Richard Rorty is one of the most challenging contemporary philosophers and thinkers. Here he argues that, with the demise of the old socialist vision, all that’s left us is the ‘banal’ politics of the everyday.

In the wake of the events of 1989 and 1991, it has become clear that western leftist intellectuals stand in need of a new political vocabulary. Visitors from postrevolutionary eastern and central Europe are going to stare at us incredulously if we continue to use the word ‘socialism’ when we describe our political goals. Indeed, given the suffering they have endured under regimes that called themselves marxist, our eastern European friends are likely to feel that marxist rhetoric is no more respectable than Nazi rhetoric.

Just as we would be justifiably suspicious of anyone who spoke of ‘Hitler’s excesses’, so our colleagues in Czechoslovakia and Hungary will be outraged if we continue to speak, as many western intellectuals still do, of ‘Stalin’s excesses’. We will have to stop repeating Trotsky’s claim that Stalin betrayed a promising revolution and begin to see Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin as Vladimir Nabokov did; as three ruthless gangsters, distinguishable only by their facial hair. We are all accustomed to think of World War Two as a good war, but many of us are not yet prepared to think of the Cold War as a good war. Yet this is just how the Czechs think of it. The Czechs and the Slovaks would be as outraged by the suggestion that the West should have avoided the Cold War by coming to terms with Stalin in 1948 as the French would be at the suggestion that Britain and the United States should, in 1941, have followed through on Chamberlain’s betrayal of Benes by betraying de Gaulle.

It is going to take a long period of readjustment for us western leftist intellectuals to comprehend that the word ‘socialism’ has been drained of force—as have been all the other words that drew their force from the idea that an alternative to capitalism was available. Not only are we going to have to stop using the term ‘capitalist economy’ as if we knew what a functioning non-capitalist economy
looked like but we are going to have to stop using the term ‘bourgeois cultures’ as if we knew what a viable non-bourgeois culture in an industrialised society would look like.

I am saying these things not as a triumphant Reaganite but rather as someone who kept hoping that some country would figure out a way to keep socialism after getting rid of the nomenklatura. Even now, I am unwilling to grant that Friedrich von Hayek was right in saying that you cannot have democracy without capitalism. All I will concede is that you need capitalism to ensure a reliable supply of goods and services, and to ensure that there will be enough taxable surplus left over to finance social welfare. The only hope for getting the money necessary to eliminate intolerable inequities is to facilitate the activities of people like Henry Ford and even Donald Trump. Public virtues, as far as we can presently see, will continue to be parasitic upon private vices. Nothing remotely like ‘a new socialist man’ seems likely to emerge.

We will have to work hard to free ourselves of the marxist vocabulary to which many of us in academia still cling. But I hope that we shall go further. I hope we can admit that we have practically nothing in the way of a ‘theoretical basis’ for political action and that we may not need one. As Karl Popper pointed out forty years ago, Plato and Marx share a certain resemblance. Both thought that they understood deep underlying forces, forces whose direction determined the fates of human communities. Plato claimed to know that justice could not reign until kings became philosophers or philosophers kings. He claimed to know this on the basis of a searching inspection of the human soul. Marx claimed to know that justice could not reign until capitalism was overthrown and culture decommodified. He claimed to know this on the basis of a deep understanding of the movement of history. I hope we have reached a time when we can finally get rid of the conviction common to Plato and Marx, the conviction that there just must be large theoretical ways of finding out how to end injustice. I hope we can learn to get along without the
conviction that there is something deep—such as the human soul, or human nature, or the will of God, or the shape of history—which provides a subject matter for grand, politically useful theory. We should accept the fact that from here on in we are going to have to be as crudely experimental as the new governments of Poland and Lithuania are being forced to be.

Now that we can no longer be leninists, intellectuals have to face up to some questions that leninism helped us to evade. What is behind the sense of loss that comes over us now that we are forced to conclude the bourgeois democratic welfare states are the best we can envisage? Is it sadness at the thought that the poor will never get all the way out from under the rich, that the solidarity of a cooperative commonwealth will never be attained? Or is it instead sadness at the thought that we intellectuals turned out to be less relevant to the fate of humanity than we had hoped? Was our thirst for world-historical romance—for deep theories about deep causes of social change—caused by our concern for human suffering? Or was it at least in part a thirst for an important role for ourselves to play?

Whatever the answers to these navel-gazing questions, I think that we western leftists can best acknowledge the revolutions of 1989 and 1991 by resolving to banalise our vocabulary of political deliberation. I suggest that we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labour, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes. I suggest that we stop assuming that the function of the intellectual is radical criticism that attempts to penetrate down to the realities beneath the appearances. I hope that we can stop using notions like 'mystification' and 'ideology', notions that suggest that we are in a position to see through mere social constructions and discern something that is more than a social construction. It would be better simply to say: perhaps we can construct a better society than we have now—better not in the sense of conforming better to the way things really are but merely in the sense of containing fewer inequities. From this point of view, the only kind of criticism of existing institutions that will count will be reformist rather than radical—the kind that sketches a concrete alternative institution, an alternative that does not presuppose the existence of a new kind of human being.

