

ARTICLE

“If happiness is not the aim of politics, then what is?”: Rorty versus Foucault

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I present a new account of Richard Rorty’s interpretation of Michel Foucault, which demonstrates that in the course of his career, Rorty presented several diverse (often mutually exclusive) criticisms of Foucault’s political thought. These give different interpretations of what he took to be the flaws of that thought, but also provide different explanations as to the sources of these flaws. I argue that Rorty’s specific criticisms can be divided into two overall groups. Sometimes he saw Foucault’s rejection of bourgeois democracies and bourgeois utopias as a specific case of his general critique regarding the structures of social life as inherently oppressive. At other times he seemed to attribute to Foucault a view that—while not all forms of social life are inherently oppressive—bourgeois democracies certainly are, in a very specific and radical way. In conclusion I show that Rorty’s interpretation of Foucault should be understood in the context of his approach toward the ‘American Cultural Left.’

Keywords: Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, cultural left, liberalism, Foucault on power and society, philosophy’s role in politics.

I

It is a common feature of academic industries devoted to studying a particular thinker that due to their high specialization and hermeticity (each has its own baroque, complex hierarchy, discursive codes, and—most of all—an overwhelmingly comprehensive and incessantly shifting canon of secondary literature) they remain almost perfectly parallel worlds. Even when there is a significant potential for interaction, dialogue, or collision between them (for instance, because great thinker x discussed great thinker y), it is often channeled into sterile carping, within each industry, about how x misread y, or vice versa; an exercise that is at once as easy as it is grotesque. Easy, because virtually every thinker capable of engendering an industry is a strong reader for whom the interpretive standards of the sort celebrated by pedantic specialists simply do not exist. Grotesque, because such fulminations must themselves be based on a misreading of the incriminated misreader, since the fulminators are generally too busy exploring the work of their hero or heroine to gain sufficient knowledge of anything else.

While not claiming that the relationship between Foucault and Rorty studies can be reduced *entirely* to this particular pattern, I would like to present in this paper a new account of how Rorty understood Michel Foucault, which, I hope, can be of use to Foucault specialists.

If not in the sense of facilitating a dialogue between these fields of study, then by enriching knowledge about Foucault's reception in America. What I consider to be the novelty of my account, lies mainly in showing that in the course of his career, Rorty presented several diverse, some of them mutually exclusive, criticisms of Foucault's political thought, in the sense that not only did he differently interpret what he took to be the latter's flaws, but also provided different explanations as to the sources of these flaws. Admittedly, many of these criticisms may seem baffling or even outrageous to a majority of readers. Apart from a few remarks in the conclusion, however, I am going to remain agnostic with regard to the accuracy of Rorty's interpretations and to the validity of his arguments.¹ Moreover, since I am convinced that it does "matter who's speaking,"² and that the ambiguous entity: 'the oeuvre' is important; I shall try to read Rorty's respective views through the prism of his intellectual background and situate them in the general context of his thought.

II

Before I turn to the main subject of the paper, I must mention that Rorty's treatment of Foucault was—to grossly understate things—not uniformly critical.³ In fact, he did not hesitate to praise Foucault as a "remarkable man" of great "imagination,"⁴ who was able to consistently follow Nietzsche's imperative of "becoming who one is,"⁵ not to mention that he portrayed him as an "impressive" (if slightly "overwrought"⁶) "intellectual figure,"⁷ a fellow anti-dualist,⁸ anti-Platonist,⁹ anti-representationalist,¹⁰ anti-essentialist,¹¹ and social constructivist.¹²

¹ This is also the reason why, in the present paper, quotations from Rorty's works drastically outnumber citations from Foucault. For some other accounts of Rorty's critique of Foucault (some of them defending the latter against the former) see, for instance, Joan M. Reynolds, "'Pragmatic Humanism' in Foucault's Later Work," *Canadian Journal of Political Science, Revue canadienne de science politique*, 37, no. 4 (Dec., 2004): 951-977; James D. Marshall, "On What We May Hope: Rorty on Dewey and Foucault," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 13, nos. 3-4 (1994): 307-323; Barry Allen, "After Knowledge and Liberty: Foucault and the New Pragmatism," in Carlos G. Prado (ed.), *Foucault's Legacy* (London: Continuum, 2009); David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 154-60; Christopher J. Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Langham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2006), 125-7; and Marek Kwiek, *Rorty's Elective Affinities: The New Pragmatism and Postmodern Thought* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe IF UAM, 1996), 211-237.

² See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited, with an introduction, by Donald F. Bouchard; translated from the French by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 138.

³ As Barry Allen emphasizes, Rorty "always begins with something to admire [in Foucault]." (Allen, "After Knowledge and Liberty," 79)

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, edited and with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 40.

⁵ See Richard Rorty, "Is 'Cultural Recognition' a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?," *Critical Horizons*, 1, no. 1 (2000), 15.

⁶ Richard Rorty, "Foucault and Epistemology," in David Couzens Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford-New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 45.

⁷ Josefina Ayerza with Richard Rorty, "North Atlantic Thinking," *Lacan.com* [originally published in *Flash Art* (Nov/Dec, 1993)]. <<http://www.lacan.com/perfume/rorty.htm>> Cf. also the following remark by Rorty: "I think he [i.e., Foucault]'s inspired a lot of very creative work, particularly at Berkeley. He's created a whole

To nuance this picture chronologically, when in the late 1970s and early 1980s, his research interest was mainly in epistemology and its history, and thus in Foucault's pre-1968 work,¹³ Rorty used to advertize the latter as somebody who was helpful in "fleshing out" Kuhn's conception of science¹⁴ and in supplying contemporary historicist, or post-Hegelian, critics of theory of knowledge with sufficient a dose of irony to guard them against their own inclinations toward Whiggishness.¹⁵ These elements of Foucault's thought, as Rorty revealed in his philosophical autobiography "Trotsky and Wild Orchids," had even contributed to "the small epiphany," without which, we may suppose, Rorty's opus magnum—*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—would not have come into being at all.¹⁶

school there through other historians, through anthropologists; the literary critics are all more or less Foucaultians—that's quite a remarkable intellectual event." (Ibid.)

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books 1999), 47.

⁹ Ibid., xix-xx.

¹⁰ See Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15; and Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 86.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, "Response to Kate Soper," in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.), *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 132.

¹² See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31, 35; and Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 49. Cf. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

¹³ Cf. Rorty's remarks on dividing Foucault's work into the pre- and post-1968 period in "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," *London Review of Books*, 3, no. 3 (19 February, 1981), 3-4; pagination refers to the online edition of the article to be found at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v03/n03/rort01_.html>.

