

For example, his ideal is the "pre-Sixties reformist Left," whose approach to the question of race is for Rorty exemplary, and against which the failures of the cultural left may be measured historically:

Insofar as the pre-Sixties reformist Left concerned itself with oppressed minorities, [it] did so by proclaiming that all of us--black, white, and brown--are Americans, and that we should respect one another as such. This strategy gave rise to the 'platoon' movies, which showed Americans of various ethnic backgrounds fighting and dying side by side. By contrast, the contemporary cultural Left urges that America should not be a melting-pot, because we need to respect one another in our differences. ["CL" 100]

Yet this glowing record of inclusivity is belied by the historical record, which reveals that the liberal left held a wide range of attitudes toward race. As Eric Foner points out: "[t]here were plenty of New Dealers who supported every single New Deal measure on the economy, on the rights of labor, on many other issues, who were arch segregationists" [9]. Foner goes on to speak of New York intellectuals' support of [Adlai] Stevenson in 1952: "[t]he fact that all those people could flock with immense enthusiasm to the Stevenson [End Page 48] banner, again suggests how it was possible to be a good liberal and subordinate issues of race as not significant" [9]. Even labor unions, which Rorty holds up as the premier formal space of collectivity, were historically exclusive of racial minorities, seeing them as threats to their livelihood. Of course, this was in many cases true. But without an analysis of race, history, *and* economics, one is unable to see how owners were able to exploit minorities and use them as scabs in the first place. Rorty would say that this is a perfect example of how solidarity might incorporate racial minorities into the fold, but he assumes the disappearance of race. David Hollinger notes:

The suffering that Rorty wants to diminish has been created and perpetuated by the feeling among many white Americans that blacks are not really part of "us" anyway. Distinctions between Americans of different "racial" and "ethnic"; groups yield formidable we-they dynamics of their own. Indeed, such dynamics gave rise in the first place to the concept of "ethnocentrism," which Rorty now wishes to appropriate for two benign purposes: the flagging of the recognition of our own historical particularity and the inspiring, Rorty hopes, of a measure of generosity greater than that previously called forth by appeals to the common humanity of all sufferers. [327]

This is the key move Rorty makes in his recent work: the move from *contingency* and *poesis* to an *ethnos* that is *stratified* precisely as "American." In this transfer of emphasis, the historical particularity and the generosity that Hollinger correctly posits as underwriting Rorty's new proposals for action are both narrowly reconceived and enacted. Whereas in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty sees liberal society as "a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common goal" [CIS 59], in *Achieving Our Country* we see, instead of contingent solidarity, an appeal to the latter.

In *Achieving Our Country*, the "band of fellow spirits" is produced precisely in that the recognition of the "eccentricities" of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth, have been declared of only secondary interest. If there is no mutuality to appeal to, it is because *these* eccentrics stubbornly insist on *not* leaving their particularities at the door. They do not simply act on the faith that the liberal core understands, recognizes, cares about their vocabularies, as the liberal ethnocenter claims it does. These "eccentrics" witness instead how the formation of the *pragmatic* program of Rorty's illiberal core leaves them on the margin as long as they might insist on the liberal core making good its promise of *inner* transformation, that is, of realizing its "*poeticizing*" ideology. This is not "merely" a "cultural" argument--these "eccentrics" point to the economic inequities and injustices that produce their "pain and humiliation" as well. Yet the liberal core is impatient with such particularities. According to Rorty, we have to stop worrying about making sense and

simply act, and act American:

I have two suggestions about how to effect this transition. The first is that the Left should put a moratorium on theory. It should try to kick its philosophy habit. The second is that the Left should try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans. . . .

For purposes of thinking about how to achieve our country, we do not need to worry about the correspondence theory of truth, the grounds of normativity, the impossibility of justice, or the infinite distance which separates us from the other. For those purposes, we can give both religion and philosophy a pass. We can just get on with trying to solve what Dewey called "the problems of men." ["CL" 91, 97] [End Page 49]

Rorty insists, "First Projects, Then Principles." <sup>12</sup> There is something quite worthwhile and indeed admirable about the projects Rorty proposes (campaign finance reform, universal health insurance, equalization of educational opportunity). One would be hard-pressed to come up with a better list. My complaint is not with the projects Rorty proposes, but with the either/or reasoning he employs, its liberal *intolerances*, and the way it makes other concerns seem *unpatriotic*. By defining patriotism thus, Rorty in fact defeats his effort to rehabilitate the term. And by insisting on this strict binary, he misses the way that, in each of the projects he suggests, the economic is articulated in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.

