abstractly that you doubt he knows much about the "cultural left" he attacks; and what his "public" is supposed to make of all this when they already vote Democratic is up to you to figure out. The overall effect is rather like listening to a quaint old crank trying desperately to convince you that Walt Whitman would be appalled by the current state of the IRS.

If he had a better sense of his readership, Rorty might challenge a broader public for whom his own Cream of Wheat ideas—secular humanism, the insignificance of Truth, the importance of labor unions—would alone be a difficult bolus to get down. He has occasionally done so, to fine effect. Is he afraid to do more, here, than present himself as a liberal martyr drowned out by noisy, know-nothing leftists?

There's little in Achieving Our Country that you can't find in the work of, say, Robert Reich or Michael Lind, except the huffing and puffing. At least presenting your writing as a challenge to misguided colleagues makes liberal common wisdom a little more interesting. Rorty even boils down the perspectives of writers like Reich and Lind to a few obvious liberal propositions: boosted by the kind of national pride found in Lincoln or Whitman, intellectuals should focus on policy rather than speculative debate, on economic inequality rather than what Rorty calls "stigma" (race, for example), and on practical reform rather than radicalism:

The heirs of the New Left of the 1960s have created, within the academy, a cultural Left. Many members of this Left specialize in what they call the "politics of difference" or "of identity" or "of recognition." This cultural Left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed. . . . The new cultural Left . . . has few ties to what remains of the pre-Sixties reformist Left. . . . This residual reformist Left thinks more about laws that need to be passed than about a culture that needs to be changed.

What isn't wrong with this passage? This cultural left is heir to the white- and male-dominated New Left—the one that crumbled when women, blacks, and queers made their own movements? The cultural left, which reads Marx rather than Dewey, has had nothing to say about capitalism? The "cultural left" is new? (Tell it to The Masses or Partisan...
Review.) It's a surprise that contemporary radicals aren't invigorated by stories about the reformist left.

It appears that the linguistic turn is over and the social science turn has arrived. There is a good bit of the reformed "law," and other times assorted proclamations, but this book does nothing to dispel the sense that Rorty only enjoys the idea of policy-making. (His call in a December 1997 Nation for universal health care, funding for Head Start, and the rest—a kind of utopian Clintonism—was proof, not exception.) Rorty caricatures and traduces a left that has always been more involved in social justice campaigns than he himself ever has: even Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Martha Nussbaum took the stand in actual trials. Is a life change afoot? Rorty now believes that "the Left should put a moratorium on theory," and he thus implies that even his own celebrated work on other theorists falls short of the political mark. Maybe it hurts when Congress doesn't rally round your call for an end to the category of "ideology."

Rorty's distinctions seem to collapse under very little pressure. He explicitly disavows sectarianism in the interest of a healthy, broad left, but the book is on the whole a scorchingly sectarian indictment of the "heirs of the New Left." This tends to get a bit confusing. Rorty begins the final chapter by talking about the importance of the New Left's recognition that "economic determinism had been too simplistic." But Rorty's invocations of the "money question" have no weight, because he doesn't think it worthwhile to discuss the political dimensions of capital—his nods to greed and selfishness are virtually Dickensian. One imagines that there might be more to it than this, but Rorty makes few gestures toward any notion of how to effect economic redistribution, except to pass a law for it. I know I'm not alone in wondering where this would leave the

There is no guarantee that, when all is said and done, blacks, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, women, the disabled, and the working class will find common cause in some world-transforming purpose.

sinner's tract here. Between you and me, I never had any doubt that Nabokov was a better read than Fichte, but I was (kind of) willing to let Rorty tell me so in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. But now we've discovered that quantitative sociology will unlock the doors of perception! What's next, Hillis Miller doing labor history?

