



Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America

Richard M. Rorty

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America

Richard M. Rorty

Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America Richard M. Rorty

Must the sins of America's past poison its hope for the future? Lately the American Left, withdrawing into the ivied halls of academe to rue the nation's shame, has answered yes in both word and deed. In *Achieving Our Country*, one of America's foremost philosophers challenges this lost generation of the Left to understand the role it might play in the great tradition of democratic intellectual labor that started with writers like Walt Whitman and John Dewey.

How have national pride and American patriotism come to seem an endorsement of atrocities--from slavery to the slaughter of Native Americans, from the rape of ancient forests to the Vietnam War? *Achieving Our Country* traces the sources of this debilitating mentality of shame in the Left, as well as the harm it does to its proponents and to the country. At the center of this history is the conflict between the Old Left and the New that arose during the Vietnam War era. Richard Rorty describes how the paradoxical victory of the antiwar movement, ushering in the Nixon years, encouraged a disillusioned generation of intellectuals to pursue "High Theory" at the expense of considering the place of ideas in our common life. In this turn to theory, Rorty sees a retreat from the secularism and pragmatism championed by Dewey and Whitman, and he decries the tendency of the heirs of the New Left to theorize about the United States from a distance instead of participating in the civic work of shaping our national future.

In the absence of a vibrant, active Left, the views of intellectuals on the American Right have come to dominate the public sphere. This galvanizing book, adapted from Rorty's Massey Lectures of 1997, takes the first step toward redressing the imbalance in American cultural life by rallying those on the Left to the civic engagement and inspiration needed for "achieving our country."

Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America Details

Date : Published September 1st 1999 by Harvard University Press (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780674003125

Author : Richard M. Rorty

Format : Paperback 159 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Politics, Nonfiction, History, Writing, Essays



[Download Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Cen ...pdf](#)



[Read Online Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-C ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America Richard M. Rorty

From Reader Review Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America for online ebook

Intery says

????????? ?? ??? ???? ?????, ?????? ?? ?? ?????????? ??????? ??????, ?? ??????? ??????? ??????. ,? ??????????
?????? ??????“ ?? ?????? ??????? ?? ?????? ?? ?????? ??????? ?? XX ?.; ?? ?? ?????? ??? ????? ??
????????? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ??????? ?? ? ??? ??????, ? ?? ? ?????, ?????? ????? ?? ???????
????????? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ? ?????????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ???? ???? ???? ? –
?????????!! – ????? ????.

????????? ?? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????????? ??????. ? ??????? ?? ??? ??????? ??????????? „??????????????
?????????? ???????“ ? ??????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?? ??????? ??? ??????? ??, ??? ??????? ?? ?
????????? ? ??????? ??????? ?????????? ??????? ?????? ?????????????????? ?? ??? ?????? ??????; ????? ?? ? ? ?????? ?????
?? ??????? ??, ??? ?? ????? ???????; ? ??? ?????? ??????????? ??????? ??? ??????? ? ?? ???
?????????? ?? ????? ??????. ????? ?? ??????? ?? ??? ??????????? ?? ???????????????, ????? ?? ??? ?? ?
????? ? ???, ?? ?? ??????? ?????? ?? – ? ??????? ?????? ??? ?? ?? ?????? ?????? ? ?????? ?? ? ???????????
?? ?? ??????, ?? ??? ? ??? ??????? ??? ?? ?? ??????? ?????????? ??? ??? ?????? ?? ??????????? ???????
???? ??????? ?? ???-????? ? ??? ?????????????? ? ??????????????? ?? ??????????? ?? ?????????????? ?????????? ? ???????
????-??????????????, ?? ??? ?????? ??? ??-????? ???????????.

????????????? ?????? ?? ??????? ?????? ?? ??????????? ? ???? ???-?????????? – ????, ????? ?????? ?????? ??????
„?????? ?? ?????????????? ??????“ ? ??????? ?? „????????? ??????“ ? ??????? ?? . ??? ?????????? ??
????????? ?? ???, ????? ??????? ? ????? ???????, ???? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????????????? ???????????,
???? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ??????? ?? ? ??????? ?? ?? ???????, ??? ?????? ?????????????? ???????????
? ???-???????. „?? ??????? ?????? ??????“ ?? ??????? ??? ?? ???????, ?? ???? ?? ????? ??????? ??
????????????? ???????, ?? ?????? ?? ??????? ???????????, ??? ??????? ?????, ?????? ?? ????.
????? ?????? ??? 60-?? ?????? ?????????????? ??????? ?? ? ?????????? ?? ?????? (??????????) ? ????
(??????). ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ? ???????????, ? ???? ??????? ?? ?????????? ?????????????? ??
????????????? ??????? ?? ??????? ?? ?? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ??????
????????? ??????? ?? ?? ???????????, ? ??????? – ?? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ????
????? ? ?????????????? ???????, ? ? ?????????? ? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ??? ? ?????? ? ??????
????? ??????? ?? ?????????? ?? ???????????, ??????? ?? ?? ?????????????? ?????????? ?????? ????
????? ? ?? ??????? ?????? ???? ???? ???? ?????? ?? ? ???? ???? ??????? ?? ?????? . ?????????? ??? ????, ?? ??? ?????? ????
????????? ???????, ?????? ?????? ???? ?????? ???? ?????? ?? ?????????????? ?????? ???????.