So far, I have been suggesting that we intellectuals should react to the recognition that we may always have market economies by taking less interest in philosophy and more in reform legislation, less interest in academic politics and more in electoral politics, less interest in the criticism of ideology and more in formulating scenarios for change. But I have to admit that something very important has been lost now that we can no longer see ourselves as fighting against 'the capitalist system'. For better or worse, 'socialism' was
a word that lifted the hearts of the best people who lived in our century. A lot of very brave men and women died for that word. They died for an idea that turned out not to work, but they nevertheless embodied virtues to which most of us can hardly aspire.

Still, the image of Lenin at the Finland Station, an image that captured the hearts of our grandparents, cannot be retouched and revived. That image is, in today's St Petersburg, the memory of a nightmare. In the minds of our grandchildren, that image will form a triptych along with that of Hitler at a Nuremberg rally and of Mussolini on the balcony of the Palazzo Venetia. The image of Aleksandr Kerensky is going to blend with that of Tomás Masaryk, and that of Hans Beimler with that of Horst Wessel.

So what now will fire the imagination of the international Left? What songs will the next generation of hopeful, idealistic students sing now that nobody wants the International Soviet to be the human race? What cry will rally young people who have realised that what their grandparents used to call ‘the bourgeois revolution’ is not going to be succeeded by a proletarian revolution? That what their grandparents called ‘petit-bourgeois reformism’ is, at least in the industrialised democracies, the only political alternative we have left? That revolutions against Third World oligarchies are unlikely to throw up any better institutions than those the industrialised democracies have already developed? What heroes and heroines and which triumphant events, will fill the minds of the leftist university students in 2010?

I have no confident answers to such questions, but I shall offer a tentative one: perhaps the image of Lenin will be replaced by the image of Václav Havel, and the events of October 1917 in St Petersburg, by those of 1989 in Prague. For of all the revolutions of the past three years, the Velvet Revolution best fulfils the intellectual’s hope to act together with the workers, successfully joining forces to overthrow tyrants. Havel’s magnificent honesty has made him the symbol of everything that Lenin was not. It is not hard to hope that Havel’s writings will set the tone for the next worldwide surge of social hope.

What is so surprising and refreshing about Havel’s tone, to my mind, is that he seems prepared to go all the way in replacing theoretical insight with groundless hope and trial and error. As he says in the interviews collected as Disturbing the Peace, “hope is not prognostication”. Throughout those interviews, he emphasises his lack of interest in underlying forces and historical trends. The following passage, describing the events of 1967-69, is typical:

Who would have believed—at a time when the Novotny regime was corroding away because the entire nation was behaving like Schweik—that half a year later that same society would display a genuine civic-mindedness, and that a year later this recently apathetic, sceptical and demoralised society would stand up with such courage and intelligence to a foreign power! And who would have suspected that, after scarcely a year had gone by, this same society would, as swiftly as the wind blows, lapse back into a state of demoralisation far deeper than its original one! After all these experiences, one must be very careful about coming to any conclusions about the way we are, or what can be expected from us.

‘Us’ here means ‘us Czechs and Slovaks’, but what Havel is saying works just as well if we take it to mean ‘us human beings’. We can put Havel’s refusal to prognosticate in an American context by asking, ‘Who would have guessed that the white middle class that acknowledged the justice of Truman’s desegregation of the military, the Supreme Court’s repudiation of the separate-but-equal doctrine, and King’s freedom marches, the same white middle class that turned King into a schoolbook hero, would now decide that it is more important to cut taxes than to immunise ghetto children against measles? Who can know whether, a decade farther down the road, the same middle class may not become disgusted with its own greed and turn against the shameless opportunists who have been pandering to its selfishness?’

Lenin would not have agreed with Havel that we have to be “careful about coming to any conclusions about the way we are, or what can be expected from us”. Scientific socialism, Lenin thought, gave us the tools to formulate, and demonstrate the truth-of, just such prognostications. But the end of Leninism will, with luck, rid us of the hope for anything like scientific socialism, and for any similar source of theoretically-based prognostication.

And yet many of us are still, alas, on the look-out for a successor to marxism—for a large theoretical framework that will enable us to put our society in an excitingly new context. We hope that this new context will suggest something to say that will be less banal than “people ought to be kinder, more generous, less selfish”. My own hunch is that there may be nothing less banal to say. There may be no middle ground between that sort of banality and attempts to sketch concrete, workable alternatives to present sociopolitical arrangements. Rather than dreaming of a spiritual renewal, I think we would be better off assuming that whatever improvements occur in the next century will be no more dramatic than those that occurred in ours—that the best we can hope for is more of the same experimental, hit-or-miss, two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back reforms that have been taking place in the industrialised democracies since the French Revolution.

RICHARD RORTY is professor of humanities at the University of Virginia, and is author of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. This article, an extract from a longer essay, was originally published in the US monthly Harpers Magazine.