Until the late 1980s, Richard Rorty had been best known as the author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), a book that urged readers to 'change the subject' from their Cartesian-Kantian preoccupations with the foundations of knowledge, in favour of 'continuing the conversation of the West' on any number of non-epistemological topics, from novels to public policy. Since then, he has spent less and less time writing articles about eliminative physicalism and theories of reference, and more time apologising (the term is his) for something he has called 'bourgeois liberalism'.

The books under review are about America's promise, and they all address an audience that is not limited to university humanities departments. *Achieving Our Country* was adapted from Rorty's 1997 Massey Lectures at Harvard University. The book takes its title from a line in James Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time*, and it takes as its subject the life and health of an alleged constituency that Rorty calls 'the American left'. The second book, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, consists of previously published articles and lectures on a number of topics, including the public/private split, liberal education and citizenship, pragmatism and law, religious tolerance, and the politics of identity. One of the most interesting essays in the book, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', is autobiographical. The third book, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchs* consists of a wide-ranging interview with Rorty about politics and his life. At 78 pages, *Against Bosses* would count as a book by the Library of Congress definition, but it reads more like a pamphlet. Together, these three books – a series of lectures, a collection of essays, and an interview – give us an idea of Rorty's political trajectory in the years between Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom.

As a good pragmatist following in the footsteps of his hero Irving Howe, Rorty provides not just retrospective redescriptions but also advice and forecasts. In the books under review, he addresses leftists in America who, he says, rightly feel shame for slavery, genocide and conquest. He wants to convince them, though, that their shame should be admixed with pride that they are citizens of a country that has produced people capable of feeling such shame in the first place. In addition to stealth bombers and Enron, America has also produced Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey – writers who embodied two principles that should inspire pride and hope: the inalienable right of every individual to the pursuit of happiness; and the imperative to ameliorate unnecessary suffering and humiliation. The Left, which Rorty interestingly defines as 'the party of hope', should once again set itself the task of achieving the America of this promise, the unachieved America of Emerson, Whitman and Dewey. But leftists have no chance of doing so if they continue to fritter their energies on 'cultural studies' rather than specific legislation and reform campaigns, and if they continue to dream of sweeping change rather than working for piecemeal reform.

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For a while during the last century, Marxism had made it possible for intellectuals to dream of sweeping change while convincing themselves that they could play a role in helping to bring it about. Since then, however, Marxism and all putative sciences of society and history have proven 'completely irrelevant to what eventually happened'. By the 1990s, it was unanimous: History had repudiated Marx. Opponents of Marxism – including many former Marxists – declared that if political power had ever come through the barrel of a gun, it no longer did. A new, multipolar world had emerged circa 1991, a bright world where information, technology and free trade were the keys to peace and prosperity, and America, the Hope of the Nations, no longer needed to bare its teeth because it had defeated that singularly Evil Empire, the Soviet Union. Class rule had given way to the rule of law; the rising tide of Free Trade would lift all boats, and conflicts among nations would henceforth be resolved 'non-ideologically', with the application of the right technology. A couple of months before the high-tech bubble burst, "Newsweek" announced that Communism was dead, replaced by 'Dot-Com-ism'.

A funny thing happened, though, in the years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the construction of Sharon's wall through the Holy Land: on point after point on which there had been a nearly unanimous consensus that Marxists had been wrong, it turns out that they were right after all. The gap between rich and poor has grown, both globally and within the United States, even as productivity has soared, and from Venezuela to Iraq, there is a rising suspicion that the magical invocations of Democracy and Freedom have served one overriding process: capital accumulation. The George W. Bush administration and the US Congress demonstrate daily that 'the rule of law' is but a scrim for class rule, and that the federal government is indeed little more than the executive committee of corporate America. After the meltdown in the Pacific Rim, a deep global recession, and the example of Argentina, the least one can say is that Marxism is not 'completely irrelevant to what eventually happened', after all. Meanwhile, the champions of 'small government', privatisation, swollen military budgets, and homeland security have brought America's state institutions into ever closer conformity with Engels's stark picture of a group of armed men.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, Rorty repeated advice that he had offered many times before: 'I think we should abandon the leftist-versus-liberal distinction, along with the residues of Marxism that clutter up our vocabulary – overworked words like "commodification" and "ideology", for example. This sentence encapsulates several of the main themes of the books under review, including the leftist-versus-liberal distinction, and Rorty's advice that 'we' purge our vocabularies of Marxism.

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3. Rising productivity and deeper poverty for the majority: This is one of the seeming paradoxes that Marx and Engels described so well. For documentation of the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States, see Mishel et al. 2003. By 1995, at the latest, Rorty was aware of this seeming paradox (Rorty 1999, p. 258).
4. Rorty 1998, p. 42. A note on 'clutter': Darwin, the historiciser of nature, and Marx, the naturaliser of history, made humans part of the same world that physicists, geologists and astronomers describe. Together, these two 'obsolete nineteenth-century system-builders' enable us to tell long, detailed and ever-changing stories about one particular species of animal on planet Earth. What is more, they have enabled us to tell these stories elegantly, without recourse