?? ??????? ?? ??? ?????????? ??? ????? ????? – ?????? ?????? ?? ??????????? ?? ?????????????????????? ?????? ???
1968 ?. ? ??????. ?? ??? ?????????????????? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?????? ??????????, ?????? ??????????
?????????, ?????? ??????, ??????????? ?? ??????, ?? ?????? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ? ?????? ?? ???
?????????. ??? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??????????, ?? ? ???? ?? ??????????????????
????????????????? ?????? ?? ?????????-????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ? ???
????????? ?? ?? ?????????????? ?? ??????, ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?? ?????????????? ?? ?? ?????????????? ??,
????????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ? ??????. ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????????, ?????? ?????????? ?
?????????, ? ?????? ??????, ?????? ?? ?????? ? ?????????????? ?????? ??-?????, ?????????? ?????????? ??? ?
????? ?????????????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?? ??????, ?????????? ? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ??????, 3
????? ?????? ?????????? ? 2 ?????? ??? ?????????????? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??????.

???? ??????????, ?? ????? ?????????? ?????? ??? ?? ??? ?????????????-?????????? ?? ?????????????, ??????

????????? ?????? ????? ? ??????????? ??????, ? ?????? ?????????? ?????????, ??????? ???????, ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????????????? ?????? ?????????????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????-????????? ? ?????????? ?????????????? ? ? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? -????????? ? ???????, ?? ?????? ?????????? ? ?????????? ?????? -????????? ? ???????, ?? ?????? ???????????.

????????? ?????????? ?????????? ? ?????????? ?? ?????????????????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??-????? ?? ???? ?????? ?????? ??????
????? ?? ?????? ???, ? ???? ?? ???? ??? ? ?????? ?????? ?? ?? ? ?????? ?????? ?????? . ??? 1964 ? . ??????????????????
????? ? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ? ?????? ?? ???????????, ??? ?????? ?? ?????????? (?? ???? ???? 40% ??
?????????? ?? ????) ?? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ???????, ???????, ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????? ? ??????????
?? ???????. ?????????? ?????????????? ?????? ?? ?????? (????), ?????????? ?? ?????????????? ? ?????? ? ??????????
?? ???????. ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????????? ? ??????
????????? ?? ?????? ? ?????????? ????. ??? ?? ???????, ?? ?? ?????????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?? ??????????,
?? ???? ?????? ?????????? ? ?????? ?? ?????????? ????. ?????????????? ? ?????????? ?????? ???? ???? ?????? ?????? ??
?? ???? ???????????, ?? ?????? ?????? ??????, ?? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ??
????? ?? ?????? ???? ?? ?????????????? ??????, ? ?????????? ?????????????? ?? ?????????? ?????????? ??????:
????? ?? 68-?? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????????????? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?? ?????????? ??
????????, ??? ??? ??? ??? ???; ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ??
????? ?????????? ??????????, ?????? ? ?????????? ??????. ???? ?? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ??
?????????. ??? ??????????: „????? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ??
??????, ?????? ? ?????????? ??????. ?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ??????, ?? ?? ? ?????????? ??????
????????????? ?? ?????????????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????????????? ?
????????????? ?????? ?? ?????????????? ??????. ?????? ???, ?????? ?????????? ? ?????????? ??????
????????????? ?????? ?? ?????????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?????????? ??
????? ???????. ?????? ??-????? ???? ????:
?? ?? ?????? ?? ???, ???? ???? ?????????? ?????? ? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????????? ??????. ?????? ???? ?????? ?
????. ?? ???? ??????, ?????? ?????? ?????? ??????, ?????? ?????????????? ? ?????? ??????, ? ?????? ?? ??????
????????? ??? ??????????, ??? ??? ?????????? ??????, ?? ?????? ?????????? ? ?????? ??????, ?????? ?? ???,
????????? ?? ??????????. ???? ?? ?????? ???? ?? ?????? ?????????? ???? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????????? . ??????
????? ?? ??????????, ?????? ?????????? ??????, ?????? ?? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ??????, ?????? ?????????? ??????
????? ?? ??????????, ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?? .“

??????, ??????? ?? ? ?????????????? ?? ? ?????????????? ?????? ? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????, ?????? ?????????????? ??
????????????? ?? ???? ?????? ?????????? – ? ???? ?? ? ?????????? ?????? ??? 1964 ., ? ?????????????? ??? 1968 ?.
?? ?? ?????????? ?? ?? ??????? ?????????????? ?? ?????????? ?????? – ?????????????? ?? ?????? ??? ?????? ?
????????????? ?? „????????? ?????????? ??????“, ?????? ?? ? ??????????????, ??? ?????, ??????, ?????? ??
????? ?? ?? ???? ? ???? ?? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?????????????? ??????: „? ?????? ?????, ??????
????????? ?????????? ?????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ??????????????
????????? ?????????? ??????????. ??????????, ?? ?????????????? ?????? ?? ??? ?? ?????? ? ?????? ??
????? ?????????? ?????????? – ??? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?? ?? ?????????? ??????