What he refuses to see is that the struggles to recognize the interlinkage of all these issues have had the effect *not* of driving people away from the core, but of laying bare the operations of exclusivity that belie the liberal self-image *so as to* make good on it, in some form or another. Not everyone would sign on *as liberals* to a coalition that might emerge from that "poetic" process of actually recognizing "new vocabularies," but that may not be a bad thing, especially as that contingent coalition has a positive political effect. Instead of accommodating "new vocabularies," the benchmark of a liberal society constantly in progress, Rorty's ethnocenter builds up a wall of ignorance, a dismissal of accountability outside its own terms of faith, and a defense of Americanism particularly conceived.

In *Achieving Our Country* the notion of "mutual protection" becomes linked to "survival"--the protection of a particular identity that once again discloses the weakness of Rorty's liberal idealism. We are faced with the problematics of "we." Bernstein remarks,

It begins to look as if Rorty is substituting a "historical myth of the given" for the "epistemological myth of the given" that he has helped to expose. He speaks of "our" practices, "our tradition," the "consensus" of a particular community as if this were simply a historical given. . . . But if one is to appeal to a historical consensus or a tradition, then let us be wary of making it into something more solid, harmonious, and coherent than it really is. [550-51]

In short, Rorty's ever-widening "circle of 'we'" is a weak concept precisely because the others that are included really don't possess a "*new* vocabulary," and the ones that do don't make it in. As Bernstein puts it:

[Rorty] fails to realize that when he appeals to our shared beliefs and our common historical heritage, he is speaking as if there is at least a historical fact of the matter. . . . There seems to be no genuine resistance, no otherness, nothing corresponding to what Pierce called Secondness to which we must be responsive. . . . And our interpretations, our self-creations, seem to be little more than an expression of our idiosyncratic will to power, our will to self-assertion. [554]

There is no need for reform, even given the historical failures of liberalism, because those failures have been placed at the doorstep of the cultural left. It is those insisting on making good on liberal rhetoric that are responsible for "disuniting" the left. *They* should stop [End Page 50] "theorizing," stop making sense, and apply for citizenship in the ethnocenter. Meanwhile, what are Rorty's liberals to do? "We[!] should simply keep doing what our liberal society is already in the habit of doing . . ." ["On Ethnocentrism" 530].

The critique of identity politics by Gitlin, Rorty, and others of their persuasion betrays a deep discomfort: the American conversation seems to have left little space for heterosexual, white, middle-class male progressives, caught between women and minorities pressing their claims on the left, and the right. Such progressives unwilling to modify their "vocabularies" can only resort to "class" as a tool to deflate the claims of race, sexuality, gender, and so on, or else resort to an appeal to something transcendental, like awe and patriotism, to solidify their positions.

### **The Romantic Strain in *Postmodernism*: Loss and the Fall into Sameness**

In "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," Rorty sums up his distinction between Harold Bloom and Fredric Jameson: "I do not see the disagreement between Jamesonians and Bloomians as a disagreement between those who take politics seriously and those who do not. Instead, I see it as between people taking refuge in self-protective knowingness about the present and romantic utopians trying to imagine a better future" ["IV" 140]. Well, neither is exactly the case. There is not a little cynicism and "knowingness" in Bloom, for anyone who cares to read him carefully, or even not so carefully. Indeed, not a few have noted that his own rhetoric is nothing if not "resentful." But here I want to focus on how Jameson is indeed "romantic" in his *partial* nostalgia for a romantic Eurocenter, and that this nostalgia feeds his notion of "mapping," his hope that History might be "thought" again. His problem is that he is not quite sure how to map History in late capitalism, given that formerly secure cardinal points have been wiped out.

As is well known, the "flatness" which for Jameson characterizes the postmodern age is produced by the evaporation of historical density, of temporality itself. There is simply nothing to anchor identity, since no "story" obtains: no narrative can link up random events into a meaningful statement; no personal identity can be formed when one cannot locate oneself in history: "[t]he breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis" [Jameson 27]. Not only is history depleted of any weight, it becomes simply one "optional" narrative among many.

