature, that our relation to the world is mediated many times over, but we reject most of his conclusions. First, although we too are against foundationalism, we hold that it is possible for theory to construct non-arbitrary grounds to assess competing factual and value claims. These grounds are not metaphysical or ahistorical, they are found in the criteria of logic and argumentation which are reasonable to hold, and in shared social values that are the assumptions of a liberal democracy which Rorty himself affirms. Rejecting the implication of Rorty's position, we do not find it arbitrary to say racism is wrong, or that critiques of racism or sexism are merely good "descriptions" with which we hope others would agree. Rather, we find the arguments for racism, for example, far weaker than the arguments against racism and counter to liberal values that enlightened citizens hold -- or should hold. The assumptions of these anti-racist arguments are of course themselves historical; they stem from the modern liberal tradition that proclaims the rights of all human beings to a life of freedom and dignity. Rorty would rightly see this as a "tradition," but it is one that was constituted with a strong rational component and has compelling force for those who wish -- and clearly not all do -- to play the "language game" of democratic argumentation.

Similarly, while we do not know what the nature of the universe ultimately is, we find that astronomy provides a better "description" than astrology, that evolutionary theory is more compelling than creationism. Our court of appeal is reason, facts, verified bodies of knowledge, and our experience of the world itself, which is not infinitely malleable to any and all descriptions, such as the one which says the earth is flat. Symptomatic of this problem, Rorty adopts a problematic consensus theory of truth which holds that "truth" emerges from free discussion; it is "whatever wins in a free and open encounter" (1989: 67). This ignores the fact that even the "freest" inquiry can still produce falsehood and that might continues to often make right. Needless to say, the defense of such claims will require the tools of theory -- science or philosophy -- rather than fiction. Abandoning these tools, the ironist is disburdened of the need to defend one's claims and tries to evade argumentative responsibilities in ways we don't tolerate in our undergraduate students. For Rorty, "Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis" (1989: 9). Admittedly, argumentation is difficult and not always sexy, especially to the mind of an impatient aestheticist who seeks beauty, novelty, and speed over

rigor, fairness, and coherence. Rorty is only one step away from Baudrillard, the self-proclaimed "intellectual terrorist" who prefers simply to blow up ideas with unsubstantiated claims and outrageous exaggerations rather than attending to matters of evaluating truth or falsehood, or patient empirical demonstration of his claims.

Moreover, without some kind of metatheory, Rorty cannot plausibly claim that liberalism is good or convincingly show which practices are to be favored over others. If politics is strictly an aesthetic affair, what standards do we use to judge success from failure, good from bad politics? With Lyotard, Rorty seeks to proliferate ever new descriptions of the self and the world. This has the value of overcoming stale assumptions and entrenched dogmas, but it represents a fetishism of novelty over concern for truth and justice. On this scheme, there can be no gradual progress toward greater insight and knowledge, there is only succeeding and random points of discontinuity that scatter inquiry and knowledge in fragmented directions. Put in Rorty's own terms, our claim is that foundationalism, rationalism, and progressivist narratives of Western theory can be "re-described" in better ways that make them more effective tools for historical analysis and social critique.

From our denial that theory is powerless to seek grounds of justification for claims, or to effectively challenge, counter, refute, or argue for specific positions, we hold that a crucial role of theory is to step beyond the circumscribed boundaries of individuality to assess the ways in which the social world shapes subjectivity. For Rorty, by contrast, the personal is no longer political. The question, of course, is not whether or not one should be theoretical, since all critical, philosophical, or political orientations are theoretical at least in their embedded assumptions that guide thought and action. No one hoping to speak intelligibly about the world can hope to avoid theory; one can either simply assume the validity of one's theory, or become reflexive about the sources of one's theoretical position, their compatibility, their validity, and their effects. The potential weakness and triviality of a non-theoretical approach is evident, for example, in the anti-theoretical biases of much cultural studies that mindlessly celebrate media culture as interesting, fun, or meaningful, while ignoring its economic and ideological functions.

Theory is necessary to the extent that the world is not completely and immediately transparent to consciousness. Since this is never the case, especially in our own hypercapitalist culture where the shadows flickering on the walls of our caves stem principally from television sets, the corporate-dominated ideology machines that speak the language of deception and manipulation. As we show in our book *The Postmodern Adventure* (Best and Kellner, 2001), which contains studies of Thomas Pynchon, Michael Herr, Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, and other imaginative writers, Rorty is right that fiction can powerfully illuminate the conditions of our lives, often in more concrete and illuminating ways than theory. Ultimately, we need to grant power to both theory and fiction, and understand their different perspectives and roles. For just as novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* had dramatic social impact, so too has the discourse of the Enlightenment, which provided the philosophical inspiration for the American and French Revolutions, as well as numerous succeeding revolts in history.

Postmodern attacks on theory are part and parcel of contemporary misology -- the hatred of reason -- that also manifests itself in the mysticism pervading some versions of deep ecology and ecofeminism, in anti-humanist attacks from "biocentric" viewpoints that often see human beings

as nothing more than a scourge on nature, in the layperson's rejection of philosophy for common sense, in the pragmatist celebration of the technological and practical, in the postmodern embrace of desire and spontaneity over reflection, and in the mindless "spiritualism" pervading our culture (see Boggs 2000: 166ff.). The positive value of pragmatic critiques of theory is to remind one to maintain a close relationship between theory and practice, to avoid excessively abstract analyses and becoming mired in a metatheory that becomes obsessed with the justification of theory over its application -- a problem that frequently plagues Habermas' work (see Best 1995). The pragmatic critique helps keep theory from becoming an esoteric, specialized discourse manipulated and understood only by a cadre of academic experts. No doubt we are not alone in our dissatisfaction with the highly esoteric discourse that comes not only from modernists like Habermas, but also -- and more so -- from poststructuralist and postmodern champions of the ineffable and unreadable, or the terminally obscure and pompous.

