

Richard Rorty: living in dialogue

By Ramin Jahanbegloo,
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"We distinguish the excellent man from the common man", wrote the Spanish philosopher Ortega Y Gasset, "by saying that the former is the one who makes great demands on himself, and the latter who makes no demands on himself". Richard Rorty - who died on 8 June 2007 [1] - was a man of excellence, but he was also a man of simplicity. He was with no doubt the finest contribution America has made to the planet's philosophical culture in the last fifty years. His work will be remembered by many in the 21st century as unsystematic and ranging across many disciplines [2], principally analytic philosophy, political theory, comparative literature and the social sciences.

As a pragmatist philosopher and an acute reader of John Dewey [3], Rorty remained mainly a moderate, but also a modest philosopher. Non-foundationalism [4] formed the leitmotif of much of his philosophical and political writings, but his essays cannot be reduced, in the manner of a Kant or a Hegel, to a systematic statement. Yet while Rorty's thought did not constitute a centripetal system or converge on a single solution, it did form a cohesive whole, consisting of a set of recurring and overlapping concerns and convictions. The themes that he pursued [5] across many years and pages ultimately fit into a pattern, but strangely enough they are held together by his philosophical excellence and his will and readiness to dialogue, rather than by a single master idea.

Rorty's [10] non-foundational conception of democracy, combining a non-instrumental respect for individual choice and dignity with the idea of solidarity, or self-realisation of the individual through his union with a larger group or movement, was mainly devoted to his championing liberal conceptions against ideological views of politics. Rorty was, in short, not so much an intellectual activist, who was deeply engaged with everyday politics. However, his contribution to the thinking and practice of democracy should not be forgotten or underestimated.

Rorty taught and wrote during a period when the American philosophical scene was deeply influenced by analytic philosophy on the one hand and postmodern thought on the other. Yet, Rorty remained an outsider on the American philosophical scene. His own intellectual personality was strong and distinctive and coloured all that he wrote. Rorty sought to build a world of what Theodor Adorno [11] once called "non-dominative difference". And that role he fulfilled, by raising in our minds the singularity of so much of the human experience.

Ramin Jahanbegloo [6] was born in Tehran and studied at the Sorbonne University, Paris. He is currently the Rajni Kothari professor of democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies [7] in Delhi. Before this he was a post-doc at Harvard University and then headed the department for contemporary studies at the Cultural Research Bureau [8], Iran. Among his twenty books in English, French and Persian are *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (Phoenix, 2000), and

His was the authentic voice of an independent critic and a free thinker with a vast encyclopedic knowledge and a great intellectual power who as a truly cosmopolitan and worldly soul marked his life and his work by an ever-present tension between the goal of understanding the world and the making of the quotidian history. This was in part because one of Rorty's marked philosophical traits was his ability to feel and think his way into other worlds and cultural perspectives. As such, Rorty's empathy [12] reflected no lack, no empty space waiting to be filled, but rather an overflowing of dialogue.

An intellectual imperative

This quality of Rorty's, which made him such an attractive human being [13], was his positive capability to understand and to think the paradigm of interculturality as the *conditio sine qua non* of the variety and variations of our world. He knew well that we are faced with an absolute need for an intercultural imperative in order to understand the cultural diversity in today's world. Therefore Rorty's search for democracy [14] was also a quest for a plural world not in spite of our differences and divergences, but thanks to our differences and divergences. In this respect, his philosophy was a result of border-crossing and dialogue with other cultures.

It was largely in such a context that I got to know Richard Rorty during my lecture at Stanford University and got to invite him to make a trip to Iran in June 2004. As a pluralist, Rorty realised that there is no such thing as a single homogeneous culture that functions as an isolated horizon. In other words, he was convinced the future of our global civilisation on this fragile and vulnerable earth is dependent on our ability to live together - with our diversities - if not in harmony at least with a capacity of dialogue [14] and mutual understanding.

Rorty tended to consider globalisation as a multifaceted process with the intercultural dialogue taking a new meaning in the context [15] of the current international climate. Thus, we find in Rorty an intellectual imperative to think of globalisation beyond the free exchange of goods and services and only the movement of people around the world.

"Against the darkness of the inhuman"

A final reason for Rorty's openness towards other cultures was that according to him the intercultural dialogue had become the *raison d'être* of human civilisation. This raises the question of Rorty's attitude in regard to the process of democratisation in our world, in which according to him no value system unilaterally lays down the rules and the scope of the game. This pluralist perspective prevented Rorty from being a partisan of American democracy, but did not make him neutral [16] toward the strengths and weaknesses of democratic thinking.

(as editor) *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lexington Books, 2004 [9])

Richard Rorty exchanged letters with Ramin Jahanbegloo in **openDemocracy's** "Letters to Americans" series in 2004:

"America's dreaming [9]" (11 June 2004)

In his letter, Richard Rorty wrote:

"The acclaim with which (Walt) Whitman's poems were greeted in many different countries showed how widespread was the need to believe that the human future can be made very different from the human past. Reminding the world of what the United States managed to accomplish is still a good way to encourage hope that every adult human will, some day, be a free citizen of a democratic, global, political community."

Also by Ramin Jahanbegloo:

"Iran's conservative triumph [9]"

(28 June 2005) - contribution to a post-election symposium with seven other Iranian writers

Rorty's contribution to democratic thought [17] was that of innovation. He returned to the ideas of American thinkers such as Dewey, but he also brought something that was wholly his own and of his own time to democratic thinking. This consisted in part of his capacity to live in dialogue with other cultures, but also in part because of his commitment to individual liberty with appreciation of deep diversity and the difficulties it engenders.

Richard Rorty warned us against the pitfalls of democratic thought in order to think and vindicate democracy. For him, our attempts to think democracy would always be imperfect and incomplete. The goal of a philosopher, like Rorty, was to assist men to understand this anti-Procrustean nature of democracy, but also to strive on behalf of democracy and against the darkness of the inhuman. As such, Rorty's work will remain a compelling vision for our future world.

Also in **openDemocracy** on
Richard Rorty:
Roger Scruton, "Richard
Rorty's legacy [16]"
(12 June 2007)

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