??????, ??? ??????????. ??? ?? ??????????? ?? ??? ????? ??????????? ?? ?? ?????? ??? ??? ?????? ???
?????????????? ?? ?????????????? ???????????, ??????? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ? ???????,
? ?????? ?? ?????? ??????? ??????? ??? ?????? ??????. ... ?????? ??? ?????????????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?
????? ?????? ??????? ?? ?????????? ? ??? ?????????? ??? ?? ???, ??? ?????? ??? ?????? ?? ?????? ???
?????????.“ (???. 106-107) ??????, ?????? ?????, ?? ?? ??? ?????????? ?????? – ? ?????? ?????? ??????
????????? ??? 1998 ?.

????? ?????? ?????? ???-?????, ?????????? ?? ?? ?????????? ?? ???? 200 ??????? ? ?????? ?????? ???
? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????????????? ?????????? ???, ??? ?????? ?? ??? ?????????? ?? ?? ??????
? ??? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?. 113, ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?? ?????? ???, ?? ?????? ?? ?????? ??????????
????????? ?????? ???:

„...?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? ??????????
?????????????, ?????????? ?????-?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????, ?????? ?????????????? ?? ???
????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?? ????????. ?????????? ?? ??? ?????? ?????? ??? ?????????? ??? ?????????? ??
????? ?? ????????. ?????? – ?? ????????. ?? ?????????? ?? ?????????????? ?? ?????? ??????, ?? ?????? –
??????????, ?? ?????????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?? ? ??????. ?????? – ?? ???????????, ??
????????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?? ??? ?????? ???-????? ??????. ??? ?? ?????? ??????
????????? ?? ? ??????? ?????? ?? ?. ?? ??????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?? ???????, ?? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ??
????????? ??????? ??, ?????? ?????? ??????????, ?? ?????? ?? ?? ?????????*. [* ?????????? ?????? ??? ??
????????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?????????? ??
3-4 ???????, 1996 ?. ?????? ???????, ??????? ?????? ?? ?????????? ???????, ???????, ?? ??? ?????? ?????????? ??
????????? ?? ?????? ?? ??? ??????????, ?? ?? ?????? ??????? ?????????????? ??????????. ??? ?? ?????????? ??
????, ?????? „?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????“. ?????????? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ??
????? ?????????? ?? ? ??? ??????????, ?? ??? ??? ?? ??????. ??????????, ?? ???????, ?????????? ?? ?????????? ??
????? ???-????????? ? ?????????? ?????? ?? ?????????????? ?????? ?? 21. ??? ?? ?? ?? ?? ?????? ??????
????? ??? ?? ??????? ?? ??? ??????, ?? ?????.]“

Anthoferjea says

Reading this in my senior year of college as an English/some gender studies major I thought it was insulting and patronizing. Now I'm having conversations with liberal friends or my parents and I can't help thinking of sadism vs. selfishness, reform vs. theory, identity vs. campaign, and I don't say anything, I just feel worried and anxious. It is way too easy for people in academic bubbles and liberal cities to dismiss his argument. I forgot how generous and fair Rorty really is to the academy and the left; he shrugs at the spectatorial Foucauldian rabbit hole and says it's much better than the cynicism of the right as often as he criticizes it. He's obviously read all of both the reformist and the New left literature which seems rare and important for a theorist to do. Re-reading it has reminded me how having to live and compromise with a fairly broad swath of New and Reformist left and center-right people in my day-to-day life over the past 8 years in some rust-belt towns has moved my opinions on the efficacy of campaigns vs movements way towards the former.

Kathleen says

This book would not have been satisfying to my 20 year old self, or my 25 year old self. I would have (mis)read Rorty, as some people have, as an apologist for America. I would have conflated his insistence on

treating America as an unfinished democratic project with a legitimization or denial of the awful atrocities that have been carried out by America. Some people (mis)read this book in those ways. And I would have been one of those people until the last few years. When I first read this book in 2008 I was ambivalent about Rorty's message, but now I find it inspiring, even if I don't agree with every single point he makes.

