

Pragmatic irony in times of terror

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The political cash value of Richard Rorty's pragmatic liberalism

How should we react to the challenge of religious fundamentalism without betraying our own liberal values? The Neopragmatist Richard Rorty presents a convincing answer to this pressing question. His ironic-pragmatic liberalism is an alternative to (Christian) refundamentalization and postmodern relativism as he combines irony in matters of justification with loyalty to our values. This short article claims the usefulness of continuing the conversation with Rorty's Neopragmatism for political theory and practice. One could call this project "Rorty 2.0".

American Pragmatism has had a renaissance in the past decades. But the transformative thinking of Richard Rorty is still underestimated in political theory. His neopragmatism can be reconstructed as a fragile, but consistent combination of private romanticism and public pragmatism. It is best characterized by the idea of a pragmatic coexistence of these two main dimensions of Rorty's thinking. Romanticism of linguistic creativity and prosaic liberalism are reconciled by use of the private-public distinction. The reconstruction reveals that this coexistence-strategy is all in all consistent but there are some corrections required. The most important of these relate to questions of borderline between his romantic and his pragmatic impulse.¹ The required modification of Rorty's use of the private-public distinction itself is possible in a Rortyan spirit. One could call this project "Rorty 2.0".

This project follows John Dewey's maxim, "Pragmatism must take its own medicine." The pragmatic method has to be applied to Rorty's thinking itself: What are the "fruits" of his anti-fundamentalist utopia of a society of ironic-pragmatic liberals for political theory and for the liberal practice? Following selected topics are then getting in the focus: 1. Would it be helpful for intercultural dialogue if we adopt the ironic-pragmatic attitude regarding justification which Rorty recommends? Wouldn't Rortyan Liberals be condemned to a self-refuting relativism? How could we argue for our human rights culture without the appeal to Truth? 2. Could we still criticize our own liberal culture without this appeal? Is Rorty's own theory and praxis of criticism convincing? 3. Does the "ethnocentric" notion of a political justification-community really make sense in our pluralistic societies? Or isn't it rather naïve

¹ See: Müller, M. (2014): Private Romantik, öffentlicher Pragmatismus. Richard Rorty's transformative Neubeschreibung des Liberalismus, Bielefeld: transcript, (part 3).

and dangerous, because it's neglect of power-structures and its tendency to premature exclusion.

Most promising is the individual level of Rorty's ironic liberalism, i.e. his ideal of citizenship: the liberal ironist. She "embodies" not only his coexistence-conception of private romanticism and public pragmatism but also an indirect, because pragmatic answer to the theoretical failing and the political dangerousness of (philosophical) foundationalism. The normative question "Why be moral?" is transformed in a question of practical identity.

Ironism is Rorty's notion for an offensive antifoundationalism which should be understood as a crucial step towards a serene moral fallibilism without nostalgia. The irony of the liberal ironist stands for an enlightened awareness of the contingency of the liberal vocabulary which is central to her public identity. It is a reaction to the crisis of the project of grounding political values. Until today philosophy has not succeeded in supplying an uncontroversial justification of our liberal culture. Its promise to deliver a grounding of morality independent of religious traditions remains still unfulfilled. But according to Rorty this justification-project is not only condemned to failure but also harmful to democracy. Any claim of truth leads to dangerous and infinitive arguing in the public discourse. It presents a danger for freedom and tolerance, the basic values of a pluralistic society.

Rorty's ironic-pragmatic liberalism combines this antifoundationalism with a communitarianism of justification. Although Rorty is definitely a liberal political thinker on the contentual level, he turns out to be a communitarian on the justification level. He himself calls this position, in the usual provocative manner: ethnocentrism. And his figure of the liberal ironist is both at the same time: ironist *and* liberal ethnocentrist. Her contextual identity is characterized by a liberal enclosure of her irony. Irony does not lead to solidarity according to Rorty, like some of his critics are assuming. It is rather privatized in the context of a practical balance between irony and solidarity. And this privatization is only pragmatically justified with reference to the already existing art of separation in liberal societies. The liberal ironist respects the (fuzzy!) border between private and public realm and the prohibition of cruelty because she is a loyal member of her political identification-community. The aim of her political commitment is the global enforcement of the liberal values as best answer yet to the challenge of pluralism. These values are not understood as objective truths but as the historically proven moral tools of the contextual tradition with which she identifies herself. As a liberal she is committed to these values and prepared to defend them if necessary. But due to her fallibilist attitude she avoids the understandable temptation of refundamentalization in the contention with fundamentalist positions.

Rorty outlines with his ironic-pragmatic liberalism not only an important contribution to political theory but also a possible way for us citizens of contemporary liberal societies how we can stick to our political values and commit ourselves to them while at the same time being aware that these values lack a philosophical grounding. His vision of a pragmatic balance of private search for self-creation and public solidarity can be considered as a “live option” (James). The figure of the liberal ironist is – with some corrections – a useful personification of a pragmatic fallibilism which we should champion even in the face of fundamentalism. It is a convincing ideal of democratic citizenship, especially in our times of terror.