Deeply linked to this notion of radically interchangeable narratives (or nonnarratives) is the idea of Difference. How can the idea of Difference exist in this indifferntiable atemporality called, provisionally, "now"? If time is flattened, space too evinces a particular horizontality, and on this "level playing field" emerges in new proximity, visibility, and likeness what was formerly called the racial Other. In a remarkable move, Jameson connects the disappearance of history to the *appearance* of Others as precisely, now, *not* different:

The apparent celebration of Difference, whether here at home or on the global scale, in reality conceals and presupposes a new and more fundamental reality. Whatever the new liberal tolerance is, it has little to do with the exotic range of the emblematic Family of Man exhibit, in which the Western bourgeoisies were asked to show their deeper human affinity with Bushmen and Hottentots, bare-breasted island women and aboriginal craftsmen, and other of the anthropological type who are unlikely to visit you as tourists. These new others, however, are at least as likely to visit us as are immigrants or *Gastarbeiter*; to that degree they are more "like" us, or at least "the same" in all kinds of new ways, which [End Page 51] new internal

social habits--the forced social and political recognition of "minorities"--help us to acquire in our foreign policy. [357]

The "fundamental" condition of postmodernity induces a deeply unsettling effect in Jameson's analysis, precisely as it sets up an uncomfortable *sameness* amongst heretofore discrete others and the Eurocentric Self: all former modes for understanding the relative positionalities of raced and "nonraced" are taken from us. This presents at once an ontological and an ethical dilemma. Jameson suggests:

We need to explore the possibility that there exists, in what quaintly used to be called the moral realm, something roughly equivalent to the dizziness of crowds for the individual body itself: the premonition that the more other people we recognize, even within the mind, the more peculiarly precarious becomes the status of our hitherto unique and "incomparable" consciousness or "self." [358]

The crowd that engulfs the Self is made up of Others, but their frighteningly "new" proximity may be attributed to the fact that, in postmodernity, they are precisely like "us." Jameson's analogy for this "overcoming" is profoundly provocative in its mode of expression and is worth quoting at length:

The dispersive impact of demography is another very different and perhaps more characteristically postmodern effect, felt first and foremost in our relationship to the human past. It would seem, according to some reports, that the quantities of human beings now alive today on earth (some five billion) is rapidly approaching the total number of humanoids who have already lived and died on the planet since the beginning of the species. The present is thus like some new thriving and developing nation-state, whose numbers and prosperity make it an unexpected rival for old traditional ones. *As with bilingual speakers in the United States*, one can at least predictively calculate the moment when it will overtake the past: that demographic moment is already at hand, as a rapidly approaching point in the not so distant future, and thereby to that degree already part of the present and the realities with which it must reckon. . . . It used to be like an old family, old houses in an old village with only a few young people around, who had to sit in the darkened rooms at night and listen to the elders. . . .

What the past has to tell us is therefore little more than a matter of idle curiosity, and indeed our interest in it . . . comes to look like an in-group hobby or adoptive tourism. . . . The salute to non-great-power languages or extinct provincial traditions is, of course, politically correct and a cultural spinoff of micropolitical rhetoric. [360-61]

Let me try to untangle this depressing scenario. The present, represented in the live body count of the world's extant population, virtually overnumbers the past. The "old family" (of modernity) is consigned to a mythic "darkened room." But, most significantly, the numerical superiority which has produced that relegation is not simply a matter of more people, but of newly visible populations, those "Bushmen and Hottentots, bare-breasted island women and aboriginal craftsmen" that are now to be not only counted, but counted as the Same. Jameson's choice of analogy (bilingual speakers in the United States) is not accidental, and we may link it to his later remarks about non-major-power languages and "extinct" provincial traditions. In the flattened-out atemporality of the present, everything can claim equal status. The "old family" is dead; nothing can cohere the disparate and [End Page 52] [Begin Page 54] dense population of the present since History (secured by the traditional "tale" passed down from elder to child in that cold dark space of tradition and history) is simply one tale among many.

Postmodern meaninglessness is directly correlated with the fact that racial others are now too much like us in this flat space of postmodernity--there are no hills or valleys to secure our geographies, no way to "map"

a position. Yet this "sameness" is not total. If it were, how could Jameson even identify these subjects as raced in the first place? What he will argue is that these surface differences mask the "fundamental" sameness brought about by the all-encompassing mode of late capitalist production. Nevertheless, this is hardly satisfying. What appears more clearly than anything else is the sense of loss felt by Jameson: the loss of historical mooring and the consequent loss of any foundation upon which to mount political life. We must ask why and how the appearance of new people, the sound of new voices, must necessarily coincide with the disappearance of politics.

