

INTRODUCTION:

AN AMERICAN LEFTIST PATRIOT

Alexander Kremer

(Editor in Chief, *Pragmatism Today*; Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Szeged; Director of the John Dewey Research Center of Hungary;
alexanderkremer2000@yahoo.com,
kremeralexander5@gmail.com)

It is my pleasure to introduce the first issue of the second volume of *Pragmatism Today* (Volume 2, Issue 1, Summer 2011), because it is a thematic collection of papers on Richard Rorty's philosophy. Pragmatism again became a significant philosophical approach to human life in the second half of the 20th century, and the reason for this was primarily the influence of Rorty's neopragmatism.

If we look at pragmatism first in general, we can claim that the representatives of traditional pragmatism had already transcended the narrow interpretation of the principle of utility. Of the main representatives of this philosophical movement we should mention three. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism, was an excellent logician. William James (1842-1910), who is the brother of the world famous writer Henry James, traveled to Europe as a child, and later visited Europe frequently, acquiring in this way a nearly perfect understanding of European culture. William was enrolled in fine schools and had gifted tutors, and he later taught psychology and philosophy at Harvard. Last but not least, John Dewey (1859-1952) wrote not only several important books and articles about nearly every important question of contemporary philosophy in his almost a century long life, but he also took part in the life of his communities as teacher, social critic, and political activist.

What is the leading idea of pragmatism that is still alive today? What is worth renewing according to the main

representatives of neopragmatism? Not touching now on the cardinal subject of truth, we can say that in James' and Dewey's opinion *philosophy has to speak about real human life, and it must serve our permanent improvement. However, human life is basically practice, and that is why theory is also part of this practice taken it in the widest sense.* Even theory is a tool of our practice, the main aim of which is to improve our social and individual lives. But life, understood as practice, obviously cannot have a more human aim on the social level than to improve our community life, to establish democratic institutions, and to build democracy. *That is why Dewey's ultimate intention was to create a genuinely democratic society.*

These principles were taken seriously by neopragmatist philosophers, first of all by Richard Rorty, who also emphasized the differences between the old and the new pragmatists. The new pragmatism, he wrote in his book *Philosophy and Social Hope*, „differs from the old in just two respects, only one of which is of much interest to people who are not philosophy professors. The first is that we new pragmatists talk about language instead of experience, or mind, or consciousness, as the old pragmatists did. The second respect is that we have all read Kuhn, Hanson, Toulmin and Feyerabend, and have thereby become suspicious of the term 'scientific method'. New pragmatists wish that Dewey, Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel had not insisted on using this term as a catchphrase, since we are unable to provide anything distinctive for it to denote.” (PSH 95)

The obvious reason for these differences is that Rorty knew European culture and philosophy as well as American pragmatism and the analytic tradition. He was familiar not only with the philosophical epoch from Plato to Hegel, but he also wrote several papers about the leading 20th century philosophers (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer) and about recent developments in Continental philosophy: Habermas, Foucault and Derrida. With respect to intellectual history and ideology, from among the three historically available

possibilities of conservatism, socialism, and liberalism, Rorty chose a liberalism that was forged first of all by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. That is why he modified slightly Dewey's aim and strived to sketch a utopia of a *liberal* democracy in his 1989 book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*: „One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal. A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.” (CIS xv-xvi)

Who was Richard McKay Rorty in the mirror of „facts”? Perhaps Christopher J. Vopari's „General Introduction” has summarized the essential features of Rorty's oeuvre and life in the best way: „Whether or not one shares Harold Bloom's assessment of Richard Rorty as the most interesting philosopher in the world, that he was for a time „the most-talked about philosopher” is hard to dispute. Catapulted to the intellectual heights by the 1979 publication of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – recently called „the most widely discussed philosophy book of the second half of the twentieth century” – Rorty's influence transcends the walls of discipline and culture. Books of his have been translated into over twenty languages and his ideas debated in leading journals in fields as diverse as political theory, sociology, legal studies, international relations, feminist studies, literary theory, business ethics, educational theory, and of course philosophy. His work has spawned a body of secondary literature beyond the limits of a single human being to master and played a pivotal role in the revival of the tradition of American pragmatism. Following his death on June 8, 2007, Rorty was heralded by a chorus of prominent intellectuals as „the most influential philosopher of the last three decades,” „the most famous philosopher in the world,” and nothing less than „a great philosopher, who, daringly swimming against the tide of modern analytic philosophy, single-handedly revived pragmatism, with great impact on a variety of fields.””(The Rorty Reader 1)