¹⁴ "Wittgenstein's insistence that one cannot get outside language-games so as to compare our language with reality was used by Kuhn and others to construct a picture of science as a matter of working with (and using up) tools, rather than of seeing reality more clearly. Such Wittgensteinian criticisms of Enlightenment notions of 'truth' and 'science' will seem more paradox-mongering, however, as long as we retain the 19th-century picture of continuous, asymptotic, scientific progress—of knowledge as evolving and spreading in a continuously rational way. Foucault's histories helped us see the discontinuities, the sudden twists and turns. His notion of an *episteme*, 'the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may be from what may not be characterised as scientific, and his illustrations of how such an apparatus can suddenly be cast aside, helps flesh out Kuhn's notion of 'paradigm'." (Ibid.)

¹⁵ Thanks to Foucault, contemporary historicists have realized that "Maybe we [i.e., the historicists] *cannot* put together a history of thought which is both honest and continuous. Foucault might just possibly be right in saying that the stories we tell about how our ancestors gradually matured into ourselves are so 'Whiggish', so anachronistic, as to be worthless." (Rorty, "Foucault and Epistemology," 48) Cf. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 391-2.

¹⁶ "About 20 years or so after I decided that the young Hegel's willingness to stop trying for eternity, and just be the child of his time, was the appropriate response to disillusionment with Plato, I found myself being led back to Dewey. Dewey now seemed to me a philosopher who had learned all that Hegel had to teach about how to eschew certainty and eternity, while immunizing himself against pantheism by taking Darwin seriously. This rediscovery of Dewey coincided with my first encounter with Derrida... Derrida led me back to Heidegger, and I was struck by the resemblances between Dewey's, Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's criticisms of Cartesianism. Suddenly things began to come together. I thought I saw a way to blend a criticism of the Cartesian tradition with the quasi-Hegelian historicism of Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking and Alasdair MacIntyre. I thought that I could fit all these into a quasi-Heideggerian story about the tensions within Pla-

When, from the 1980s onward, Rorty's work began to gravitate toward politics, he still found some aspects of Foucault's thought praiseworthy, beginning with Foucault's "debunk[ing]" of the conceptions of emancipation that rely on a "Rousseauistic" picture of the true human nature that hides beneath layers of apparent subjectivity shaped by socialization.¹⁷ In that picture, *all* social institutions and communal constraints must appear as "ex definitione coercive," which naturally implies that the only way to realize human freedom lies in abolishing such institutions and breaking down such constraints. As Rorty argued, Foucault's skepticism toward that conception resulted from his social constructivism about humanity which he shared with John Dewey among others¹⁸; a fact worth mentioning here, if only because one of the highest compliments Rorty could pay to any thinker was to stress their convergence with Dewey.¹⁹ In any event, both Dewey and Foucault—Rorty's argument went on—were convinced that if one tried to peel the layers of socialization from the human self, one would end up empty-handed, since we are what society makes of us. So, if there is any freedom available to anybody, it is available not despite, but thanks to social conventions and constraints.²⁰ To put it differently, both would agree that we are basically constituted by "the meshes of power"—and so is everything else.²¹

As soon as one acquires this view, all philosophical speculations about the alleged ahistorical, inner core of the human self, along with political theories that are predicated on such speculations, appear useless or comical, or both at the same time. Since *der Lebenswelt* is all that there is to featherless bipeds (apart from such biological trivialities that they are bipeds indeed),²² in solving human problems, we should turn not to philosophy, but instead to those discourses that are confined to a sublunar, social perspective; say, sociology, anthropology, novels etc.²³ But that is not all. Since power permeates everything, we cannot evaluate anything solely on the basis of its being immune to or infected by power, and, a fortiori, build a politics around such evaluation. Rather, we should satisfy ourselves with distinguishing be-

tonism. The result of this small epiphany was a book called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*" (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 11-2)

¹⁷ Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 7.

¹⁸ Those others include, e.g., Hegel, "Mead, Sellars, and Habermas." See Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 7; and Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 64.

¹⁹ For some other similarities Rorty saw between Dewey and Foucault, see Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xxxi, 86.

²⁰ Cf. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xlii, 208.

²¹ See Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 7. Cf. Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 22.

²² See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 208.

²³ "We don't need philosophy for social criticism: we have economics, sociology, the novel, psychoanalysis, and many other ways to criticize society. Take the very powerful critic Foucault. His best work does not strike me as particularly philosophical. The most interesting parts of his works are the details about the culture of the insane asylums, of prisons, of hospitals. Foucault was also a great philosopher, but he made a social difference not as a philosopher, but as someone who looked at particular things harder than anybody else." (Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 45)

tween the power “we like” and the power “we don’t like,”²⁴ and do our best to ensure there is less of the latter and more of the former, something for which the aforementioned discourses, including such specimens as Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, are—says Rorty—indispensable.²⁵

The problem with Foucault, however, and here we are approaching the gist of Rorty’s criticism of him, is that while he was exceptionally good at unmasking the “bad” power, he was quite bad at helping the “good” one flourish²⁶; a flaw which stems mainly from his inability to detect even the faintest traces of the latter in our present democracies. In fact, what is probably most striking in Foucault, for philosophers such as Habermas, Taylor, and Rorty, is that being a perceptive historian he was, sensitive to all kinds of “cunning ways”, in which the process of modernization brought with it new kinds of oppression, he remained blind to the unquestionable advantages of that process and to their “compensating” for the negative consequences of it.²⁷ This seems all the more curious if one considers the fact that it is precisely thanks to these advantages that Foucault could fashion his life in a way that was undreamt of (or at least was fiercely punishable) before modernity.²⁸ It is only thanks to them that he could become, as Rorty once put it, “the knight of autonomy.”²⁹

This, however, does not exhaust the list of Foucault’s sins, for—to Rorty’s mind,—he not only failed significantly in analyzing the present and the past, but also failed, and failed even worse, at envisioning the future; something certainly no politics can do without.³⁰ In order to better grasp the latter point, let us take a look at the remark with which Rorty concludes his review of *Herculine Barbin*

Foucault urges that the structures of power have made life pretty well impossible for somebody whose sexual organs are intermediate. So they have: but that seems like saying that they have made life almost impossible for somebody who is deaf and blind. One is not

²⁴ That is, power used for purposes we like and that used for purposes we dislike. For instance, says Rorty, “The power of a utopian egalitarian community to create good citizens via biopower is a good thing.” (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 69) Cf. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 175.

²⁵ “Discoveries about who is being made to suffer can be left to the workings of free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion—enlightened, for example, by books like *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*, as well as those like *Germinal*, *Black Boy*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *1984*.” (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 63-4.)

²⁶ See Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 175; and Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 40. Cf. Kwiek, *Rorty’s Elective Affinities*, 212.

²⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 63. Cf. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 195; Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 198; and Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 7. Cf. Allen, “After Knowledge and Liberty,” 80.

²⁸ Richard Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” in Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (eds.), *The New Salmagundi Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 518.

²⁹ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 194.