## Politics of a Different "We"

The cry of new voices is unsettling all across the political spectrum, especially when it regards securing rights and privileges. The "fundamental issue" of rights and civil society in late capitalism has forced assumedly separate bodies into new proximities. With restructured localities and transnationalized national spaces, the new visibility of "others" as neighbors, the theorizing of the historical moment and the rearguard action it prompts even in liberal and Marxist Euroamerican subjects, we must face the question of how to at once acknowledge the material basis for such a historical moment and rise to rewrite history in such a way that these "new presences" are recognized not as the manifestations of the evacuation of history, but rather as the voices of other histories which might leverage a politics that the supposedly impoverished Euroamerican history no longer can. <sup>13</sup>

I suggest that it is possible to retain the notion of "nation" around which progressive political work might take place, without submitting to a forced consensus of what that nation *is*. Hollinger rightly notes the importance of not abandoning the "nation" to the right:

It is not chauvinism to insist that the ideological resources of the United States are too useful to democratic egalitarians to be conceded to the Far Right while the rest of us devote our public energies to more narrowly particularist or more broadly universalist projects. A postethnic perspective invites critical engagement with the United States as a distinctive locus of social identity mediating between the human species and its varieties, and as a vital arena for political struggles the outcome of which determine the domestic and global use of a unique concentration of power. Such an engagement with the American nation need not preclude other engagements, including affiliations of varying intensity and duration defined by material or imagined consanguinity. [335]

Nevertheless, his argument contains a Rorty-like sentiment that ultimately shows, again, the limits of both their liberalisms: "[a] truly postethnic America would be one in which the ethno-racial component of identity would loom less large than it now does and in which affiliation by shared descent would be more voluntary than prescribed" [Hollinger 336]. **[End Page 54]** There seems to be throughout the assumption that the "ethnic" and the "racial" have no inherent place in the "nation." By the same token, the "nation" is once again assumed to be nonraced, when in fact it surely is skewed toward the normativity of whiteness. To not make race or ethnicity visible is seemingly a universal call to the Nation on the part of all of its participants, but this leaves unexamined the heavy residue of historical racism that remains at the center, which has been naturalized and made part of "common sense."

Now the Nation is surely important: it would be fatal to abandon it pragmatically. <sup>14</sup> But one should distinguish between the *function* of Nation in forming a sense of social and political solidarity, and the *contents* of "American": one can be accepted pragmatically while still questioning the inclusivity of the latter, and calling for a true accounting of the way the Nation functions both in synch with and in contradiction to its declared contents. When Rorty says that the "residual reformist Left thinks more about laws that need to be passed than about a culture that needs to be changed" ["CL" 78], he is simply

reinforcing a notion that the two can be so easily separated, a separation that the "cultural left" I know does not accept or want. The function/content dichotomy that I propose as a starting point through which one might disaggregate and see more precisely the political work to be done, would work toward, in a romantic and hopeful (Jameson's "utopian"?) fashion, an "achievement" that took seriously into account the various components, the various vocabularies that speak through and to America.

Of the several studies of this terrain, perhaps the best nuanced book is Martin Jay's *Fin-de-siècle Socialism*. Jay recognizes the way that new social movements challenge the left in meaningful and complex ways. For example, he notes that "the social struggles around issues of patriarchy and misogyny are never subsumable under those dealing with economic issues, however much they may be intertwined. . . . It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the relationship between the two movements is an uneasy articulation rather than a smoothly harmonious totalization" [6], and speaks of an emerging recognition among many leftist thinkers of "the value of democratic politics in itself as something irreducible to socio-economic class struggle" [9]. Jay sees the benefits to be derived from coalitional work such as mentioned by Manning Marable [see note 12] as considerable and not worth giving up for the sake of a nostalgia for a past historical possibility: "[t]here is sufficient work to be done without being haunted by the need to measure what modest successes might be granted us against the daunting model of a normatively totalized, fully redeemed social order" [13]. Rorty is certainly right in noting that: "[i]f the cultural Left insists on its present strategy--on asking us to respect one another in our differences rather than asking us to cease noticing these differences--it will have to find a new way of creating a sense of commonality at the level of national politics" ["CL" 101]. That dialogue is in fact going on and being put into practice by many who see the intimate links between class, race, and gender, in a vocabulary and praxis in which Rorty has not yet joined.

