Book Review

Carlin Romano

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In *American the Philosophical*, journalist, philosopher, and professor Carlin Romano defends the seemingly indefensible:

> For the surprising little secret of our ardently capitalist, famously materialist, heavily iPodded, iPadded and iPhoned society is that America in the early twenty-first century towers as the most philosophical culture in the history of the world, an unprecedented marketplace of truth and argument that far surpasses ancient Greece, Cartesian France, nineteenth-century Germany or any other place one can name over the past three millennia (p. 10).

As more articles and books decrying American anti-intellectualism appear every year, asserting that we already live in the dystopian future of Mike Judge’s film *Idiocracy*, Romano has set a prodigious task for himself. He is up to it, covering an immense range of culture, history, and philosophy. His “full-scale assault” (p. 19) on the idea that America is unphilosophical, at best, covers seven distinct points:

1. A reappraisal of American philosophy, one sensitive to biography.
2. The rise of nonprofessional philosophers and their role in the public sphere.
3. The increasing role of underrepresented peoples in changing what counts as ‘philosophy.’
4. The development of ‘cyberphilosophy’ and its concentration in America.
5. A characterization of American philosophy as following Isocrates, rather than Socrates.
6. An explanation for the rejection of ‘justification’ talk, as exemplified in the success, and failure, of John Rawls.

7. Finally, an account of Barack Obama as a cosmopolitan philosopher-in-chief.

Let me fill in a little more of Romano’s trajectory. He starts with Emerson, and moves through Peirce, James, Santayana, and Dewey to Quine, Nozick, Rawls, Dworkin, Posner, Danto, Cavell and ultimately Rorty. For each, Romano uses his journalistic eye to present each man as more than a set of arguments and theories to be analyzed. Instead, they were people (not so) simply trying to figure things out, including the very meaning of philosophy as a profession. Rorty receives the most attention, as both the apotheosis of classical pragmatism’s pluralism, and also the deflation of the aspirations of technical analytic philosophy. Romano highlights Rorty’s (re)introduction of Continental thinkers into mainstream philosophical debates. Fortunately, while Romano does not address ‘American Continental Philosophy’ thematically, he does acknowledge the continuous influence of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt in non-mainstream philosophy.

Rorty’s revolution, in Romano’s phrase, also opens the possibility for considering those outside philosophy departments as philosophers, whether broadcasters (Bill Moyers), psychologists (Oliver Sacks), or literary critics (Kenneth Burke), among others. Romano’s point throughout is that considering American unphilosophical only makes sense within the parochial view that true philosophy is what happened at Harvard in the 1950s:

Yet if one recognized “philosophy” as a word and activity that preceded this professional sect into the world, didn’t the burden fall on those identifying “philosophy” with rareified “research programs” that sought universally satisfying definitions for contested everyday words such as “truth,” “meaning” and “knowledge” (not to mention “can” and “must”) to justify their artificial narrowing of the terms? (p. 143).

Next, Romano reviews the expansion of philosophy through the still-too-neglected role of African Americans, homosexuals, Native Americans, and women in American thought. Again, Romano is remarkably inclusive, sketching the ideas and lives of the (grudgingly) canonical (Jane Addams, Alain Locke), well-established (Kwame Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum), and the supposedly unphilosophical (Michael Eric Dyson, Susan Sontag). His sections on Native American and gay thinkers are relatively brief, and, as he acknowledges, he neglects Asian and Latino [sic] American thinkers. I should also note