³⁰ See Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 174; Rorty, “Beyond Nietzsche and Marx,” 9; Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 138-139.

going to feel the force of either remark unless one can think up some structures which wouldn't have this effect.³¹

Rorty was fond of calling such imagined structures utopias, and thus we might say that his objection toward Foucault is that the latter was unwilling to sketch a "utopia" ahead of us—both in the sense of "liberal," or "bourgeois," utopia, which Rorty cared about the most, and defined as "just a lot more of the same kind of thing we have had a little of already,"³² and any utopia whatsoever.

These, according to Rorty, would be the main drawbacks of Foucault's political thought, which, it is worth adding here, kept puzzling Rorty for many years. So much, in fact, that he felt it necessary to account for them, eventually providing several different hypotheses in this regard, which I will try to reconstruct in the following sections of the paper and which can be divided into two groups, depending on which particular spin he would give to his interpretation of the aforementioned drawbacks at a given moment. For it seems that he interpreted them in at least two ways. Namely, sometimes he saw Foucault's rejection of bourgeois democracies and bourgeois utopias as a specific case of his general critique of all structures of social life as inherently oppressive, while at other times he attributed to Foucault a view that while not all forms of society are inherently oppressive, bourgeois democracies certainly are so, and in a very specific and radical way.

III

To begin with the latter case, it must be noted that, for Rorty, there can be no logical *iunctim* between Foucault's contempt for bourgeois liberalism³³ and his aforementioned views on power and the self. According to Rorty, a constructivist dissolution of the Rousseauvian conception of subjectivity does not invalidate liberalism in and of itself (even if one considers as its key component a certain ideology of individualism). This is so because liberalism, as practically any other political outlook for that matter, does not hinge on its philosophical justifications and is in principle "compatible" with any ontology, understood as a set of theoretical views on the nature of human beings and reality which can be found in philosophy books, including those written by Foucault.³⁴ Even though this argument, or should I say claim, is not uncontroversial (some philosophers, like Kate Soper, for instance, would say it is utterly

³¹ Rorty, *Beyond Nietzsche and Marx*, 8. See also *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, introduced by Michel Foucault; translated by Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

³² Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 324. Cf. "Liberals in the Mill-Dewey tradition dream of a utopia in which everybody has a chance at the things only the richer citizens of the rich North Atlantic democracies have been able to get—the freedom, wealth, and leisure to pursue private perfection in idiosyncratic ways." That utopia is "not a transfiguration but a redistribution." (Ibid.)

³³ Note that Rorty "contrast[s] bourgeois liberalism, the attempt to fulfill the hopes of the North Atlantic bourgeoisie, with philosophical liberalism, a collection of Kantian principles thought to justify us in having those hopes." (Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 198) In the remainder of the text, I shall be using terms the "bourgeois liberalism" and "liberalism" (and its derivatives) interchangeably.

³⁴ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 197. Cf., e.g., Rorty, "Response to Kate Soper," 132; and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33-4.

wrong³⁵), instead of trying to expand or defend it here, let me stress that when it comes to the compatibility of social constructivism and liberalism in particular, it sometimes seems enough for Rorty to indicate that both these views were held simultaneously by George Herbert Mead or Dewey without contradiction.³⁶

The case with Foucault's conceptions of power is even simpler, since they boil down to the claim that when we recognize a particular kind of power as oppressive, it is not oppressive because all power is intrinsically so, but rather because we have just encountered a power we "don't like," and they do not tell us anything about which power to like and which not to like. What we seem to be left with, then, is the question why Foucault, did not "like" liberal democracies as such, to which Rorty gives three different answers. These can loosely be called "sociological," "psychological, and "historical."

In the first case, the predicate "sociological" should in fact be qualified with the adverb 'vulgarly', since the explanation in question boils down to a sweeping claim that Foucault's behavior is the result of following some "contingent French fashion." In other words, (words that notably come from an interview, which might justify their insouciance to an extent): "I don't see—says Rorty—what Foucault had against bourgeois liberalism, except that in the France of the fifties and sixties it just wasn't respectable to be a bourgeois liberal. I don't think he has any arguments against it or anything better to suggest."³⁷ As if to bolster this "diagnosis," in a different place, Rorty invoked yet another French thinker who "hate[d] the bourgeoisie more than he love[d] anyone else", i.e., Jean-Paul Sartre, and pointed out that both men had been "led" by their hatred to adopt political stances that seem dangerously irresponsible, to put it euphemistically.³⁸ What Rorty meant here is, mainly, that Foucault entertained "the same sort of tolerance for Maoist bloodthirstiness as Sartre had for Stalinist terror":

In the first interview in *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault out-radicals some Maoists by objecting to 'People's Courts' as perpetuating the 'judicial and penal apparatus' which the revolution must get rid of. It all sounds much too much like a Nazi ideologue suggesting that the administrative apparatus for carrying out the Nuremberg Laws betrays the spirit of the National Socialist revolution, and hinting that it would be better if Jews were beaten to death on the spot by their neighbours. It is hard to see how someone who claims no longer to believe in a good, pure, true self which has been repressed by society can seriously suggest that 'the masses will discover a way of dealing with the problem of their enemies... methods of retribution which will range from punishment to re-education, without involving the form of the court which—in any case in our society, I don't know about China—is to be avoided.'³⁹

³⁵ See Kate Soper, "Richard Rorty: Humanist and/or Anti-Humanist?" in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 125.

³⁶ See Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 237.

³⁷ Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 30.

³⁸ Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.* The Foucault citation is from "On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 28. Cf. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 196.

Since I am aware of the fact that some members of contemporary academia (especially Western academia) do not find it self-evident why Stalinist or Maoist sympathies should be adjudicated in the Rortyan sense (indeed, some may see Rorty's views in this regard as themselves dangerously irresponsible) let me shed light on his stance by looking at it through sociological lenses provided by Neil Gross' study *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*.⁴⁰ Gross' main point is that understanding how Rorty was made (or made himself) a philosopher and an intellectual necessitates studying his family background, at least up to his famous maternal grandfather, Walter Rauschenbush. In extension it is necessary to analyze the particular social roles undertaken by his parents.

Obviously I do not have the time to even briefly summarize Gross' findings here, but to cut a long story short, it needs to be stressed that Rorty's parents, who were associated with "the group that would become known as the New York intellectuals,"⁴¹ became critical of Stalinism and Communism earlier than most of their colleagues on the Left (i.e., in the early 30s).⁴² As Rorty himself describes it, he was "a red-diaper anticommunist baby," and his childhood memories involved listening to his parents discussing the atrocities committed by Stalin, not to mention the fact that when he "was seven [he] had the honor of serving little sandwiches... at a Halloween party" attended by such prominent anticommunist socialists as Sidney Hook.⁴³ This should make it clearer why he eventually grew up a liberal who would squirm with revulsion at each positive mention of Stalin (or any other communist leader) and at each justification of terror in leftist politics. Rorty's anticommunism was in fact such an integral part of his identity that, however unfashionable it may have seemed to leftist intellectuals in the recent decades, he would never deny it, just as he was never ashamed of his intellectual pedigree.