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## Notes

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1. This binarism is established in Rorty's recent work. Eric Alterman also remarks on the current debates between an "academic left" and an activist left in his article "Making One and One Equal Two" [10].

2. Martin Jay suggests that there is a slippage between Rorty's "patriotism," which is based in love of country and a concept of citizenship open to all, and a nationalism based on birth. Rorty is in favor of the former, but I will argue that his recent rhetoric has nuances of the latter, as his impatience with identity politics that challenges the formation of national identity has become clear.

3. For Bloom's "School of Resentment," see the first chapter of Bloom's *The Western Canon* [20]. Here is the place to mention that throughout that essay, Bloom argues against any social function for literature, any possibility that it might, as Rorty suggests, perform any consolidating function. Instead, Bloom insists that reading literature has always been and should always be a "solitary" experience which should lead the reader back to "himself" and nowhere else. According to Bloom, the idea that literature should prompt social action is a mistaken and dangerous notion. This sentiment runs throughout his essay and other writings, which makes clear how strange it is that Rorty should so selectively appropriate Bloom without acknowledging this huge difference.

4. Consider, for example, "[t]he ethnocentrism of a 'we' ('we liberals') . . . dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*. It is the 'we' of the people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism" [CIS 198].

5. This formulation resembles the notion of "strategic essentialism." Both have to do with contingent and motivated identity politics.

6. Cornel West makes this point: "Rorty's historicist sense remains too broad, too thick--devoid of the realities of power; his ethnocentric posthumanism too vague, too nonchalant" [Afterword 268].

Although West cites the potential for Rorty's work to "create a new discursive space . . . for those on the underside of history," I have tried to demonstrate that Rorty's development of ethnocentrism has the effect of closing down precisely those potentials beneath the weight of an uncritical patriotism.

7. For an excellent discussion of Gitlin, Tomasky, and others, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. The only distinction I would make in Kelley's grouping of Rorty with these others is precisely Rorty's anti-Enlightenment stance.

8. "The most insistent multiculturalists do not seem to recognize that there is no Left, there is only panic, unless a plausible hope emerges for a greater equality of means. The right to a job, education, medical care, housing, retraining over the course of a lifetime--these are the bare elements of an economic citizenship that ought to be universal" [Gitlin 234]. Putting it simply, Gitlin remarks, "[i]t is the identity obsessions, all of them, each fueling the others, that give the question of multiculturalism its charge and its venom" [227].

9. This is of course nonsense: in the recognition of "Otherness" it is commonly understood that otherness is produced at a number of sites, including the economic, and that that economic manifestation is linked to larger sociopolitical structures which reinforce otherness as well as mobilize a false "normative community" to maintain that otherness while subjecting that "norm" as well to its economic imperatives.

10. At my own campus (which is also Rorty's), Al Camarillo--a professor of history and Director of the Program in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity--teaches a course on homelessness, *and* maintains a center for the homeless. Contrary to Rorty's belief, college campuses were and are essential sites of education, protest, and organization. Antiwar, antiapartheid mobilization comes from the academy, as does an understanding of anti-immigrant laws, women's labor issues, homophobia, the rapaciousness of global capitalism, the nature of NAFTA, and so on. Each of these issues talks across the boundaries that Rorty assumes are in place. See Peter Drier, "The Myth of Student Apathy," for other examples.

11. For a discussion of Rorty's notion of storytelling in the international sphere, see Bruce Robbins, "Sad Stories in the International Public Sphere: Richard Rorty on Culture and Human Rights." This essay contains a useful discussion of Rorty's liberal partitioning of "private" and "public" selves. See also Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism," for a discussion of the politics and stakes of "knowing" the world.

12. Yet the piece that follows Rorty's in *the Nation*, Manning Marable's "Black (Community) Power," cites several examples of how racial solidarity joins forces with "multiracial coalitions where African-Americans are only one of many groups" [22]. Marable gives the example of a demonstration against welfare cuts which drew together the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, the YMCA, the Labor Party, Women for Racial and Economic Equality, and the Progressive Alliance of Alameda County (California), a 400-member group that has sponsored teach-ins on campaign finance reform, health care,

tenants' rights, and proportional representation.

13. This discussion of Jameson is taken from my forthcoming book, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, in which I discuss Jameson's notion of postmodern "schizophrenia" in conjunction with race, what I call "white schizophrenia."

14. And the fact that progressives still protest the out-sourcing of "American" jobs, for instance, suggests that they remain attentive to both the local *and* the global, and their interpenetrations.

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