A more banal POLITICS?

Peter Beilharz responds that, while a more ordinary politics may be a good thing, it still needs to rise to the occasion.

Richard Rorty is one of the most provocative and insightful of contemporary philosophers—which is to say, of course, that by some criteria he is not a philosopher at all. He is a vital critic and public intellectual. In the age where grand narratives collapse noisily like ageing dinosaurs in the jungle, Rorty pursues central social problems in a prose that is at once sprightly and clear. No mean feat. But do we need more banality in politics?

I find it difficult to disagree with Rorty’s claim that we—western radicals—need a new political vocabulary. The question is, what might it be? Rorty correctly observes that the term socialism is completely discredited among citizens of the old Soviet Empire. They have a powerful claim to be heard, and to be taken seriously. But there are others, in the so-called third world and in the deindustrialising parts of the first world, who would still hitch their hopes to that star, or at least view socialism as a counter-trend to the market, and they also have a right to be heard, whatever vocabulary they use.

Rorty’s point here is that fellow-travelling has never been a small sin or a passing weakness on the part of leftists. For leftists, like everyone else, are suckers for success; and so the story that starts with the Red October, travels through China, eastern Europe and Cuba is an irresistible path of success for radicals who identify socialism’s success with the achievement of state power.

Into the 1990s, it may be the case that socialism remains a defensible tradition or set of traditions, if only the obsession with state power is rejected. In Foucault’s work, for example—or even in that of the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, there is a sense that marxism is part of our culture; perhaps an oppositional moment, but nevertheless part of the furniture. Here I stand, I can say no other—Marx for me is usually half right, and therefore half wrong. Half full or empty, the critical philosophy is not yet ready for the junkyard. For marxism speaks a truth about the way the world works, about the extraordinary power of the economic, about the magical world of commodities. Sorel put a similar kind of case at the turn of the previous century, when he argued that socialism only made sense in tension with and against the everyday reality of capitalism—but it was the tension or struggle which mattered. An end to this
tension would be an end to history, an absolute loss. The Sydney philosopher John Anderson argued a similar line in the 30s, with his proposition that labour actually needed capital because it needed a power to constitute itself against. The trouble began, imaginably, when the balance was overthrown.

The ghost behind various of these cases is that of Hegel. To some, Hegel was a crazy system-builder, postmodernism's nightmare, part of the problem rather than the solution. But as always there are several Hegels or ways to read Hegel. The young Marx read Hegel as the theorist of the relation between master and slave. Hegel's image made it possible for Marx to think class struggle in a double sense—as containing a moment which reproduced power as well as one which suggested its overthrow. In short, the dialectic of master and slave suggested a theory which could address both culture and power. Little accident then that this particular reading of Hegel became dominant in postwar French philosophy, for it made it hypothetically possible to address both how pernicious assymetrical relations of power could be, and how it was that the subordinate partner could help reproduce these relations.

To say this much is one way of confessing that I do not share Rorty's sense that we can or ought to junk marxism. Perhaps his argument makes more sense in the context of American culture, where marxism had always been viewed as an alien, if not enemy growth and where there are live and rich alternatives such as pragmatism. Rorty proposes that we now have practically nothing in the way of a 'theoretical basis' for political action, and that we may not in any case need one. This is a useful argument, because it puts theory back in its place, but it may also risk jeopardising the idea that criticism is an important practice in itself. Rorty proceeds to argue—again I think correctly—that the 20th century has been a mess partly because intellectuals have been too busy filling an invisible queue as would-be legislators or heroes. But the logic of his argument is that intellectuals should drop not only their bizarre pretensions to power, but even perhaps their claims to criticise or to influence.

The idea that we should, in our time, seek to make politics more ordinary therefore cuts both ways. In one sense politics is already so banal as to be anaesthetising. It's true that in Australia, for example, Dr Hewson has in mind something less than banal, something closer to scorched earth, and we can only hope that Australian electors in this context will go for the banal. But if we can go beyond that, what then of social democratic or liberal prospects? I agree with Rorty that there needs to be more talk of health and education. These were, indeed, original causes for socialists like Owen, Tawney, and the Fabians. Gas and water matters. But I cannot see how we can do this without talking also about ideologies and political visions, not least because Rorty is entirely correct to suggest that the whole process of reform is so incredibly fragile and contingent. The only lesson that history teaches today is that there are no lessons, at least as far as the teleological views of Right and Left are concerned. Here it is better to return, say, to Croce, with his sense that such progress as occurred was always continu-

The middle class is, as Rorty suggests, a major factor in all this, if only in the sense that recent charges in welfare policy regimes can be traced to changing preferences in middle class culture. What this serves to indicate, again, is the volatility of ordinary politics. This may well be a condition that we're stuck with; Labor in Australia will continually reintroduce the health care insurance programs which the Liberals will sell off again, and so on. Viewed from a certain cynical perspective, this kind of stop-go stuff may simply be a cosmetic means of keeping the economy going, just as crashing cars helps to keep up GNP indicators. This takes us not into banal politics so much as the banality of economics.

Richard Rorty's key cue here I take to be the idea that we should indeed entertain an ordinary politics, a politics after the heroic. None of us, arguably, are very good at doing ordinary politics, neither on a national nor transnational, regional or local basis. So this is also a positive exhortation, that we drop our eyes from the sublime, that we speak more of the prose of the world, that we avoid unnecessary abstraction in the way we think or speak. This inflection would indeed see radical language become more conversational and democratic, and this would be a good thing. What makes me twitch is the possible suggestion that there could be a singular answer to the question: what then should intellectuals do? In the Australian setting there is always a risk that intellectuals construct the legitimacy of their work by marginalising that of others. 'Leftist' intellectuals should, to my mind, be both reformists and radicals; some ought even be revolutionaries, surrealists, poets as well as policymakers. In this sense we probably still have something to learn even from the cultural and political milieu of October. If we are living after communism and after the heroic phase of socialism, then the question still remains how to create or revive an ordinary politics which can rise to the occasion.

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