Another thing to which he openly confessed, a thing seemingly even more unfashionable in the eyes of contemporary leftists, and which I mention here because it will allow us to contextualize what I have named the "psychological explanation," is his attachment to precisely that tradition of Anglo-Saxon intellectuals which Nietzsche scornfully summed up with his well-known bon mot: "Man does *not* strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that."⁴⁴ Rorty's fellow-Anglo-Saxon intellectuals indeed think that human beings live for happiness and they want to organize social life in a way that would allow as many different people as possible to pursue this goal by "smoothing out the rough edges of their incommen-

⁴⁰ See Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Cf. Casey Nelson Blake, "Private Life and Public Commitment: From Walter Rauschenbush to Richard Rorty," in John Pettegrew (ed.), *A Pragmatist's Progress?: Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 85-102.

⁴¹ To be exact, they were situated "on the periphery of the group." (Gross, *Richard Rorty*, 29)

⁴² See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 59.

⁴³ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 58, 61. As he also recalls: "as a teenage student at the University of Chicago, I had enjoyed a snotty sense of inherited superiority to fellow-students whose parents had waited until the Moscow trials to break with the American Communist Party. That was a whole five years later than my own parents, who had broken in 1932." (Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 59)

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Arrows," no. 12, in *Twilight of the Idols*; and *The Anti-Christ*, translated, with an introduction and commentary by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 33. Cf. Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 324.

surable claims.”⁴⁵ Of course, they realize that present liberal democracies are far from this ideal (there are many individuals whose attempts at happiness are constantly interrupted by the democratic society they live in), yet they think these democracies are nevertheless on the right track; that even though they need to be improved, they are still better, much better indeed, than any other system—both past and present. What they are also aware of is that it is easy to stray from that road, and they thus prefer to tread very cautiously on it (this is what they themselves call “reformism” or “meliorism,” and what their detractors prefer to dub “a cowardly defense of the status quo”⁴⁶) remaining skeptical of any suggestions that we might translocate directly to a brave new world by means of some revolutionary gesture. This is also why they think all radicalism, anything wildly heteroclitic and extreme, should be confined to the private sphere and domesticated in such a way that the public realm will not begin to disintegrate. For instance, and let me here cite a characteristically self-ironic (yet at the same time defiant) passage from Rorty’s review of James Miller’s *The Passion of Michel Foucault*:

Americans whose first information about what happens in gay bathhouses comes from Miller’s book, and are intrigued to learn that “Once penetration has been achieved, internal massage coupled with in and out motions generates paroxysms of intense euphoria” (Geoff Mains, quoted in Miller’s book), will be inclined to wonder if perhaps we might not be able to get the same paroxysms in the comfort and convenience of our own homes. Maybe an FDA-approved paroxysm pill? An Underwriters’ Approved bedside widget for stimulating the relevant paroxysm-center in the brain? This sort of reaction is why Americans often strike French intellectuals as just what Nietzsche had in mind when he described “the last men” as having “their little pleasures for the day and their little pleasures for the night.”⁴⁷

This observation by Nietzsche brings us to the obvious truth that the features Rorty attributes to Anglo-Saxon intellectuals (the belief in happiness, the anxiety of radical changes, the attachment to the private-public cleavage) are also the defining features of bourgeoisie, which Foucault, as Rorty saw it, “hated” so much. Yet if Miller’s book allowed him to identify in more detail the object of that scorn, it also helped Rorty locate its source in something deeper,

⁴⁵ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 518.

⁴⁶ Cf. the following remark by Rorty: “I’m all for social changes, but I would prefer them to be reformist rather than revolutionary.” Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 31.

⁴⁷ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 515. Of course, it is interesting to ask why the first thing that came to Rorty’s mind when he tried to imagine his fellow Americans’ reaction to learning about the pleasures of anal sex described in Miller’s book was a pill or a widget, i.e., something that allows one to feel the pleasure generated by this particular erotic corporeal activity without the need to engage in any such activity. One way to begin to answer that question would be to indicate that sex did not figure prominently, if at all, in Rorty’s writings, and that neither did he show any interest in the poststructuralist conceptions of limit-experience, something which made American pragmatist Richard Shusterman describe him once as “product of Puritan America.” One can imagine that many a philosopher would be outraged by such a dictum. This was not the case with Rorty, though, who responded to it with his characteristic phlegm: “For better or for worse—perhaps because of being a product of puritan America, or perhaps because my views are indeed determined by ‘the intellectual field and consumerist world of late-capitalist liberalism’—Foucault’s, Bataille’s, and Deleuze’s discussions of the body leave me cold.” Richard Rorty, “Response to Richard Shusterman” in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, 156. See also James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

darker, and more “idiosyncratic”⁴⁸ than an attempt to be fashionable in Parisian circles, or in the fact that French intellectuals simply are such curious creatures who, unlike the last men, “want paroxysms where nobody should want them—in politics.” For Miller’s study:

shows us how Foucault’s lifelong infatuation with death (an infatuation he shared with Sade, Poe and Baudelaire, but not, it is worth noting, with Nietzsche) came together with his experiences in California to produce, at least in the last ten years of his life, a belief that there is a kind of death-in-life which has nothing to do with happiness and which was, for him, “thinkable” in a way that happiness was not.⁴⁹

This is exactly the reason why it is clear (for Rorty) that “we should not hope to get a new *politics* out of Foucault”⁵⁰—a phrase which should be read as meaning not only that Rorty simply cannot imagine a different aim of politics than happiness, but also that he believes that even if it were possible to imagine such a thing (something like “a kind of death-in-life,” for instance), it would nevertheless hardly constitute an advisable basis for any new political endeavor. For, faithful to his pragmatist stance of “starting from where we are,” Rorty observes that we would still have to do something with all those for whom happiness is not only thinkable, but is the most important thing in life. We would have to do politics *with them*, and to “begin” this job by showing utmost “contempt” for what they stand for would simply be absurd, especially that, however depressing this might have seemed to Foucault, they constitute the majority in our societies.

Yet Foucault wrote as if he was ready to just that. He wrote, that is, “from a point of view light-years away from the problems of contemporary society,” wrote as its “dispassionate observer... rather than its concerned critic.”⁵¹ This is why, Rorty thinks, he avoided like a plague deploying in his discourse the kind of “we” that Rorty often used in his own writings and which is probably best epitomized by the following sentence: “We know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together.”⁵² This “dryness”

⁴⁸ Rorty, “Response to Kate Soper,” 132.