I have come to believe that changing America into a more just, kind, and generous place will require those of us working for social justice to offer Americans another way to be American--much in the same way that men need new non-patriarchal ways of being men and whites need to cultivate new identities as anti-racist whites. For America to change, leftists, progressives, and radicals need to offer substantive visions of what's possible for America. They need to articulate America in precisely the way that Rorty is advocating for here. Not to excuse what we are and have been, but to find a way out of the situation in which we find ourselves. As much as I love Foucault and Butler and Derrida and find their books important and interesting and enlightening, Rorty's right when he says that they don't offer the kind of clear political vision that can animate a vigorous movement for social justice. Furthermore, he's smart to choose Dewey and Whitman for valorization, not only because of their important contributions to thinking about what America can and should be, but also because of their status as Americans. Dewey and Whitman are Americans that demonstrate that identifying as American doesn't have to make you a nationalist, a nativist, or an idiot. There are, within our history, examples out there for us of Americans committed to social justice and progress. One thing we must do is start to valorize and turn to these Americans as the paradigmatic examples of what Americans can and should be. Rorty makes this point in *Achieving Our Country*, and I couldn't agree with him more--regardless of the many minor points upon which we disagree.

Dan says

Argues Left has sold out the working class/poor by focusing on the politics of sex and identity. He's right, but fails to convince (me, at least) that we can't care equally for both.

C?r???lu says

This a short book about how the American Left turned from trade unions, labor rights and protecting the poor to nowadays' cultural or identity politics, focusing on symbolic violence and such. The author argues that unless the Left recovers and starts working for social reform, this will lead to very shitty situation and he kinda „predicts” the rise of a Trump-like figure: „*the nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots*”.

He deplores the fact that the Left seems incapable of defending both the economically vulnerable and the minority groups and criticizes the futile intellectualism of current Leftist thinkers. For Rorty, as interesting and smart the likes of Foucault are, they are completely useless when it comes to action and practice. In his opinion, postmodernist thinkers are too busy debunking the past and nitpicking the present and have nothing to say about the future. He is against academic detachment, objectivity and dryness. He wants hope and romanticism so that philosophers and social scientists could use their brains to actually improve society.

While he admits that the New Leftists have indeed unveiled some systemic discrimination mechanisms and that political correctness has increased respect towards women and minority groups, he thinks is benefits the

super-rich elite. As long as activists and intellectuals argue about stuff like symbolic violence, the super-rich continue calling the shots unchallenged where it matters: economy. Although today everyone feels entitled to make an Orwell analogy, Rorty has one which is actually competent: the rich cosmopolitan elites will be the Inner Party, while the bourgeois intellectuals and politicians will be the Outer Party.

„The job of people like us will be to make sure that the decisions made by the Inner Party are carried out smoothly and efficiently. It will be in the interest of the international super rich to keep our class relatively prosperous and happy. For they need people who can pretend to be the political class of each of the individual nation-states. For the sake of keeping the proles quiet, the super-rich will have to keep up the pretense that national politics might someday make a difference. Since economic decisions are their prerogative, it will encourage politicians, of both the Left and the Right, to specialize in cultural issues. The aim will be to keep the minds of the proles elsewhere – to keep the bottom 75 percent of Americans and the bottom 95 percent of the world’s population busy with ethnic and religious hostilities, and with debates about sexual mores. If the proles can be distracted from their own despair by media-created pseudo-events, including the occasional brief and bloody war, the super-rich will have little to fear.“

Rorty draws on Dewey to argue in favor of national pride, he asks intellectuals to be proud of their country and, basically, instead of bitching and moaning to start dreaming and working for a better future. He wants those in humanities and social sciences to argue less about how the past or the present and more about how the future should be. And to learn bloody economics.

Hadrian says

This obscurer 1997 work of Rorty's has become popular after a three paragraph excerpt (describing a book by Edward N. Luttwak) was posted on Twitter. I quote:

[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers — themselves desperately afraid of being downsized — are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for — someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. A scenario like that of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here* may then be played out. For once such a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen. In 1932, most of the predictions made about what would happen if Hindenburg made Hitler chancellor were wildly overoptimistic.

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past 40 years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words 'nigger' and 'kike' will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.

After all that, you'll probably want to see if Rorty wrote anything about sports scores or lottery numbers. The broad outlines are immediate and clear after the events of November 8, 2016 - rural voters have had their revenge against the contempt of the coastal elites and academics, and they don't give a damn about the 'establishment'. But prophecies, even if they are broadly right, leave the devil in the details.

This series of lectures by Rorty describes what he feels are prevailing trends in contemporary academia - a sort of anemia among the intellectual left, which he feels is consumed in guilt and granular infighting instead of direct action, which in its (granted, important and beneficial) pursuit of identity politics, has either ignored or understated the role of grander unifying narratives in political campaigning. If one says 'America was Never Great', in response to 'Make America Great Again', you may feel better about yourself or being morally right, but it does apparently not win elections. This new message was not as remote or impractical as one may think - Obama won his election on the backs of rural voters and the promise of sweeping change, even if he could not entirely fulfill it.

His hope (as much as his curmudgeonly attitude allows) is for a pragmatic combination of identity politics and economic reform, and referring to the United States as a work in progress, which is a more uplifting narrative and a tougher competitor to the conservative narrative of decadence and decline.