If only it were that good. Standing firm on the importance of policy, economics, and reform as opposed to culture, stigma, and radicalism, Rorty flubs all three key oppositions. First off, if you thought the second terms might have real bearing on the first ones, forget it—Motown had nothing to do with the Voting Rights Act, black workers face only economic exploitation, and reform generally has nothing to do with the push of radicalism. Rorty doesn't argue this, but his points are so baldly and summarily made that he might as well.

And yet, for all the hue and cry of Achieving Our Country, Rorty advances no policy proposals of the sort he advocates; he doesn't even seem sure what counts as a policy proposal. Sometimes it's
“stigmatized” working people whom labor leaders and politicians could still write out of the ranks of the deserving. Rorty tells the cultural left to open lines of communication with “the unions” but says no more—as though that would take care of it just fine. Are we talking about James Hoffa, Jr.? Radicalized unions? Leadership only? Insurgent rank and file? And what about the 85 percent of nonunionized American workers? Here, too, the road-to-Damascus quality of the ideas is a little embarrassing—Rorty seems not to realize that he’s actually following the “cultural leftists” who beat him to the promised land of prolabor politics. From the back of the pack, it’s apparently difficult to glimpse the political ends of the glorious means with any clarity.

Rorty’s constant invocations of “stigma,” meanwhile, evince the same color blindness that his younger compers find so enthralling. Why does he refer to any oppression other than class oppression as a stigma? Certainly he means to trivialize the radicals he dislikes. Rorty undoubtedly knows that no one uses the term anymore, precisely because it carries the suggestion he himself wants to put forward: that race, for example, is less fundamental than other grounds of exploitation, that racial oppression is, in the end, an issue of manners and private life rather than a public injustice. I think the sneer backfires, because it underscores Rorty’s myopic view of race. At the end of Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty mentions the attitude of contemporary American liberals to the unending hopelessness and misery of the lives of the young blacks in American cities. . . . Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow Americans—to insist that it is outrageous that an American should live without hope.

Forget the case being made, the false choice it proposes: both arguments suck. Blacks exist in this passage because they suffer, and liberals are good liberals when they find the right language to express pity and outrage for “these people.” National devotion of the paternalistic sort that helped produce the problem will also heal it, according to Rorty.

**When does left universalism simply become hegemonic liberalism?**

Must useful case studies of “our” suffering Negroes continue to serve as relics in the church of liberal compassion? This “stigma” is apparently so bad that even when you’re trying to avoid it, you run into trouble.

Rorty dedicates Achieving Our Country to Irving Howe and A. Philip Randolph; Howe earns several pages of commentary, Randolph none. This would be unremarkable if the book weren’t so keen on the kind of practice and policy that Randolph championed far more effectively than Howe. Rorty, finally, is a philosopher, more comfortable talking about Howe’s intellectual self-styling than about Randolph’s political thought, strategy, and action. And yet if thought is preferred, where are Lani Guinier, Mary Frances Berry, Patricia Williams, or Cheryl Harris—bona fide intellectuals with actual ideas about laws and voting
AND THE AUTHORITIES QUESTION VARIOUS DISREPUTABLE SUSPECTS

Yuh better talk, commie... or I'll blow yer brains out!

To pass from the senior public moralist to the boomer critics is to find a similar fatalism dressed up as tough-minded intellectual responsibility. It ought to be said right away that the work of the boomers is weightier and more tenacious than Rorty's wayward wind; at least Berman, Gitlin, and others fought for a long time on the ground. It's just that 1968 seems to have been as traumatic for them as they say it was for the country: black and female departure from the ranks of the student left arrested its political development at the Chicago Democratic Convention. These ex-New Lefters now make a career out of haranguing the identity movements that formed in that moment of traumatic separation. Stanley Aronowitz has written of "when the New Left was new," while Gitlin, Berman, and other boomer liberals offer a much less attractive picture of the New Left grown old.