⁴⁹ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 517. Cf. the following exchange: “Josefina Ayerza: In this same article [i.e., “Paroxysms and Politics”] you say that Foucault proposes something more exciting than happiness. Why not presume he’s invoking Freud’s concept in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*? Wouldn’t this so-called happiness concern the kind of satisfaction which makes for a bourgeois standard? Richard Rorty: I think that he associated being bourgeois with being happy and distrusted. I’m not sure about the relation to Freud’s book, because I just don’t understand Freud’s book. I’ve never gotten a grip on what Freud had in mind when he talked about the death instinct.” (Ayerza with Rorty, “North Atlantic Thinking”) Cf. also Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 139.

⁵⁰ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 517.

⁵¹ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 173.

⁵² *Ibid.* 174. Cf. Foucault’s response to this charge: “Richard Rorty points out that in these analyses I do not appeal to any ‘we’—to any of these ‘we’s’ whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible, by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and a necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new

of Foucault's discourse (in the sense of that term that Rorty borrowed from Iris Murdoch),⁵³ was seen by Rorty (at least most of the times) as stemming exactly from Foucault's inability to feel any commonality with his contemporaries.⁵⁴

In the "psychological" interpretation, then, Foucault looks contemptuously at liberal democracies from the standpoint of some further unspecified future world⁵⁵ that knows no happiness and whose contours he caught a glimpse of (through a glass darkly, but nevertheless did) by dint of his experiences with sadomasochism and drugs. However, in what I earlier termed the "historical" interpretation, such a look is directed at its object from the perspective of the past: a "pre-modern" reality in which human subjectivity had been supposedly freer than it has been for the last "several centuries."⁵⁶ For Rorty, however, the latter perspec-

terms in which one formulates it. For example, I'm not sure that at the time when I wrote the history of madness, there was a preexisting and receptive 'we' to which I would only have had to refer in order to write my book, and of which this book would have been the spontaneous expression." (Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 385) Commenting on this passage, Marek Kwiek rightly asserted that "Rorty had no doubts... that the 'we' of liberals is quite satisfactory and there is no need of looking for another 'we' ...in the manner of Foucault." (Kwiek, *Rorty's Elective Affinities* 213, 221) Cf. David Hoy, "Rejoinder to Thomas McCarthy," in David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 258-9.

⁵³ "It is a dryness produced by a lack of identification with any social context, and communication." (Ibid. 173) Cf. another formulation of what Rorty meant by "dryness": "[Nietzsche] and Kant, alas, shared something which each other that neither shared with Harriet Beecher Stowe—something that Iris Murdoch has called 'dryness' and Jacques Derrida called 'phallogocentrism.' The common element in the thought of both men was a desire for purity. This sort of purity consists in not only being autonomous, but also in having the kind of self-conscious self-sufficiency which Sartre describes as the perfect synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself. This synthesis could be attained, Sartre pointed out, if one could rid oneself of everything sticky, slimy, wet, sentimental, and womanish." (Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 283) For a discussion of Rorty's attributing "dryness" to Foucault's discourse, see also Hall, *Richard Rorty*, 198, and Allen, "After Knowledge and Liberty," 79-80.

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 173. Cf. the following remark by Rorty: "The big difference between Foucault and Derrida is that Derrida is a sentimental, hopeful, romantically idealist writer. Foucault, on the other hand, seems to be doing his best to have no social hope and no human feelings. One cannot imagine Derrida hoping to write 'so as to have no face', any more than one can imagine Nietzsche doing so. Despite his prediction that 'the Book' will be replaced by 'the text', Derrida intensely admires the great authors who stand behind the text he glosses; he has no doubts about his or her authorship. Although he of course has doubts about metaphysical accounts of the nature of the self and of writing, he has no interest in dissolving the books in which great human imaginations have been most fully themselves into anonymous, rootless, free-floating 'discourses.' Whereas Foucault cultivates aloofness, Derrida throws himself into the arms of the texts he writes about. Cynical detachment is not the whole story about Foucault, but it is an irreplaceable part of that story." (Richard Rorty, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge 1996), 13) Note, however, that in his later article "Hope and Future," Rorty describes both Derrida and Foucault as "specializ[ing] in impossibility and hopelessness." (Richard Rorty, "Hope and Future," *Peace Review*, 14, no. 2 (2002), 152) Cf. Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 22.

⁵⁵ Cf. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 174.

⁵⁶ Rorty refers here to the following fragment of Foucault's "The Subject and Power:" "...the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individu-

tive is no more convincing than the former and he brushes it aside with a series of rhetorical questions:

But what other kind of individuality did we have before those centuries? The one we had when our subjectivity was shaped by the pre-literate village? By the Athenian polis? By the medieval church?

And then adds:

If Foucault thought that his historical research had revealed that in earlier times, before the state really got the hang of exercising bio-power we (who? everybody? a few lucky intellectuals?) had a different, and really terrific, sort of subjectivity, he certainly failed to make clear just when and where this was so.⁵⁷

It is all too clear what lurks between these lines; the suggestion that despite all his “claptrap about repression”⁵⁸ and his political activities, etc., Foucault was in fact just another elitist thinker who was inclined to perceive any world that would be better *merely* for “...a few lucky intellectuals...” as *generally* better.

Since we are on this subject, let me admit that when a moment ago, I mentioned Rorty’s fulminations against French intellectuals, I did not mention all the vices he attributes to that group. For besides chastising them for being inexcusably susceptible to dangerous political fads and extremism, he also—which in the mouth of a professional philosopher such as Rorty may seem a rather paradoxical accusation—bemoaned their paying too much attention to philosophy. If I elided this accusation for now, this is because it constitutes an important aspect of Rorty’s interpretation of Foucault as rejecting all forms of social life. This is the interpretation to which we now turn.

IV

So, as we learn from Rorty, French intellectuals pay *too much* attention to philosophy, which is a result of the simple fact that “they read a lot of philosophy in high school, and are expected to take it pretty seriously.”⁵⁹ What could that mean and why would that be a bother in the first place? Rorty tries to answer these questions by invoking one “of the most marked behavioral differences between French and American intellectuals,” (i.e., those American intellectuals who have not been seduced by French thinkers), which can be illustrated by the following situation.⁶⁰ Imagine someone provides you with a fairly convincing argument that the current “moral consensus rests upon a questionable philosophical assumption” or, *horribile dic-*

ality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.” (Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, edited by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216)

⁵⁷ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 517.

⁵⁸ Rorty, “Foucault and Epistemology,” 47.