Yet for all its assumed prescience, Rorty still misses some major circumstances about the world we live in now. He does not, for one, see the 2008 economic crisis and what came after. He has a chuckle at Frederic Jameson's use of the term 'late-capitalism', but the international legal and economic systems which have existed in some form since 1945 are now facing their greatest existential risks, in the form of the Trump campaign's avowal to withdraw from this system. He notes the effects of NAFTA, and he would probably say the same things about the TPP and TTIP, but the idea of such a long-standing crisis is out of his reach.

Furthermore, he misses something about America's plurality - the waves of immigration which continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s, with Latinos gaining further prominence across the Southwest, and more Muslim refugees from Syria and Iraq, even if the former did not prove a decisive role in the electorate as previously thought in the polls. Though some remain avowedly optimistic about their new place in America, as I do, there are still many others who do not - who see something they need in Trump's promises about the wall. They feel isolated and threatened by this new set of immigrants, strangers in a strange land. Here, Rorty misses that point. His critique and conception of the United States is an extrapolation of what he saw in the mid-1990s - similar, yet different in some radical ways which he could not have guessed - gay marriage legalization, the election of a black man to the office of the Presidency, the further rise of the internet and the spread of propaganda, and so on.

Still, there is much to ponder, and much to act on, in this critique. He sees Dewey and Whitman as bases for a new America, one which is continually self-improving, and I see a potential in realizing these ideas, if it ever seizes the opportunity.

Matthew says

If you are at all wondering how the hell 2016 happened and align even slightly left of political center, I urge you to take a look at this short book of lectures. Philosopher Richard Rorty offers some fairly amazing explanatory and predictive insights about our current American political reality.

I first learned of *Achieving Our Country* when a paragraph from the book circulated on social media last

month (and even made its way into the *New Yorker*) which almost miraculously predicted the rise of Donald Trump. I immediately ran to the shelves of the research library I work at only to find every copy of this somewhat obscure book was already checked out, so I borrowed the last copy from another library. I now see what the clamor is about.

Rorty is a thinker raised by parents who were members of the New York socialist intelligentsia of the 1920s and 30s. These were socialist workers who were pragmatic but also opponents of Stalinism and the dark side of communism. This biography is important as it builds the framework for how he describes the split of the American left circa 1964 with the rise of Vietnam War opposition.

Rorty makes a distinction between a Reform Left vs. a New Left (or progressive left vs. cultural left). This new left rose in prominence as a reaction to the horrors of Vietnam. The rationale of breaking from the leftist old guard was that 1) since the Vietnam war was horrific, and 2) the U.S. was fighting communism, then 3) communism must hold some value. This is in direct conflict with the reform left who were raised on economic justice but saw the genocidal tragedies of Stalin's communism. The new left, in his description, has evolved into overly theoretical anti-Americanism as a result of this.

He is admittedly critical of the cultural left for abandoning pragmatic tools of workers' economic justice in favor of elitist imagination about abstract concepts of "power". He laments the irrelevance of Whitman and Dewey in favor of Foucault and Derrida. He keeps everything grounded in real-world problems of workers wages and economic disparity.

If you're curious about why identity politics are currently center stage, or why the super-rich are capitalizing on populist rage, or why notions of social justice are now couched in highly jargonized terms that seem to dismiss working class concerns, or why the left seems to hate the country they live in, take a look at this book.

Spoiler alert: He gives advice on how to unify the left. He suggests toning down critical theory, having a non-jingoistic pride in America that works for everyone, reaching out to trade unions again, and avoiding the traps set by the super-rich that seek to divide American workers along ethnic, racial, and religious lines.

American pride, he argues, should be like a healthy ego. If you love yourself too much you become arrogant and aggressive to others. If you hate yourself too much you become despondent and useless. The left needs a nudge in the direction of pride in country to help create a plan for real justice.

Jean Bosh says

Highly recommended for people on the Left who are wondering (rather than merely pointing fingers of blame) how our present situation could have arisen and what can possibly be done about it. While many on the Left certainly have their hearts in the right places, their strategies and actions are often ill-suited to accomplishing the hopes and goals that they have for this society. Bottom line for Rorty: less empty revolutionary talk and philosophizing, more reformist action in specifically figuring out how to get laws changed/passed.

I suspect that some of Rorty's practical advice will sound superficially abhorrent to some Leftists who have grown accustomed to certain ways of thought. For instance:

"If the cultural Left insists on its present strategy - on asking us to respect one another in our differences rather than asking us to cease noticing those differences - it will have to find a new way of creating a sense of commonality at the level of national politics. For only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections."

But if people on the Left in general cannot change their rhetoric, methods, strategies, activities, and ways of thinking - so much the worse for the Left's goals and hopes for this society - and so much the worse for most of this society's poor and middle-class people of all colors, genders, religions, sexual preferences, and political affiliations.