Gitlin's *Twilight of Common Dreams* is a convenient summation of the boomer front. Its insistence on a consensus vision of national culture is all the more surreal coming from a prominent New Leftist and former Students for a Democratic Society president. Gitlin advances what he calls a "Left universalism" that would bind up the "profusion of identities" (gays, blacks, the deaf) into some
plausible left unity; as Gitlin puts it, “What is a Left without a commons, even a hypothetical one? If there is no people, but only peoples, there is no Left.” What sounds very much like a resurrected Popular Front slogan rings strangely on the ears, coming from a writer whose early political commitments amounted to a thorough rejection of the Old Left. Though sympathetic to many of the changes brought about by the new social movements’ multiplication of difference, Gitlin has trouble seeing why any of these movements should retain the autonomy that made those changes possible. In a very real sense, he misses their fundamental point. There is no guarantee that, after all is said and done, blacks, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, women, the disabled, and the working class will find common cause in some world-transforming purpose; the motive of identity-based movements, for all their troubles of self-definition, is not to stand up for their particular rights so that they can take their place in the honorable (and now expanded) left.

Indeed, the identity-based movements have so utterly transformed the idea of the left that Gitlin’s common dreaming seems merely half-asleep. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argued in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), the new social movements are rarely compatible in any kind of united-front way. In fact, the new social movements call into question the presumption that such a front wouldn’t wind up suppressing or misrepresenting the interests grouped under its umbrella. Yet any one of these movements is liable to engage a dominant social formation at one of its weak points, sparking a fire that could create widespread solidarities. It is revealing that Gitlin refuses to consider even the most widely debated theorists of social action. Throughout Common Dreams, Gitlin reviews the wars over grade-school history books, literary theory, academic politics, political correctness, and more, rather like the cultural studies scholars he deplores. He would rather deride the difficulties that arise from an insistence

**Todd Gitlin’s tirades against contemporary black activism recapitulate the feelings of anger and rejection that sixties black separatism elicited in his generation of white, often Jewish, male intellectuals.**

on local autonomy than demonstrate how that autonomy cripples the left—at least such a demonstration would require him to take new social struggles seriously. Instead, Gitlin contents himself with assuming that certain black demands, for example, simply harmonize with the aspirations of his universal left.

Thus we witness such spectacles as Gitlin’s debate with Robin D. G. Kelley at one of the most volatile panels of the Columbia Teach-In. Gitlin read a stern and rather dyspeptic screed discounting group demands, such as those of black militants, as divisive and merely local:

*The fact remains that African Americans constitute a minority, and no wishful thinking or census projection changes this fact. ... Adding up abstract minorities does not automatically produce a victory for general justice. ... American history is replete with instances of minorities submerging their particular claims, only to be forgotten, and this is always a risk.*
But it is much too easy to lose sight of the opposite risk, that of narrowness, and of the gains that have accrued to minorities when broad-based movements—in particular labor—have been strongest.

It’s a measure of Gitlin’s nonrecognition of black left traditions that he can so appallingly write blacks off as a minor political bloc whose independent struggles don’t result in “general justice” (quite a phrase, this last, begging the question of just what counts as “general” enough to warrant struggle). American history contains more stories of submerged minorities who wound up with little or nothing than of the “narrowness” of black demands. (I hope Gitlin doesn’t really mean to say that abolitionism, Du Bois’s NAACP, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were “narrow” noncontributors to “general justice.”)

Having thus functionally eviscerated it, Gitlin nonetheless called for a united left front. Kelley was quick to show how imaginary Gitlin’s idea of the left is, now that the formerly white and male AFL-CIO membership—to take only one example—is significantly female and colored, and now that categories such as class, race, and gender are irretrievably disrupted by their interpenetration.

Examples abound in Common Dreams of Gitlin’s dim view of autonomous black activism. He can’t even praise Martin Luther King, Jr., without rushing suspiciously to embrace King’s turn to the struggles of workers and the poor:

The militants of SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] had long mocked him as ‘De Laud.’ Yet he was there to mock, to oppose, to love. While King lived, he embodied the possibility of a redemptive struggle across racial lines. He journeyed to Memphis to support a strike by black garbage workers—a solidarity that had class as well as race dimensions.

