Engaging the Present: The Use of Reading Rorty

Clayton Chin

Despite being almost universally rejected at one point, Richard Rorty was nonetheless at the centre of debates in political thought. He managed, on a rare scale, to draw in thinkers from almost every tradition into a common discussion on the role and capacity of philosophy in our social and political lives. However, he now no longer occupies that central space in contemporary political thought, where he is now ignored. This article confronts this critical situation, drawing on recent literature in pragmatist debates, in order to argue that Rorty is a necessary participant in the current conversation of political philosophy. Unlike most others, Rorty singularly situated his thought within the present social context. In fact, through a critique of foundationalism and metaphysics, Rorty restricts political thinking to that framework. The result is a reformulation of the philosophical project to articulating and justifying the present political universe. Due to this, Rorty’s thought comes to summarize many of the assumptions underlying contemporary liberal democratic thought. He thus offers us a unique site for the critical confrontation and reconstruction of that present.

1. Introduction

Richard Rorty’s place in contemporary political theory is contentious. He has and continues to be a figure that inspires strong reactions. However, the reasons for this have not remained constant. While Rorty in the past has been understood both as a dangerous philosophical radical, undermining the grounds of Western thought and politics, and as a myopic apologist for the status quo, the disagreement around reading him today surrounds his relevance. Rorty was once incendiary and dangerous. Presently however, he seems commonplace and uncontroversial. While many would still strongly agree or disagree with his ideas, they would not feel the need to engage with him in any detail. Consequently, outside pragmatism, Rorty has generally fallen out of the wider conversation of social and political thought. While he is often mentioned, he is rarely seriously engaged on any issue. He is a common object of casual dismissal but an infrequent subject for productive engagement. However, when
approached in a certain way, engagement with Rorty can yield fundamental critical and reconstructive resources for thinking politics in the present.

This article confronts this critical situation by arguing for the necessity of reading Rorty into contemporary political theory. However, the point is not simply to read Rorty but to read him in a certain manner, in relation to a certain question. Against typical readings of him as an end-of-philosophy anti-theorist, we must examine Rorty exactly in terms of the sphere that he considered most important for philosophy: metaphilosophy – that is, the reflection on the activity of philosophy and its role and capacities in human life (Bernstein 2010, 11; West 1989, 199).

Rorty uniquely confronted the crisis in philosophical foundations and the resulting question of the role and capacities of a philosophy without grounds in wider political and cultural life. His work was thus consistently oriented to this widest of all philosophical issues. Such a project increases his significance not only because of his ability to engage such intractable issues but for his skill at speaking across traditional boundaries in the constellation of Western Political thought (and beyond as well) while doing so. Rorty engaged Analytic thinkers, Pragmatists, Critical theorists and Continental philosophers (amongst others) in an inclusive philosophical dialogue that managed, simultaneously, to speak to all these groups. It is in this sense that he was accurately described as “the most influential contemporary American philosopher” (Klepp 1990).

However, Rorty’s importance goes beyond addressing wide issues and many groups. Both of these reasons speak to his relevance only if those issues and groups are still important to political thought. Rorty does offer a path away from the crisis in foundations which confronts that problem without ignoring it or slipping back into some appeal to a neutral perspective. Further, he does do this by engaging and drawing on many perspectives and attempting to speak to all the aforementioned groups. However, how he achieves both these aims is the important point, especially for his relevance to contemporary thought. Rorty reorients thought to the present. It is both the subject and object of his philosophy; that which it speaks to and about. His perspective attempts to subsist without grounds by directly engaging the present social and political world, its assumptions and limitations.

Further, unlike genealogical approaches which also claim such an orientation, Rorty’s does so without an explicitly critical orientation to the present. Rather, as will be demonstrated below, Rorty’s thought summarizes the present. It theorizes it and renders explicit its own self-justification. Due to this unique relation, whereby he draws out and reveals the philosophical content underlying much of contemporary liberal democratic politics, Rorty’s work offers a distinctive critical and reconstructive site for political and social theory. By approaching him through the question of his positive role of philosophy, his work becomes an attempt to “flush out” and engage our present framework, its assumptions, and limitations. In this manner, Rorty is a place to begin; a place to work out from. He is a starting point for a situated philosophical analysis of our