And yet, what is Rorty's book but one more philosophical diagnosis (even if it's an effectively useful one)? How and when will new Leftist heroes emerge who can transform the Left's (and, in general, Americans') shame and distrust of its government and national policies into a positive image of national hope for the future - and, more importantly, how can such potential heroes maintain the trust and hope of the people while also performing the necessary compromises involved in politics?

Mansour says

Members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers – themselves desperately afraid of being downsized – are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking for a strongman to vote for – someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.

Philippe-Antoine says

Not too long after the 2016 presidential election, a short passage from Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* went viral on social media. This amicable bulwark of the Old Left and purveyor of pragmatist philosophy had, so we were told, predicted the election of Donald Trump from beyond the grave. It is worth citing the passage in full:

[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers – themselves desperately afraid of being downsized – are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for – someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots [...].

One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Hocular contempt for women will come back into fashion [...]. All the resentment which badly educated American feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. (p. 89-90).

Rorty's ostensible soothsaying skills had the effect of catapulting *Achieving Our Country* — a minor work that was seldom read in comparison with his epochal *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) — to the top of every Leftist academic and journalist's reading list. So high was demand for the book that it prompted Harvard University Press to reprint the book for the first time in nearly a decade.

All this media attention also led to vigorous discussion in debate among laypersons: as is their wont, the Marxists and anarchists criticized Rorty's reformism and the Left-Liberals and Social Democrats defended him. In other words, the Left reproduced just the kind of puritanical infighting that Rorty claims has been dividing it since the 1960s, declining any kind of engagement with the Libertarians, cultural conservatives, and alt-right neo-Nazis whose political adversaries they are, I am told, supposed to be.

Perhaps the most amusing aspect of this whole episode is that roughly everything that has been said about Rorty's book since its unlikely rise to fame has been incorrect — starting with the very claim that earned it media attention in the first place. What the above-cited passage leaves out — what is conveniently obscured by the well-placed ellipsis at its start — is that Rorty is not speaking in his own voice, but is rather giving his gloss on Edward Luttwak's *The Endangered American Dream*. Rorty did not predict Trump's rise to power. If anyone did, it is Luttwak — and even then, this would be a dubious claim, for the diagnosis was apparently a common one. Here it is worth citing another passage that immediately precedes the first:

Many writers on socioeconomic policy have warned that the old industrialized democracies are headed into a Weimar-like period, one in which populist movements are likely to overturn constitutional governments. Edward Luttwak, for example, has suggested that fascism may be the American future. (p. 89).

So Luttwak's prediction merely serves as an example of a broader trend among social commentators. With the mystique of Rorty's prophetic proclamations swept aside, the question that arises is: if so many could see Trump's rise to power — and the many dissatisfactions from which it was borne — from a mile away, then why has the Left done so little to correct the deviations that were already, two decades ago, causing it to alienate the working class on whose support Sartre could still count in the 1950s and 1960s? I have no answer to this, but it strikes me as a much more fruitful line of inquiry than the in-party quibbling that has occupied the Left of late.

Trumpian hubbub aside, *Achieving Our Country* is perfectly fine for what it is. Rorty is the philosopher *par excellence* of the story, of the narrative. “Competition for political leadership,” he maintains, “is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation’s self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness” (p. 4). His fear is that the Left in its identitarian variant has abandoned all symbols of greatness — in other words, all national pride — turning its back on electoral politics, and choosing instead to languish in a fruitless political spectatorialism: “The difference between early twentieth-century leftist intellectuals and the majority of their contemporary counterparts is the difference between agents and spectators” (p. 9).

In his first lecture, Rorty tries to counter this trend by providing the Left with a new, more useful narrative that could show it the way out of its spectatorial impasse. According to the story he weaves, American Leftism has its roots in the writings of Dewey and Whitman. On his view, what sets Dewey and Whitman's vision apart is its thoroughgoing secularism. For both of these thinkers, there is “no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured” (p. 16). Their ideal of America

was therefore thoroughly democratic: national self-understanding was not to refer to the will of a divine Creator, but to the democratically achieved consensus of free and equal human beings.

The result was to replace divine knowledge of “what is already real with social hope for what might become real” (p. 18). From this perspective, the concept of progress loses its reference to any predetermined standards and becomes a matter of “solving more problems” (p. 28). On the resulting picture, social organization has as its purpose the pragmatic goals of reducing suffering and creating “larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals.” This, Rorty believes, can be achieved through a “classless and casteless society — the sort American leftists have spent the twentieth century trying to construct” (p. 30). With these symbols of greatness in hand, Rorty hopes to give the contemporary Left the tools it needs to inscribe itself within a larger narrative through which to understand itself and in which to take pride. Of course, this history is not without its blemishes. But from the perspective of a thoroughly secularized national self-understanding cleansed of any concept of sin, mortification and self-flagellation are to be replaced with the sober consciousness that one cannot alter the past and the resolute hope to do better in the future (p. 32): “The left by definition, is the party of hope” (p. 14).