„Born on October 4, 1931 to James Rorty and Winifred Raushenbush, Richard McKay Rorty was an only child. „Bucko,” as his parents affectionately called him, was intellectually precocious from the start, with a clear gift for the written word. He wrote a play about the coronation of Edward, Prince of Wales, at age 6. At 7 he composed a letter to the Harvard College Observatory inquiring about the possibility of his becoming an astronomer, and at 8 penned a note of congratulations to the new Dalai Lama, accompanied by a present, for „a fellow eight-year old who had made good.” (The Rorty Reader 4) Rorty enrolled at age 15 in the University of Chicago, where he later earned his BA (1949) and his MA (1952) degree in philosophy. After his years at Chicago he studied philosophy at Yale University and earned his PhD degree in 1956. In 1957-1958 he served in the army, after which he began to teach at Wellesly College (1958-1961), from where he moved to Princeton University, which was one of the citadels of analytic philosophy. Rorty lived for twenty-one years in Princeton, where he taught primarily analytic philosophy, and then he left Princeton for philosophical and private reasons. „Although there were other contributing factors behind his decision to leave Princeton University in 1982 after two decades, he would not hold a post in a philosophy department again for the rest of his life.” (The Rorty Reader 2) His pragmatic turn ripened from the end of the 1960s (1967: *The Linguistic Turn*), and he published his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979 as the result of this mind-changing process. The publication of his *Mirror* book „infuriated then dominant analytic philosophers, who viewed Rorty's tome as a Judas-like betrayal from within.” (The Rorty Reader 2) However, the almost immediate popularity of his book „across the humanities quickly led to multiple job offers not long after its publication in 1979.” (The Rorty Reader 10) Rorty became a Kenan professor of humanities at the University of Virginia in 1983, and perhaps his most productive sixteen years had begun. From 1998 to his retirement he taught at the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford University in California, after retiring from which he lived in Palo Alto as professor

emeritus. Richard McKay Rorty passed away on June 8, 2007, at age 75.

It is not easy to estimate clearly the significance of his oeuvre. „Rorty was a prolific writer who in nearly five decades of writing penned three books, two essay collections, four volumes of „philosophical papers,“ an influential edited volume, and a co-authored book, plus scores of uncollected essays and reviews in academic journals, as well as numerous pieces in newspapers, magazines, and popular publications. Rorty also was a prolific reader, with expansive interests and an uncanny ability to drop names not only from the entire philosophical tradition, but of novelists, poets, literary critics, legal scholars, historians, and political theorists. A mainstay in contemporary intellectual debates for several decades, he traveled to all corners of the globe and engaged with the leading thinkers of the day across many fields. Widely recognized for his collegiality, Rorty himself was a consummate collaborator, enthusiastically promoting the work of others and always willing to engage even his harshest critics in the hope of furthering ongoing debates.” (*The Rorty Reader* 3) Rorty himself was the embodiment of the contemporary intellectual life and a barometer of the most exciting intellectual processes in several fields.

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As we know the late Rorty refused the philosophical single vision. *However, in some sense he has created a single vision.* It is not a metaphysical single vision but a *personal single vision.* His neopragmatic philosophy is saturated namely by his political approach. Although he has not created a distinctive political philosophy, his liberal utopia, his liberal democracy – in the sense of freedom and social justice (cf. *Achieving Our Country*) – always stood in the center of his philosophy and created a unity within his diverse thinking. Therefore, we can claim that *the late Rorty’s writings are united by one central topic, which is his conception of a liberal utopia.* The late Rorty’s neopragmatism is a coherent system of

views in its essence because he persistently confirmed his *politically saturated liberal ironist point of view.* We can look at any field of his philosophy, from his concepts of „world“ and „truth,“ through his views on art, morality, and science, to the questions of religion and other matters, and sooner or later we recognize that his analyses of questions of contemporary importance form an integral part of the whole of his philosophy until his death. *The late Rorty assured the priority of liberal democracy over everything.* (Cf. „The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy“, in *The Rorty Reader*, Ch 13) Even his interpretation of philosophy as cultural politics serves this aim. (See the title and the content of his *posthumous* book: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics!*) It follows from all of this that Rorty did not want to create a special political philosophy, but the main motive of his philosophy is *nevertheless* political. Rorty gave us a non-systematic, but logical and consistently developed interpretation of our world, with the help of his natural imagination and of the knowledge he acquired primarily through his bridge-building between post-Darwinian American and post-Nietzschean European philosophy.

Our issue, „The Roots of Rorty’s Philosophy,“ seeks to trace the pathways of the influences that affected Rorty’s intellectual development. It seemed to be a difficult task, however, because Rorty was not only a prolific writer, but – as we have already seen – also a prolific reader. That is why we unfortunately cannot map absolutely the roots and trails of influences on his philosophy. Thus we gave up the attempt to show the whole of these influences. Readers may note especially the absence of accounts of Rorty’s relations to Sartre, Gadamer and Derrida, and they are right, but we could not find authors who had the necessary knowledge, time and enthusiasm to achieve this task. We offer fourteen papers in a chronological order, except Richard Shusterman’s very personal introductory reminiscence which assures the proper tone for our approach to Rorty’s philosophy. Hopefully, „The Roots of Rorty’s Philosophy“ will prove useful not only for colleagues, but also for the students and the cultured public.

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