Operating in the tradition of critical theory, we believe that the role of theory is to provide weapons for social critique and change, to illuminate the sources of human unhappiness and to contribute to the goal of human emancipation. Against Rorty's very unpostmodern dichotomization of the public and private (itself a centerpiece of bourgeois ideology), we believe that the citizens of the "private realm" (itself a social and historical creation) have strong obligations to participate actively in the public realm through rational criticism and debate. With Rorty, we do not believe the theorist must seek to construct a perfect bridge between the public and the private, for the range of action and choice on the part of the individual always exceeds the minimal requirements of order in a free society. Rather, the role of the theorist is to help analyze what the conditions of freedom and human well-being should be, to ask whether or not they are being fulfilled, and to expose the forces of domination and oppression.

We see public intellectuals as specialists in critical thinking who can employ their skills to counter the abuses of the public realm, in order to help reconstitute society and polity more democratically and to ensure that the private realm and its liberties and pleasures are not effaced through the ever-growing penetration of mass media, state administration, electronic surveillance, and the capitalist marketplace. Indeed, new media and computer technologies have created novel public spheres and thus unique opportunities for public intellectuals to exercise their skills of critique and argumentation (Kellner 1997).

In addition, we believe that theory can provide social maps and historical narratives which supply spatial and temporal contextualizations of the present age. Social maps study society holistically, moving from any point or mode of human experience into an ever-expanding macroscopic picture that may extend from the individual self, to its network of everyday social relations, to its more encompassing regional environment, to its national setting, and finally to the international arena of global capitalism. Within this holistic framework, social maps shift from one social level to another, articulating complex connections between economics, politics, the state, media culture, everyday life, and various ideologies and practices.

Historical narratives, similarly, contextualize the present by identifying both how the past has constituted the present and how the present opens up to alternative futures. As argued in the historicist tradition that began in the nineteenth century -- in the work of Hegel, Dilthey, Marx, Weber, and others -- all values, worldviews, traditions, social institutions, and individuals

themselves must be understood historically as they change and evolve through time. As in the form of Foucault's genealogies or various popular histories, historical narratives chart the temporal trajectories of significant experiences and events, of political movements, or the forces constituting subjectivities. Against the postmodern tendency to randomize history as a disconnected series of events, we believe historical narratives should grasp both historical continuities and discontinuities, while analyzing how continuities embody developmental dynamics, such as moral and technical evolution, that have emancipatory possibilities and should be further developed in the future.

Together, social maps and historical narratives study the points of intersection between individuals and their cultures, between power and knowledge. To the fullest degree possible, they seek to lift the veils of ideology and expose the given as contingent and the present as historically constituted, while providing visions of alternative futures. Maps and narratives, then, are meant to overcome quietism and fatalism, to sharpen political vision, and to encourage translation of theory into practice in order to advance both personal freedom and social justice. Social maps and historical narratives should not be confused with the territories and times they analyze; they are approximations of a densely constituted human world that require theory and imagination. Nor should they ever be seen as final or complete, since they must be constantly rethought and revised in light of new information and changing situations. Finally, as we are suggesting, these maps can deploy the resources of either "theory" or "fiction," since both provide illuminations of social experience from different vantage points, each of which are useful and illuminating, and necessarily supplement each other.

The social maps called classical social theories are to some extent torn and tattered, in fragments, and in some cases outdated and obsolete. But we need to construct new ones from the sketches and fragments of the past to make sense of our current historical condition dominated by media culture, information explosion, new technologies, and a global restructuring of capitalism. Maps and theories provide orientation, overviews, and show how parts relate to each other and to a larger whole. If something new appears on the horizon, a good map will chart it, including sketches of some future configurations. And while some old maps and authorities are discredited and obsolete, some traditional theories continue to provide guideposts for current thought and action, as we have attempted to demonstrate in our various books that marshal both modern and postmodern theories to map and narrativize our present moment (see Best and Kellner 1997 and 2001).

Yet we also need new sketches of society and culture, and part of the postmodern adventure is sailing forth into new domains without complete maps, or with maps that are fragmentary and torn. Journeys into the postmodern thus thrust us into new worlds, making us explorers of uncharted, or poorly charted, domains. Our mappings can thus only be provisional, reports back from our explorations that require further investigation, testing, and revision. Yet the brave new worlds of postmodern culture and society are of sufficient interest, importance, and novelty to justify taking chances, leaving the familiar behind, and trying out new ideas and approaches.

Finally, we need new politics to deal with the problems of capitalist globalization and the failure of conventional politics. We fear that just as Rorty's assault on theory blocks attempts to map and critique the new social constellations of the present moment, so too does his attack on radical

politics and defense of a reformist liberalism and pragmatism vitiate attempts to deal with the new global forces of technocapitalism. Demonstrations against the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in December 1999 and the subsequent anti-globalization movement (see Best and Kellner, 2001) suggest that the radical spirit is still alive. Indeed, we believe that it is new social movements and the forces of radical opposition which provide the most promising avenues of radical democratic social transformation in the present moment.[1]

### Notes

1. For further delineation of our own political perspectives of the present moment, see Best and Kellner 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2001.