In his second lecture, Rorty gives an account of what he calls the “reformist Left” — i.e. “those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong” — and its eclipse by the “New Left” — i.e. by those “who decided, around 1964, that it was no longer possible to work for social justice within the system” (p. 43). His goal, here as elsewhere, is narrative in nature. He aims to undercut the thoroughly unhelpful Marxist distinction between leftism and reformism, thereby giving both a common narrative and — one hopes — countering the pervasive trend toward sectarianism: “[I]t would be a big help to American efforts for social justice if each new generation were able to think of itself as participating in a movement which has lasted for more than a century, and has served human liberty well” (p. 51).

Rorty gives an account of the splintering of the American left during the 1960s over the Vietnam War and the rise of the so-called New Left. The latter movement — which finds its contemporary expression in the identity politics that led you to shut down your Tumblr account — turned its back on the reformist idea that substantial progress could be achieved within the institutions of the democratic constitutional state: “The New Leftists gradually became convinced that the Vietnam War, an the endless humiliation inflicted on African-Americans, were clues to something deeply wrong with their country, and not just mistakes correctable by reforms” (p. 66). Despite Rorty’s clear ambivalence about this move, he gives each party its due, insisting that “the honours should be evenly divided between the old, reformist left and the New Left of the Sixties” (p. 71).

In the third and final lecture, by far the most interesting of the three, Rorty presents his critique of the New Left and his plea for a reunification of the Left against the Right. The cultural Left, he says, “thinks more about stigma than about money” (p. 77) — “[i]ts principal enemy is a mind-set rather than a set of economic arrangements” (p. 79). As a result, it has very little in common with the reformist Left and its emphasis on remedying economic inequality via change in policy. This is particularly worrying given that, since the rise of the cultural Left, globalization has led to increased economic inequality and insecurity. This, Rorty worries, will open the way for right-wing demagogues to take advantage of the growing gap between rich and poor. And then the infamous prediction, which of course, is proving right (pun somewhat intended) the world over: “[T]his process is likely to culminate in a bottom-up populist revolt” (p. 83).

The cultural Left, Rorty warns, does not have the tools to engage in national politics, and so to deal with the consequences of globalization. “To get the country to deal with those consequences,” he says, “the present cultural Left would have to transform itself by opening relations with the residue of the old reformist Left,

and in particular with the labour unions. It would have to talk much more about money, even at the cost of talking less about stigma" (p. 91). He makes two proposals about how to achieve this transition. The first is for the Left to "kick its philosophy habit" and "put a moratorium on theory. The second is for it to "[shed] its semi-conscious anti-Americanism" (p. 98). This latter means toning down the cultural Left's insistence on difference: "Only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections" (p. 101). I find it hard to disagree with either.

Achieving Our Country is not a great work. It is, as I said, perfectly fine for what it is. Rorty's erudition is considerable. His analyses are lucid if at points outdated, and his turns of phrase are infinitely quotable, even though his delivery is somewhat rambling. These lectures should by rights have been relegated to the bookshelves of completists and graduate students. And yet they have now acquired a strange sort of afterlife. Ostensibly, this is because of Rorty's now-famous "prediction." But I don't think that's the whole story. I think that Rorty tells us exactly what so many of us want to hear right now — and, more importantly, what we think others need to hear. As more and more of our peers are caught up in the "blue wave" that has been sweeping up the West for the past few years, and such extremist manifestations as the rise of the neo-Nazi alt-right and the election of Donald Trump are making themselves felt, several of us moderates have suspected that the excesses of identity politics are partially to blame for the widespread appeal of the Right to the general public, and in particular to the working classes. Rorty not only gives voice to these suspicions, but diagnoses the underlying problems. And to that extent, he also points the way to a solution.

Bram says

With the goal of inspiring a resurgent political Left in America, Rorty fails beautifully at uniting every historical left-of-center school of thought and action into a single moral community. A fascinating read, in that I've never before had moments of such passionate agreement and vehement disagreement stumble over each other, often multiple times in the course of a few pages. Rorty's societal priorities are commendable, but his pragmatic push for good old-fashioned reforms and renewed patriotism on the Left seem insufficient at a time (both 20 years ago and even more so today) when global capitalism has both the first and final say on what is politically reasonable, achievable, and even thinkable. Pace the pragmatic Rorty, I'm inclined to agree with Richard Falk, speaking on Palestine and channeling Edward Said, Slavoj Zizek, and Alain Badiou, that "the realm of the feasible...cannot address the challenges confronting people existing in circumstances of oppression, occupation and servitude. From their perspective, a dedication to what seems impossible from a realistic viewpoint is, in truth, the only realism with emancipatory potential."

LunaBel says

This wasnt initially the book i wanted to read by Rorty, but ' a cultural left' caught my attention. I will not explain too much the content. It's basically about the advantages and disadvantages of the American left (both reformist left and the new left), and it is also about a longing for an American that reduces sadism and which take care of its people. Isn't that what we all want from our government, eh? What I really liked about this book is the simplicity of the wording of ideas, and the complexity of ideas. Rorty is able to communicate a heavy idea in few words and in a simple way, and that made me appreciate this book, even if I usually don't like reading such topics.