There are good grounds for appreciating King’s turn, but Gitlin’s haste to write off SNCC and racial “separatism” dampens the celebration. Indeed, blaming the white left’s late-sixties “go-for-broke trajectory” on the advent of “black revolutionism,” Gitlin speaks of this traumatic moment of black independence as though it were responsible for all manner of ugly white-ethnic reaction. He eagerly sides with Jewish New York schoolteachers in their strike of 1968–69 against the “insult” of black parents who demanded more control over their children’s schooling.

Gitlin’s attacks signal an alchemical passage of the New Left into the image of the Old, a turn from internal divisions—presented as merely cultural—to more “fundamental” matters of economic inequality. Gitlin often adopts the pose of the persecuted white liberal flayed for speaking sense instead of going along and getting along, and he has even adopted Jim Sleeper’s cynical habit of lampooning black middle-class discontent by contrasting it with the plight of the black poor. One unfortunate Berkeley student comes in for professorial sarcasm during a strike for accelerated race-based hiring and admissions. Crossing the picket line, Gitlin tells his students he’ll be in the lecture hall to discuss issues raised by the strike. Strikers come shouting into the session, Gitlin invites them to join in, and the black stu-
dent yells, “We’re dying out there!” Gitlin pulls a stiff one from the quiver: “I asked him, ‘How is admitting more black students and hiring more black faculty going to stop the dying out there?’ There was no response.” Content in his ability to silence black youth and ignore connections between black death and black educational opportunity—in a single bound—Gitlin asks us to take him as an authoritative guide to left universalism. What response is there to this sort of thing?

As this episode suggests, there is a decidedly undialectical quality to Gitlin’s argument, which has its roots in the Anglo-American academy and, more specifically, in the base cousin-books it seeks to subsume and transcend: Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind (1987), Roger Kimball’s Tenured Radicals (1990), Richard Bernstein’s The Dictatorship of Virtue (1994), and Arthur Schlesinger’s The Disuniting of America (1992). Gitlin’s battle cry is simple: look at all of these cultural excrescences and see how they’re ruining the classical idea of the left! Any left sociologist worth the name, though, might think twice about why recent social struggles have taken the form of “identity”-based movements in the first place. Surely the controversies Gitlin surveys are symptoms of some larger crisis of the state, not simply the moral failings of the left.

To address such ills, one might look to Stuart Hall et al’s Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order (1978), a book that has gone virtually unnoticed in the U.S. Taking as their focus Britain’s media-created mugging scare of the early 1970s, Hall and his collaborators show how the figure of the black mugger, and attendant hysteria about rising crime, served to shore up capitalist authority still reeling from the insurrections of the 1960s. In the present instance, it seems equally clear that identity-politics hysteria belies a crisis of authority in the American nation-state, as well as the left—not only for those to whom the left never mattered and who now smell blood but also for those who find the canonical revolutionary white male subject too precious to let go.

If identity-based movements sometimes seem misguided or superficial, it might make sense to respond not with a moralizing plea for left consensus but with a historical account of how left consensus has been a disaster for blacks, women, and many others. Instead, Gitlin
explains "the dying out there" as the "historical consequence of slavery and poverty" and the "direct result of young black men killing other young black men in the course of criminal activity." Policing the Crisis sketches the profounder response of a more visionary left:

We can think of the relations of production of capitalism articulating the classes in distinct ways at each of the levels or instances of the social formation—economic, political, ideological.... Race is intrinsic to the manner in which the black labouring classes are complexly constituted at each of those levels.... This gives the matter of race and racism a theoretical as well as a practical centrality to all the relations and practices which affect black labour. The constitution of this class fraction as a class, and the class relations which inscribe it, function as race relations. The two are inseparable. Race is the modality in which class is lived. It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced.