⁵⁹ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 514.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

tu, that it lacks any such foundation at all.⁶¹ If you were an American intellectual of the sort described above, you would with all probability mumble something like “then so much the worse for philosophy,” in response, but if you were French, you would probably begin to think that the whole consensus is worthless, and maybe even start looking for ways to annihilate it—preferably some extreme, sublime ways at that.⁶²

Now, according to Rorty, there are, basically, two things wrong with the French reaction. The first is that, seen from a meta-philosophical point of view, the question about the philosophical justification for a given moral consensus (or social order, or politics) and the question of whether this consensus (order, or politics) should actually be changed, belongs to two different registers. These are the philosophical and political registers and must not be confused.⁶³ The second, and more important, thing is that this kind of reasoning may lead us (and in fact have led such people as Nietzsche) to reject a fairly good social consensus, when we do not have anything better, or at least something *concretely* different, to offer in its place.⁶⁴ Foucault’s case is even worse than that since this line of thinking—twisted further by his relentless desire for the sublime—made him reject *a priori* every possible social consensus, or this is what Rorty says in his essay “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault.”⁶⁵

To begin with, Rorty tells us, we must understand that Foucault belonged to a certain “long-standing tradition in social philosophy... which, with Plato, sees society as Man writ large”:

Most philosophers in this tradition try to isolate some central, ahistorical, noncontingent core (e.g., “reason” or “a specifically moral motivation”) within us, and to use the presence of this element within us as a justification for certain political arrangements, certain social institutions.⁶⁶

Some may object that this does not account for Foucault’s place in that tradition. Was he not one of its most famous detractors, *even* according to Rorty himself? Yes and no. To be more exact, according to the view Rorty holds in “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy,” while Foucault might have been the most famous of them, he still was not sufficiently consistent in his critique, which remained caught within the system of possibilities of the Platonic tradition,⁶⁷ thus making Foucault merely a perverted offspring thereof rather than its ultimate

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Cf. a different explanation of American intellectuals’ being philosophically unmusical: “A traditional difference between European and American intellectuals has been that the latter think that the moral and political decisions we face as individuals and as citizens are pretty clear and that the vocabulary in which typically formulate them does not need extensive revision. So they are slow to recognize the relevance of philosophy to politics, and inclined to think of philosophy as something you can take or leave alone—something which need not be approached in a spirit of moral seriousness.” (Richard Rorty, “Response to Simon Critchley” in Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 45)

⁶³ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 514.

⁶⁴ See Allen, “After Knowledge and Liberty,” 82.

⁶⁵ See Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 193-8.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁷ Barry Allen finds this interpretation “improbable.” (Allen, “After Knowledge and Liberty,” 80)

gravedigger. What Rorty means is that while Foucault rightly denounced the idea of an ahistorical core to human beings (perceiving them instead as “contingent product[s] of contingently existing forces”), he wrongly kept the connection between such a core and the justification of particular forms of social life, and “infer[red] from the absence of [such a core]... the absence of the need for social institutions,” including those that are key to bourgeois liberalism.⁶⁸

Yet the absence of the need for something does not necessarily entail its noxiousness, so we must still account for Foucault’s repudiation of all social institutions as “exerting normalizing power,” and here the main culprit (for Rorty) is Foucault’s otherwise harmless yearning for sublimity; “the sublimity one attains by breaking out of some particular inheritance (a vocabulary, a tradition, a style) that one had feared might bound one’s entire life.”⁶⁹ “Otherwise,” here refers to Rorty’s aforementioned belief that the desire for radical novelty is something acceptable (nay, commendable), only on the condition that it does not transcend the boundaries of the private, in the sense of our not trying to make the world we live in as flamboyant and unheard of as we rightfully want our own selves to become. Foucault *crossed* that boundary and this was because, as Rorty suggests, his hypertrophic sense of sublimity converged in him, by some unfortunate coincidence, with the aforementioned quasi-Platonism and with what I have described earlier as excessive trust in philosophy among French intellectuals. This is why “anarchism beg[an] to seem attractive [to him]” and this is also why he eventually began to confuse two concepts of power. The “descriptive” (which simply denotes our being shaped by the society that surrounds us, something which Dewey simply called “culture”) and the “pejorative” (where power is something inherently repressive and alien to us that needs to be “shaken off our backs”). As a result, he used a “pejorative term like ‘discourse of power’ to describe the result of *any* social compromise, any political balancing act.”⁷⁰

If this explanation of Foucault’s “anarchism” and rejection of bourgeois democracies seems too convoluted, then in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty provides a slightly simpler (which does not mean more convincing) case, which, however, also hinges on attributing to Foucault a yearning for sublimity, a gullible faith that philosophy can instruct us whether a given sociopolitical structure is desirable or not, and on locating him within the Platonic tradition. This time, however, Rorty depicts Foucault as *believing* in the inner ahistorical core of human beings and also in the idea (which “comes from Rousseau by way of Kant’s attempt to see a part of the self outside of nature”) that this core is “ex definitione”⁷¹ “deformed by acculturation” and all possible “social institutions.”⁷² From this perspective, in order for one to become fully autonomous, it will not suffice if one revolutionizes merely the way one lives in a society or even that society in particular. What one will need is a “total revolution” that will

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 324. Cf. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 193-4.

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 196.

⁷¹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 321.

⁷² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 64. See also Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 213n2; Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 182; and Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 310. Cf. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.

sweep away social structures *as such*.⁷³ This revolution will indeed have to be so total that it is barely thinkable (after all, everything you can think of now is necessarily mediated through the “socialization you have received”), a conviction which leads Foucault to eventually producing Rorty’s “least favorite” sentence in the former’s entire corpus, namely: “I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system.”⁷⁴

Let me reiterate the lesson Rorty wants us to draw from each of the two interpretations. Namely, that combining philosophy and politics (in the sense of making our acceptance of a given social order, or any social order for that matter, conditional on what some grand philosophical theories say on the nature of the self and society) is a “bad idea.”⁷⁵ Yet even if one does not accept Foucault’s “anarchism,” and even if one agrees with Rorty that it was his philosophy that led Foucault to it, then one cannot not recognize that this philosophy led also to some undeniably positive political consequences. What about GIP, for instance? Is it not a brilliant example of combining philosophical and political activity for the good of society? To Rorty’s mind, however, quite the opposite is true. First of all, he sees what Foucault did for the cause of the prisoners as not having much to do with his philosophy, but rather with a non-philosophical desire to help the oppressed. Foucault sometimes expressed this and it made him—at least in this respect—Rorty’s and Habermas’ fellow-liberal.⁷⁶ Secondly, he observes that exactly at those moments when Foucault tried to make the idea of GIP sound philosophical (by asserting, e.g., that “the ultimate goals of its [GIP’s] interventions was not to extend the visiting rights of prisoners to thirty minutes or to procure flush toilets for the cells, but to question the social and moral distinctions between the innocent and the guilty,”⁷⁷) the whole project began to sound completely useless in sociopolitical terms. After all, says Rorty, positioning himself again as a down-to-earth liberal immune to the lure of high theory:

Prisoners need flush toilets for their cells more than anybody needs to question the distinction between the innocent consensual sado-masochists and the guilty non-consensual torturers, or the distinction between the guilty male rapist and his innocent female victim (or, for that matter, the distinction between dutiful policemen and those ecstatic left-wing academics at Vincennes, trying to crush the policemen’s heads).⁷⁸

⁷³ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 321. Rorty is strongly inspired here, as he himself admits, by Bernard Yack’s *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, “Revolutionary Action,” 230.

