Banal Fixation

Banal: trite; drearily predictable
Trite: threadbare; lacking interest or originality

Richard Rorty practices what he preaches—his comments on past politics and his recommendations for the future are banal in the extreme. This is a pity, because questions he raises (ALR 144, October) are not. Among them: is an alternative to capitalism available? Does any alternative presuppose the existence of a new kind of human being? Can we fruitfully continue to use the word socialism to describe an alternative? Is there any theoretical basis for political action?

Rorty asserts that the Cold War was a good war, and good because the West won it. That war certainly deserves reassessment. For instance, it seems that the North initiated the military strike which launched the Korean war. And the disastrous situation in Somalia today arose largely out of the contest there between the Soviet Union and the US. But the existence of other powerful world forces such as the Soviet Union and China, whatever their failings, provided a counter-weight to US efforts to dominate, creating at least some room for forces seeking self-determination. Or should we regret that Castro defeated the Bay of Pigs invasion, or that the US lost their war in Vietnam? Should we rejoice that the US-backed torturer Pinochet overthrew the socialist Allende?

Rorty states that "...Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin (were) three ruthless gangsters, distinguishable only by their facial hair". Rorty looks behind the appearance—despite his proclaimed rejection of the procedure—and finds an "essence". Yet this approach tells us little about the causes of socialist failure. In more than a dozen countries with vastly different histories and cultures, great movements of dedicated people led by originally able and independently minded leaders finished up in a similar condition. We don't need to invoke marxist theory to conclude that there was more to it than the failings and crimes of a few leaders.

Was there something in the socialist project itself which helped generate the outcome? I cannot argue a case in this short space, but in my opinion a major cause lies in the fact that Marx (and subsequent socialist theory) equated the abolition of commodity production with the abolition of capitalism.

Marx thought that when social ownership replaced private, production would be "regulated in accordance with a settled plan" in consequence of which "the practical relations of everyday life [would] offer to man [sic] none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowman and to nature". Experience indicates that this was a utopian objective, and that commodity production cannot be done away with in any foreseeable future. If the market is not there to give feedback to producers as to what extent their labour is social, an army of bureaucrats is needed to (unsuccessfully) attempt to decide on the many questions involved. This army then commands the power and has the opportunity to develop its own interests.

The word 'socialism' has drawbacks because it conveys the view that the socialisation of the means of production is the essence of any radical social change. If wholesale socialisation of property is no longer on the agenda for principled and practical political reasons, the term itself becomes questionable. However, the crucial problem remains of how to curb the social power contained in wealth, evidence of which we see daily exercised all over the world. If we cannot destroy that power at a stroke, we will have to tackle it piecemeal, and from the various directions in which it is vulnerable.

The fact that "grand theories of everything" in society (as elsewhere) have not delivered is no reason to reject theory in general. A rain forest, for example, requires a theoretical as well as a practical understanding of the role of rainfall, soil, sunlight, the species of flora and fauna involved, and so on. But this does not necessarily give rise to an overriding theory of the rain forest as a whole. Perhaps none is or will be available, in which case the need for concrete study is emphasised: no great disaster.

In my youth, almost without exception, people from right, left and centre held the view that humanity should dominate the rest of nature. Now a radical change in values in this regard is well advanced. And it will continue to develop because it is a crucial issue for the survival and well-being of present and future generations. Rorty does not even mention it.

Many on the Left came to owe prime allegiance to a particular theory, forgetting that their values provided the deeper and more lasting basis of their dedication. We don't have to believe in a new kind of human being to recognise that people do change, sometimes in radical ways.

Most leftists have changed their values on the environment and other issues. But the core of values we held remains strong in our hearts. Values are the source of our motivations; the passion with which we hold to them gives us the strength to face the many difficulties we experience today. That Rorty's
politics are banal is bad enough; worse still, they are lukewarm.

ERIC AARONS’ memoirs will be published by Penguin early next year.

This Year’s Model

It seems that everybody uses statistics from economic models when it suits them, and rejects the model when it doesn’t give the right answers. Graham Dunkley (ALR 142, August) criticises my article on greenhouse (ALR 138, April) by making the same mistake of which he accuses me. He questions the credibility of economic modelling of greenhouse measures, but then proceeds to quote from such modelling exercises where they suit his purposes. Unfortunately, the greenhouse debate is plagued by competing economic and scientific assertions.

I, too, have a healthy scepticism of economic modelling, particularly that which is based on the notion of an economy moving towards a state of balance. My point was that one model was a Keynesian one, run by the National Institute for Economic and Industry Research. Its results were particularly interesting in that they were a reversal of previous work by that group which had indicated some net economic benefits from greenhouse measures. Now, despite their best efforts to discern a positive economic outcome from greenhouse measures, they were forced to conclude that costs in terms of employment and wage levels would be high in the short to medium term.

As Graham should also be aware, one reason the Industry Commission decided that the adverse economic impacts of greenhouse measures would be relatively small (small in percentages that is, but high in terms of actual people who lose out) is that the Industry Commission model assumes that people and capital adapt smoothly and effortlessly to new taxes and industry restructuring. We all know that doesn’t happen in reality, and the more ‘sticky’ or difficult the restructuring process is, the higher the economic and social costs.

Also of interest—and paid scant attention by those who claim that greenhouse targets can be met at minimal or no cost—is that the Industry Commission’s model assumes that Australia makes up for losses in coal and energy-intensive industries by switching back to traditional agricultural industries, not by developing new manufacturing or services. As it is agriculture which has been responsible for most species loss and environmental degradation in Australia, it may be that major measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will cause as many or more environment problems than they solve.

I agree with Graham’s central conclusion: that we should seek to reduce greenhouse gases through energy efficiency and conservation measures, and the use of most appropriate technology. Where we diverge is over his fall-back position that draconian measures such as a carbon tax should be used if necessary, even at the expense of falling wages, employment and living standards.

I don’t believe the economy and people should have priority over the environment: I accept they are interdependent. My objection is rather that achievable solutions must benefit rather than penalise people if they are to be implemented by a popularly-elected government. If the Coalition fails to win government at the federal level it will only be because the people believe they will be worse off under Coalition economic policies than under Labor. It is hardly a winnable strategy for Labor to add yet another justification to its armoury of reasons why real wages and living standards must be held down.

The challenge for all of us with a commitment to both people and the environment is to devise tangible solutions that improve social equity and the quality of life while reversing environmental loss. It isn’t going to be easy.

PETER COLLEY works for the United Mineworkers division of the CFMEU.

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