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Richard Rorty: The American Pragmatist

by Drucilla Cornell

Richard Rorty, one of this country's most influential public intellectuals, died last fall after a battle with cancer. When we lost Rorty, we lost a great American. Rorty would be proud to be called a great American because he was an avid defender of one version of the American dream. The America that Rorty was proud of was the America of egalitarian ideals like public education. His America was the America of working men and women of the union movement who not only fought to unionize the great industries of auto and steel in the CIO but also struggled for progressive legislation like social security and workers' compensation. His was the American dream that gave everyone his or her shot to realize their dreams without being bogged down by entrenched class hierarchies. For Rorty, the egalitarian spirit also infused the movements of Afro-Americans for civil rights and the feminist movement that insisted on the rights of women. His was not the Horatio Alger American dream, the dream that anyone can be a rich capitalist no matter how poor their beginnings. It was the America of the CIO, of John Lewis, of Martin Luther King, of Katharine Mackinnon who fought for sexual harassment to be recognized as a matter of gender equality, and of John Dewey, his favorite American philosopher. These were his prophets precisely because they fought to realize the egalitarian ideals of his version of the American dream. Rorty was proud to be part of this America and he promoted this egalitarian version of the American dream in all of his later writings.

Richard Rorty proudly called himself an American pragmatist in the style of John Dewey, who he believed lived up to the great demand on the philosopher proclaimed by Marx: "The point of philosophy was to change the world." To advocate progress rather than just sit back and engage in arcane debates about the nature of reality. He admired Dewey as much for his battle to win public education for the working man and woman as for his philosophical writings. It wasn't just what Dewey wrote but what he did and what he fought for that made him one of Rorty's prophets.

But Rorty was not always a pragmatist. Even though he grew up in a progressive family where Dewey was a frequent guest for dinner. Both of Rorty's parents were progressives. Rorty's mother was involved in the labor movement. Unionists and progressives were part and parcel of his childhood and he grew up listening to the debates about how America should realize her egalitarian ideals. But he went off to the University of Chicago at the age of 17 to enter the world of analytic philosophy. That he was to later call arcane debates on the nature of reality and how we could know what that reality was dominated philosophy departments during his years as a student and later as a young philosopher teaching at Princeton University. Rorty became increasingly dissatisfied with this way of doing philosophy in the late 1960s. He started to question the whole analytic philosophy enterprise. His rethinking of philosophy and what it should be culminated in his classic study *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. He carefully criticized both the actual work of philosophers who were to his mind were obsessed with the question of how the mind comes to know reality and how we can develop tests for objective truth when we make claims to know that reality. In other words, he critiqued the major thinkers of what is called the philosophy of the mind, a project that dominated the philosophical circles of the late 1960s and still plays a dominant role in many of the elite philosophy departments. His book, as he often mentioned, went over like a lead balloon in most philosophy departments precisely because it challenged the hegemonic idea of what philosophy is.

fighting for their rights in communities and workplaces and that we needed to continue to be inspired by those who on a daily basis fight to make the world – and particularly America – a better place. He was a philosopher of