⁷⁵ Note, however, that Rorty is at least willing to admit, in another article, that “Foucault’s attempt to get philosophy and politics together is much more wary, complicated and generally intelligent than Sartre’s.” (Rorty, “Beyond Nietzsche and Marx,” 2)

⁷⁶ Foucault’s “own efforts at social reform (e.g., of prisons) seem to have no connection with his exhibition of the way in which the ‘humane’ approach to penal reform tied in with the needs of the modern state.” (Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 173)

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now,’” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 227.

⁷⁸ Rorty, “Paroxysms and Politics,” 516.

V

So these are the particular interpretations of Foucault's politics that can be distilled from Rorty's works, but while their divergence is interesting in itself, it would probably be more useful to explore why Rorty expended considerable energy criticizing Foucault in the first place. In other words, why not apply to Rorty a similar hermeneutic strategy that he himself applied to Foucault, and ask: Why did Rorty "dislike" Foucault's political thought so much and why did he so consistently manifest it? If it was merely about Foucault's contempt for Rorty's beloved bourgeois liberalism, then there are plenty other important authors who expressed similar sentiments (or, rather, "resentments"⁷⁹), yet of whom Rorty did not say anything or relatively little (take Sartre, for example). Does that not invite a psychological or a sociological (even vulgar) explanation? Might it be that Rorty was driven in this regard by some fad or an idiosyncratic experience? The answer is that it does invite such explanations, and Rorty in fact himself provided hints for this—hints that concern fads and idiosyncratic experiences indeed.

As Barry Allen rightly pointed out, an important factor in Rorty's approach to Foucault was that he considered him one of the patron saints of the "cultural Left"; a certain dangerous fad, as he saw it, which has enjoyed preponderance in American leftist politics from the time of the Vietnam War, having supplanted the "Reformist Left" to which Rorty's parents belonged and whose ideals he deeply cherished.⁸⁰ Those ideals involved a belief in the emancipatory potential of liberal democracy (its American variant in particular) and a conviction that emancipation is best achieved by making gradual steps, such as introducing laws that would prevent "the rich from ripping off the poor." Of these two ideals, the said belief was scorned, ridiculed, and rejected by the Cultural Left, while the conviction, itself not explicitly attacked, was replaced by the notion of emancipation as a struggle for cultural recognition.⁸¹ This latter maneuver by the Cultural Left can be explained by the fact that it was established by humanities professors (most prominently, professors of literature), for whom, in the late sixties, a sense of "occupation alienation"⁸² became so unbearable as to have led them to a kind of self-deception, which consisted in the fantastic belief that by doing what they were professionally trained to do (studying all sorts of cultural artifacts that is) they could change the face of the extra-academic world. Needless to say, Foucault proved a perfect object of emulation and this is also why, even though we owe the emergence of the Cultural Left's principal theoretical platform, i.e. literary theory, to the influence on American scholars of both him and Jacques

⁷⁹ Cf. Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 9.

⁸⁰ For Rorty's discussion of the reformist and the cultural Left, see "The Eclipse of the Reformist Left" and "A Cultural Left" in Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*. Cf. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 201 and Richard Rorty, Derek Nystrom, and Kent Puckett, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 16. Cf. Wojciech Małecki, "Ascetic Priests and O'Briens: Sadism and Masochism in Rorty's Writings," *Angelaki: The Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, no 3 (2009): 101-15, and Allen, "After Knowledge and Liberty," 68. Cf. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatism and Cultural Politics: From Rortian Textualism to Somaesthetics*, "New Literary History", no. 1 (2010): 69-94.

⁸¹ See Rorty, "Is 'Cultural Recognition' a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?," *passim*.

⁸² Frank Lentricchia's term, appropriated by Rorty in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 133-6. Cf. Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 7.

Derrida, the former's popularity quickly overshadowed the latter's, opening the way for a transformation of literary theory into cultural studies,⁸³ and to Foucault's exerting his "dangerous influence" on that Left.⁸⁴

Admittedly, Foucault was not the only thinker whom Rorty held responsible for what he conceived as the sad condition of the Cultural Left (other culprits included, for instance, Paul de Man, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Lacan), yet Rorty must have certainly thought Foucault's blame was the most serious if he dubbed that formation the "Foucauldian Left."⁸⁵ What he meant by this was not merely the fact that "there's a lot of trivialized Foucault doing the rounds in American intellectual circles, so that no matter what anybody says, there's always some silly Foucaultian statement that's in vogue: If you don't mention 'power,' someone says, 'Ah, but you've forgotten power,' that kind of thing."⁸⁶ He meant something much more weighty, which is perhaps best exemplified by the following angry and bitter indictment Rorty made in *Achieving Our Country* and reiterated obsessively in his other texts:

The Foucauldian Left represents an unfortunate regression to the Marxist obsession with scientific rigor.⁸⁷ This left still wants to put historical events in a theoretical context. It

⁸³ Or this is at least how Rorty sees it. Richard Rorty, "Looking Back at Literary Theory," in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 63. Cf. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), especially Part II "The Uses of Theory."

⁸⁴ Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom*, 40.

⁸⁵ Admittedly, he called it also, after Harold Bloom, "the Nietzscheanized Left." See Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 133.

⁸⁶ Ayerza with Rorty, "North Atlantic Thinking."

⁸⁷ If, as far as politics is concerned, Rorty's least favorite passage in Foucault was "I think to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system," then when it comes to methodology, it must have certainly been the following fragment from *The Archeology of Knowledge*, which, Rorty importantly conceived of as Foucault's "stuffiest, most obscure and worst book" (Rorty, "Beyond Nietzsche and Marx," 7): "I have undertaken, then, to describe the relations between statements. I have been careful to accept as valid none of the unities that would normally present themselves to anyone embarking on such a task. I have decided to ignore no form of discontinuity, break, threshold, or limit." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 31; cited in Rorty, "Foucault and Epistemology," 43. According to Rorty "In such passages, Foucault writes like a contented inhabitant of the 'system of possibilities' offered by French academic philosophy, a system which forbids you just to settle for being clever enough to have found interesting new descriptions to replace boring old ones. Instead, it commands you to exhibit your discovery of such unities as the application of a rigorous method, an illustration of a general theory, the result of having adopted the right starting-point. Nevertheless, notions of 'method', 'starting-point' and 'theory' are, officially, anathema to Foucault." (Rorty, "Foucault and Epistemology," 43) Alternatively, Rorty interprets Foucault's celebration of "method" and "rigor" as a feature he shares with other post-Nietzschean anti-Platonists (e.g., "with Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, [and] Derrida"), and which distinguishes that group from "post-Darwinian" American anti-Platonists. Namely: "The Europeans have typically put forward a distinctive, new, post-Nietzschean 'method' for philosophers to employ. Thus in early Heidegger and early Sartre we find talk of 'phenomenological ontology', in late Heidegger of something mysterious and wonderful called 'Thinking', in Gadamer of 'hermeneutics', in Foucault of 'the archeology of knowledge' and of 'genea-

exaggerates the importance of philosophy for politics, and wastes its energy on sophisticated theoretical analyses of the significance of current events. But Foucauldian theoretical sophistication is even more useless to leftist politics than was Engels' dialectical materialism. Engels at least had an eschatology. Foucauldians do not even have that. Because they regard liberal reformist initiatives as symptoms of a discredited liberal "humanism," they have little interest in designing new social experiments... The Foucauldian academic Left in contemporary America is exactly the sort of Left that the oligarchy dreams of: a Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create better future."⁸⁸