Gitlin would call this "identity politics," but Hall et al. offer something much subtler: a recognition that new social movements, even when parallel to Gitlin’s oldboys’ left, shape up along different axes of social existence. When fighting exploitative employers or companies, that is, black workers may profitably (and accurately) present their case as a racial one. Hence the success of black campaigns in North Carolina, where University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill housekeepers, nonunion workers in poultry gulags, and strikers at local K-Marts have made labor demands through antiracist activism: these campaigns were successful (to varying degrees) because they did not fall prey to the left fundamentalism that says only "class" matters. Such interven-
tions allow workers to meet capital-state formations or agglomerations the way they've been greeted: as particularized, superexploitable wage labor. To whine that this is divisive, self-interested, or marginal "identity politics" seems insane when—notwithstanding the destruction of affirmative action—the country seems less and less able to discredit worker protests fought in the name of racial justice.

Writers like Gitlin do not demonstrate the perils of bringing politics into the cultural sphere: they demonstrate the limits of their own heavily politicized notions of culture. These notions come uncomfortably close to mystical nationalist ideologies of American culture. In insisting on excluding certain political battles from one's definition of culture, in other words, Gitlin's left-liberal universalism becomes a species of American-century triumphalism. It's difficult to see how a political commitment to radical equality won through conflict can be combined with a consensus approach to culture. When does your left universalism simply become hegemonic liberalism?

In *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987), Gitlin writes with passion about the separatist implications of Black Power's advent. To activists like Gitlin, Black Power seemed like a crushing rejection of white allies, who were now told to organize in their own communities. Paul Berman still broods about this political moment in his attacks on the Panthers. Gitlin's vehement universalism, like that of many boomer liberals, is an imaginary return to early-sixties interracial brotherhood: a legitimate return, of course, though inseparable in these writers from an implied masculinism, not to mention the naked irony that interracial brotherhood came about in the first place through the fifties and early-sixties version of "identity politics"—the independent actions of African American organizers on specifically African American concerns. Gitlin's tirades against contemporary black activism recapitulate the feelings of anger and rejection that sixties black separatism elicited in his generation of white, often Jewish, male intellectuals. The pith and sting in Gitlin's accounts of the racial past and present suggest a primal scene revisited therapeutically in the hope of suacease, rather than a proposal for a new, "nonracial" left.

Katha Pollitt's June 1998 *Nation* editorial reflecting on the new liberals made a crucial point about the new Popular Front and its stance on identity politics:

*All you have to do is look squarely at the world you live in and it is perfectly obvious that—as a host of scholars and activists, whom Alterman dismisses as "the racism/sexfism/homophobia crowd," have documented—race and gender are crucial means through which class is structured. They are not side issues that can be solved by raising the minimum wage, although that is important, or even by unionizing more workplaces, although that is important too. Inequality in America is too solidly based on racism and...*
sexism for it to be altered without acknowledging race and sex and sexuality. Everybody sees this now—even John Sweeney talks about gay partnership benefits as a working-class issue—except for a handful of old New Leftists, journalists and mini-pundits, white men who practice the identity politics that dare not speak its name.

With the arrival of boomer liberalism, one is invited into a middlebrow discourse whose roots in white male identity are disavowed through a vulgar Marxist economic fundamentalism. The new liberals regard other kinds of exploitation, and other ways of combating them, as preliminary bouts with prejudice, contested a league apart from the electorally based, elite-ruled arena of “real” politics that demands hard-headed accommodation and reformist tinkering. This neoliberal agenda, cocooned in a rhetoric of universalism, commonality, idealism, and vision, is almost by definition racially and sexually exclusive. The broad post-New Left return to nationalist social democracy threatens to grace a bipartisan statist waltz into the next century. Here’s hoping our better angels help us survive the boom.
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Cover photo
Jacques-Andre Boiffard,
Masque de carnaval, 1910,
Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre de Création Industrielle-Centre Georges Pompidou

See “The Ethics of Surrealism,” p. 84