

## Philosophy and Politics

by Martyn Oliver

Can there be a credible distinction between philosophy and politics? Yes, says Richard Rorty. Politics, he argues, is a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises; it can be deliberated about in 'banal, familiar terms.' It is, therefore, an activity in which philosophical reflection, understood generally as speculation about the nature of human knowledge and the meaning of human life, is unhelpful and futile. This distinction, however, is untenable.

Rorty has developed his philosophy-politics distinction from his critique of modern philosophy. This critique is premised on the idea that, in the modern sense, philosophy is epistemology. In other words, philosophy is a discipline which 'sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and the mind.'

Rorty's critique of modern philosophy is, first, historicist, and, secondly, Wittgensteinian. It is historicist in that it understands philosophy to be shot through with time, 'historical all the way down'. One can best describe philosophy, therefore, as a conversation. In a conversation, one gets fixated on certain subjects, primarily because of what somebody else said earlier in the conversation, not because one is guided by a hidden logic. Consequently, arguments made by philosophers are contingent on the nature of their contributions to the conversation of philosophy, and the relationship of this contribution to previous contributions, rather than on the progress of reason. From this historicist perspective, philosophy can be more

appropriately defined as a 'branch of literature'.

Rorty's critique of modern philosophy is Wittgensteinian with regard to its response to the linguistic turn that philosophy took in the course of its conversation. This turn led those philosophers keen to protect the foundational status of their discipline to the study of language as a way of securing



foundations for human knowledge. Against this linguistic foundationalism, Rorty poses, through Wittgenstein and others, an alternative view of language and truth: '...the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, we can only compare language and metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language.'

The notion that philosophy might have something special to offer politics is a product of the idea that the world *could* offer us a more certain way of choosing between alternative and competing metaphors. But Rorty argues that politics neither has nor needs philosophical foundations. He believes - invoking Dewey - that politics is simply 'equivalent to 'reformist social democratic politics''. In other words, politics is about the immediate concern of how best to preserve and strengthen the institutions and practices of social democracy. The sorts of subjects which philosophers grapple with (for example, the nature of selfhood, or the motives of moral behaviour) are of little relevance to the issues of social democratic politics (improving the welfare state, for example). Reflection on the nature of selfhood and the

motives of moral behaviour is more relevant to imagining a future utopia than it is to dealing with the present political situation.

Rorty's idea of politics - the state-centred, welfare politics of mass democracy - is what Arendt called 'false politics': false because it denies any possibility of a public sphere for effective judgement and action on the basis of active citizenship.

Rorty's notion of politics is located somewhere between Arendt's and Weber's standpoints. For Weber, politics was the sphere in which the struggle between irreducibly competing ultimate ends takes place.

So can there be a credible distinction between philosophy and politics and does Rorty offer one? No, and for three reasons. First, attempts to establish the proper connections between the two are inevitably drawn to defining what 'philosophy is essentially about'. As Rorty himself suggests, such an attempt is a product of modern philosophy's foundational urge to provide for itself a privileged kind of knowledge. It should be avoided. Secondly, an account of the difference between politics and philosophy tends to the view that debates about the nature of politics are of little significance to practical political issues. This is to ignore a long history of political thought, a great deal of which we rely on for our democratic imagination. Thirdly, it is one thing to say that philosophy can do little to help social democratic reform and another to suggest that issues about human nature and selfhood are irrelevant to politics. The idea that they are irrelevant seems to be as much an idealization of politics as are the philosophical utopianisms which Rorty thinks are of little consequence in practice.

---

*Martyn Oliver is a PhD candidate at CSD. This is an edited version of a paper he presented at the symposium 'An Encounter with Richard Rorty', held at CSD in May 1997.*

---

## Fear and Politics

by Milan Podunavac

According to the famous thesis of Thomas Hobbes, fear of violent death is a basic law of nature. Since all human beings seek security and want to avoid violent death, it is a law of nature that all prudent men seek a form of peace: peace defined by the way political society is organized. On this basis, Hobbes offers a striking interpretation of how the state comes into being. Frightened men, who stand to lose their lives by violent death, gather together and make a contract with each other to escape their miserable conditions. They must write into the contract a clause specifying that obedience is exchanged for protection: 'I agree with you and you agree with me that we shall submit ourselves to someone else, whom we shall both allow to be the holder of absolute power.'

The Hobbesian protection-obedience axiom correctly grasped that the *conditio sine qua non* of social peace was the existence of a sovereign power able to guarantee respect for law, and, therefore, capable of assuaging constant fear of uncivil actions. But what Hobbes did not realize was that power based solely on coercion could never free individuals from fear; it would, rather, force them to live in permanent terror, limited freedom, and fear. This is a key point in the instructive interpretation of fear and political power provided by the early twentieth century political writer and historian Guglielmo Ferrero.

Ferrero acknowledges that the function of power - the institutionalization of the command-obedience relationship within a given society - is to free men and women from the fear they have of each other. But he insists that this relationship contains a paradox

fraught with terrible consequences. In order to eliminate the fear which individuals have of their fellows, political power creates another type of fear: the fear of power itself.

Ferrero begins from the idea that individuals' innermost feeling is the fear of death. This fear never leaves them; indeed, it so conditions them that the



innermost essence of their personality is found in the 'tactics and strategy' that they use in their 'fight against death'. The civilizations, institutions, and symbolic universes that human beings create in order to have conditions of relative stability and security all stem from their fear of nature, of others, and of the future. According to this interpretation, religion, politics, war, laws, morals, and so on, are all attempts to eliminate fear by removing, or at least reducing to a minimum, instability and uncertainty in the human condition. This brings Ferrero to define civilization as a 'school of courage'. He adds: 'Power is the supreme expression of the fear that man has of himself, in spite of his efforts to rid himself of it. This is perhaps the deepest and most obscure secret of history. Even in the poorest and most ignorant societies the rudiments of authority can be found.'

Power generated by the fear which individuals have of each other is forced to induce fear in order to be obeyed. But this means that power is dominated by the fear of the revolt of those who are governed, a fear that Elias Cannetti subsequently called the 'anguish of command'. This state of affairs highlights the symbiotic relationship between the dominators and the

dominated, or the dual nature of power. On the one hand, power is an institution that protects and keeps society united; on the other, it is a machine that oppresses its subjects. Gramsci's famous theory of hegemony underlines the same fact; so does Norbert Elias's *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, which develops the notion of an 'apparatus of self-restraint' functioning as a form of 'internal pacification'. According to Elias, the crucial point is to balance the two functions of the monopoly of violence - the function for its controllers and the function for the members of the state-regulated society - and, thus, to ensure a degree of internal pacification.

Ferrero's main concern is to address the essential task of how power is to fulfil its historical mission, which is to quell fear by exercising command according to principles of legitimacy shared by both governors and governed. He writes: 'The principles of legitimacy are a justification of power, that is, the right to command. Such justification is an essential requisite of social order, since of many inequalities between men, none have such far-reaching consequences, and hence such need for justification, as inequality deriving from power.' If these principles of legitimacy are accepted without serious reservation, they provide a moral sanction for the dialectic of command and obedience, which is the basis of social peace. The commander is not seen as a usurper, but, rather, as someone exercising a right. To obey his orders is a duty. He is thus freed from the "anguish of command". 'At the very heart of the principles of legitimacy', writes Ferrero, 'is the capacity to exorcise fear, the mutual fear that always arises between power and its subjects. . . The most important organ of society, government, can attain its perfect state, legitimacy, only by means of a kind of unspoken contract. The principles of