The fact that Rorty reiterated this accusation "obsessively" in different places, allows me to move, in conclusion, to the correctness of Rorty's reading of Foucault, and Rorty's hermeneutic habits in general. For as Rorty confessed in an essay self-ironically entitled "The Pragmatist's Progress," he could never resist reading others through his obsessions, something which amounted to "imposing" a specific "grid" on a given author.⁸⁹ One such obsession, which he mentions in that text, is the titular narrative of the Pragmatist's Progress, i.e., the process of shaking off the shackles of foundationalist thinking and attaining a truly ironic consciousness, while some others include the alleviation of human suffering and, yes, the decline of the Reformist Left and the rise of the cultural one. Whereas the first of these obsessions led Rorty to interpret *Foucault's Pendulum*⁹⁰ as testifying to Umberto Eco's alleged anti-essen-

logy' ... By contrast, the Americans have not been much to such proclamations." (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xx-xxi)

⁸⁸ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 139. Cf. Allen, "After Knowledge and Liberty," 81, where he refers to the same passage. Cf. also Rorty's remark that Foucault "reminds one of the conservative who pours cold water on hopes for reform, who affects to look at the problems of his fellow-citizens with the eye of the future historian. Writing 'the history of the present', rather than suggestions about how our children might inhabit a better world in the future, gives up not just on the notion of human nature, and on that of 'the subject', but on our untheoretical sense of social solidarity. It is as if thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard were so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of 'the subject' that they cannot bring themselves to say 'we' long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong." (Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 174) Cf. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 4.

⁸⁹ Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 133. Cf. Małecki, "Ascetic Priests and O'Briens," 101, 110.

⁹⁰ The Foucault in question is of course Léon, not Michel. On the other hand, one certainly might interpret this title, and thus the novel, as alluding to Michel Foucault, even if this is not what Eco himself had intended: "my last novel is entitled *Foucault's Pendulum* because the pendulum I am speaking of was invented by Léon Foucault. If it were invented by Franklin the title would have been *Franklin's Pendulum*. This time I was aware from the very beginning that somebody could have smelled an allusion to Michel Foucault: my characters are obsessed by analogies and Foucault wrote on the paradigm of similarity. As an empirical author I was not happy about such a possible connection. It sounds like a joke and not a clever one, indeed. But the pendulum invented by Léon was the hero of my story and I could not change the title: thus I hoped that my Model Reader would not try to make a superficial connection with Michel. I was to be disappointed; many smart readers did so. The text is there, and maybe they are right: maybe I am responsible for a superficial joke; maybe the joke is not that superficial. I do not know. The whole affair is by now out of my control." (Umberto Eco, "Between Author and Text," in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 82-3)

tialism,⁹¹ the latter propelled Rorty to read Michel Foucault through the prism of his being idolized by the Cultural Left, i.e., to concentrate on those bits of Foucault's work which served as a source of inspiration for that movement.

Therefore, one might say that Rorty grappled with a certain construct of Foucault, prominent in American academia, rather than the actual thinker.⁹² To take but two examples: How could Rorty describe Foucault as a radical anarchist who conceived power as "inherently repressive," when the latter explicitly claimed that power is "not always" so and can even "have results which are positive, valuable, interesting"; not to mention his reiteration that he was concerned with "question[ing] the relations of power in the most scrupulous and attentive manner possible, looking into all the domains of its exercise," which is "not the same thing as constructing a mythology of power as the beast of the apocalypse"?⁹³ How could Rorty impute to Foucault some rabid anti-liberalism and a desire to turn everyone into a seeker of limit-experiences, when Foucault did not hesitate to state that "The only ethics you can have, with regard to the exercise of power, is the freedom of others," and emphatically refused to play the role of a prophet ("I don't tell people, 'Make love in this way, have children, go to work'"⁹⁴)?

As should be clear from the present paper, Rorty was aware of such passages, and he even openly admitted in one place that as a matter of fact, Foucault is "better than" his Adornian-sounding judgment that "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system" (and the other claims Rorty critiqued) "would suggest."⁹⁵ Better, that is, because—in Rorty's optic—apart from the bad Foucault, elevated on the altar of the Cultural Left, there existed a good Foucault, who seemed closer to Dewey and thus to Rorty himself.

Now, leaving aside the issue whether this vision of Foucault's fissured self is accurate,⁹⁶ the question remains why Rorty focused so prominently on what he took to be the bad Foucault, while downplaying the good one, whose existence he apparently believed in? The answer is obviously related to Rorty's obsession with the Cultural Left and can be found in exactly the same essay by Rorty where he admits that, on the whole, Foucault is "better than" his anarchistic remarks imply. For this assessment is immediately followed by the reminder that "some" of Foucault's "followers are a lot worse," which clarifies that waging war on the bad Foucault, seemed to Rorty a much more urgent task than presenting a balanced account of this thinker, because it was precisely the bad Foucault who held the minds of many American intellectuals captive and changed the face of leftist politics in the US for the worse. While, as

⁹¹ An impression that "evaporated" when he later "read Eco's article 'Intentio lectoris'." (Ibid., 134)

⁹² A judgment that is further bolstered by Rorty's shifting in some of his texts between "Foucault," "Foucauldians," and the "Foucauldian Left."

⁹³ Michel Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual: An Interview with Michel Foucault conducted by Michael Bess"; <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/michaelbess/Foucault%20Interview>; accessed 30 Nov 2010. Importantly, Foucault himself adds that "Sometimes, because my position has not been made clear enough, people think I'm a sort of radical anarchist who has an absolute hatred of power. No!" (Ibid.)

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 129.

⁹⁶ For the view that it is not see Colin Koopman, "Revising Foucault: The History and Critique of Modernity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 36, no. 5 (2010), 545-565.

we have seen, Rorty presented several different portrayals of the bad Foucault, it must finally be stressed that to his eyes each of these incarnations of the main patron saint of the Cultural Left looked equally dangerous and had to be exorcised.⁹⁷

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⁹⁷ I would like to thank Colin Koopman for inviting me to contribute to the present issue of *Foucault Studies* and for his useful remarks on a previous draft of this paper. Many thanks also to Professor Barry Allen, who provided me with his essay "After Knowledge and Liberty."