Adam Gurri says

I do not share Rorty's politics. But I think our country would be in much better health had he been listened to back when this was published in 1998.

Whether or not you share his politics, this is an extremely engaging and informative look at the history of the American left in the 20th century, along with Rorty's own views on how one should engage in politics in the first place. The relevance of the divide between what he calls the old reformist (union organizing and New Deal) left and the new cultural left has never been greater.

It is also short and entertaining. Cannot recommend enough to anyone with even a passing interest in politics.

Ben Handshue says

"Achieving Our Country" (AOH) by Richard Rorty's book I think leftists should read. They might not agree with his conclusions but I think some of his arguments are philosophical grounded and at times can be quite compelling. I have divided my review as where I think succeeds and where I think he is wrong.

The first thing I like is that left needs to be proud of its nation if it wants to America to a beacon of justice for the world. He compares National pride to self-esteem for individuals. Too much national pride produces chauvinism, and too little national pride produces apathy and to be a leftist I think you have want to change the world for a social justice. The left can't have a more social justice world if does not engage in politics and class/labor issues in its political message. National Pride also lends with creating national heroes.

Left has been skeptical of creating national heroes to represent furthering social justice. Presidents such as FDR and LBJ have helped create New Deal, defeat Nazism and create Great Society, and pass The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts respectively. FDR as president oversaw the interment of Asian Americans during and ignored the treatment of blacks in the South by Dixiecrats and LBJ accelerated the U.S.

involvement War in Vietnam. Rorty explains that men like FDR and LBJ weren't perfect and their respective sins should not be replicated. However, he argues that FDR and LBJ should not let their sins overshadow them, but that their legacies should how they expanded freedoms to previous marginalized groups. I say that the left should adopt FDR's Second Bill of Rights speech as template for what a social just society would look like.

Left should be in touch with its history. Rorty argues that history is a self-created poem and that there is not inevitable destination. He criticizes the Marxist theory of history that Marx could use history to predict to the future. I think Rorty is right in this regard that Revolutionary Communism will not happen but I also don't think Francis Fukuyama's thesis that Democratic Capitalism. I hold out hope for another to take its place. I agree with Rorty that reformism is primary weapon of leftists and that we leftists should look for moral identity so that we can achieve our country. I think Second FDR's Bill of Rights and look at the history of the United States as an unfinished revolution and call to more perfect union should inspire leftists and moderates to create a more democratic and equitable society

One of main criticism I have about AOH is Rorty's treatment of the October Revolution and Communist party USA. Rorty argues that the reformist left would have won more gains if the White Army succeeded. This counterfactual history is rather pointless and does nothing to further the goal of social justice. He also maintains USSR and Communist party of USA did nothing significant nor important. I disagree with that. I

believe the presence of a strong communist government offer a competition to Western capitalist democracies and forced elites of the countries to accept reformist policies. A minor criticism is the Richard Rorty says that De Leonist Socialist Labor Party (SLP) was a reformist part but truth is SLP was revolutionary Libertarian Marxist party. The Communist Party USA was the first introduction for many blacks in the deep south to political organization. Democrats in early 20th century ignored black or actively targeted blacks for harm. The Black Panther Party organized Free breakfast program for school children. Communism filled the void for black struggle and inspired the black community to resist the continued assault by White Supremacist structure.

Second criticism I have with AOH is Rorty's argument that the left should abandon appeals to God, universal virtues, or a revolutionary theory. Rorty believes a theory of a system is a secular form of religions. He has point here religions tend to be exclusive and treat debate as a form of heresy. He points to the murderous purges of the USSR. I do think theory can be useful for to at least name the system that is creating oppressive. Revolutionary theory can connect people together and give hope to masses of marginalized groups to overthrow current oppression. The Communist Manifesto is one of the moving, and awe-inspiring literature in history of the world. It argued that as a group can overthrow the oppressors. Martin Luther King Jr used references to God's law to inspire church-going blacks to fight for their own humanity and rights. Religion even the secular form gives people a sense to fight.

Third criticism I have against AOH is Richard Rorty tone in "Eclipse of Reformist Left" to be whiny. In order to distance the left from Communism and the tyranny of Stalinism, he points that the Cold War was a necessary war. He argues that it was necessary for USA to support right-wing dictators around the world. I don't think that is the case. Stalin died early in the Cold War, and many USSR was beginning to reform itself away from Stalin era policies. I think a separate peace with USSR would have been better for the US than the rise of Jihadism and the Kleptocratic Russia.

AOH is mixed bag for me. I like his broader argument and his core philosophy, but his recall of history is a little suspect. Three out five stars.

Curtainthief says

Absolutely essential for any American with a pulse.
