

## Chapter V

### *Philosophy and politics, or about a romantic and a pragmatist*

1.

We would like to go on to the terrain which is perhaps the most difficult to catch and describe, which may lie at the origin of the most serious criticism, which, finally, requires one's own choice – in a word (to paraphrase the young Habermas from a famous review of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*), which requires thinking "with Rorty against Rorty". We will follow here the path of numerous texts, grouping and separating them depending on attempts of answers given over the years to some basic questions, and some basic tensions that are born. The question we want to discuss here pertains to the fundamental – both for Rorty and for his critics as well – issue of the relation between philosophy and politics which makes Rorty bashed from all sides, philosophical and political, radical, leftist, postmodern, feminist as well as neoconservative and rightist (whatever the above labels were to mean, what is significant is their opposition).

Let us say in the most general terms: Rorty in his philosophical and political choices is an exceptional figure (for his attitude to the philosophy/politics relation, to the theory/practice distinction etc. etc. is exceptional). *Philosophically*, he is in accordance with contemporary French postmodern philosophy, with Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard – despite numerous more or less specific differences revealing themselves over the years, as well as changing over the years – therefore he is often referred to as "postmodernist" (which, incidentally, does not mean much<sup>1</sup>) and

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<sup>1</sup> To see how misleading such classifications are, suffice it to have a look at the book by John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), in which Rorty and Lyotard together form a category of "postmodern pragmatists" – a point hardly acceptable unless one knows and writes only of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, as is the case with McGowan. I attempted to outline differences between them in my Polish book, *Rorty and Lyotard. In the Labyrinths of Postmodernity*.

the greatest and most serious philosophical challenge to him is Jürgen Habermas. On the other hand, *politically*, he agrees with Habermas' social democratic choice and disagrees with radical (especially in the USA), basically leftist account of politics on the part of promoters and followers of French postmodernists. From the same philosophical – post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian – conclusions he draws different, further conclusions in social and political matters. So, he is different from Habermas and the Frenchmen at the same time, although they differ radically between themselves; asked which differences are more important to him, Rorty would presumably answer that political ones as philosophy in his view is the domain devoid (at least "in the short run") of practical meaning in social and political matters. There are at least three possibilities: either the Frenchmen (rather than Habermas) or Habermas (rather than the Frenchmen) or finally Rorty (and neither Habermas nor the Frenchmen) are right. If Rorty were right – even if it were to mean merely "if he were the most convincing of them" – then all the others on the philosophical scene would be wrong. The only question is whether Rorty's position is acceptable – philosophically, if not politically.

Rorty expresses his views on the subject (responding to Richard Bernstein's objections) when he says that he attempted to separate in his writings what is called "postmodernism" from political radicalism, to separate polemics with "metaphysics of presence" with polemics with "bourgeois ideology", as well as criticism of Enlightenment rationalism from criticism of liberal, reformist political thought.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a word – he tried to separate philosophy from politics, as a result of which he finally got "de-politicized philosophy" and "de-theorized politics" (as Thomas McCarthy puts it). And it is precisely the radical Rortyan withdrawal of philosophy from social matters, from the public sphere and joining it – together with poetry – to the private sphere that raises in (surely, non-analytic) America the greatest controversies and that accounts for the fact that Rorty is not an American intellectual hero as admired as Dewey or, still earlier, James, despite having

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists", *Political Theory*, Nov. 1987, p. 564.

unheard-of among philosophers literary talent combined with erudition in the two philosophical traditions at the same time: the analytic philosophy and European thought. Taking away from philosophy its public relevance – and perhaps still more taking public significance off from philosophers themselves – is fiercely opposed by deconstructionists, feminists, leftist postmodernists from "Gay and Lesbian Studies", "Comparative Literature" and all those who are not quite happy, to put it mildly, with the American social and political *status quo*. Rorty's stance is well know – "we already have as much theory as we need" (and we need, in turn, "concrete utopias and concrete proposals how to reach them from the point we are at currently"<sup>3</sup>). Contemporary liberal society has institutions that help it changing for the better, as he says in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Western social and political thought perhaps has already gone through the last conceptual revolution it needs, or as he put it in a similar manner in *Consequences of Pragmatism*:

On my view, we should be more willing than we are to celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far, while regretting that it is irrelevant to most of the problems of most of the population of the planet.<sup>4</sup>

It is from such and similar statements that arise accusations of "cynicism", "ideological *apologia* for an old-fashioned version of cold-war liberalism dressed up in fashionable 'postmodern' discourse" or "apology of the *status quo*" (as in Richard Bernstein<sup>5</sup>), making radical theory "aestheticized, narcissized and bourgeoisified" and thereby "sterile" (in Nancy Fraser words<sup>6</sup>), or finally, most recently, of "terror", "assuring the continuance of the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, "Réponse à Thomas McCarthy" in *Lire Rorty*, op. cit., p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, CP, p. 210.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy" in *New Constellations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), e.g. p. 249.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technology" in *Reading Rorty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), ed. A. Malachowski, p. 314.

*status quo*" and "cultural imperialism" for which he can be viewed as an "apologist".<sup>7</sup> The accusation of elitism is put forward by all the aforementioned critics – in the case of Haber it is even "cavalier elitism". It is often noted that attacking Rorty has become the whole intellectual industry, the so-called "Rorty industry"; some criticisms do not bring about anything new to ongoing discussions, some of them open eyes of Rorty's readers, and there is also some small part of it that opens the eyes of Rorty himself (and then he says, "Come on, there must be something to it: when they describe me like that I look really bad"<sup>8</sup>). Sometimes Rorty looks so bad in the eyes of his critics – and the redescription of him is performed so skilfully and so convincingly – that he has to answer serious and embarrassing questions such as the one asked by Bernstein about who precisely constitutes the "we" to which Rorty constantly refers in his writings, such as "we liberals", "we pragmatists", "we inheritors of European civilization" etc. (Bernstein: "Sometimes it seems as if what Rorty means by 'we' are 'all those who agree with me'"<sup>9</sup>). Then he presents his political creed describing himself as a social democrat, making his answer very specific in eight points.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophy according to Rorty should stay clear from politics (like religion), it should not provide politics with "philosophical arguments", nor be "ammunition" for its guns, a weapon in its hands. Politics should be experimental rather than theoretical. As Rorty said in a famous (owing to numerous polemics) text read during the Philosophical Congress in Mexico in 1985,

We should not assume that it is our task, as professors of philosophy, to be *the avant-garde of political movements*. We should not ask, say, Davidson or Gadamer [or Rorty, for that matter? – MK] for "political implications" of their view of language, not spurn their

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<sup>7</sup> As Honi F. Haber says in *Beyond Postmodern Politics. Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 44, 55, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, "Réponse à Thomas McCarthy", p. 180.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy", p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists", pp. 565-567

work because of its lack of such implications. ... [P]hilosophy should try to *express our political hopes* rather than to *ground our political practices*. On the view I am suggesting, nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitmizes them, nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things really are.<sup>11</sup>

Such a solution to the relations between philosophy and politics requires a radical re-thinking of the public/private distinction in philosophy, requires considerations how to locate – "agree" – irony on the one hand and pragmatism on the other. This is the problem Rorty seems to be dealing with over many years and for which he seems to have found at least three solutions and which, so at least it seems to me, he tackles even today – because, from my perspective, all solutions suggested by him until now are insufficient. Let us put some Rorty's texts in three distinct groups, each of which provides a different answer to the question of philosophy and politics, that of elitism, aestheticism and solidarity; of the Bloomian, Romantic ("how to give birth to oneself" rather than to be a "footnote" to someone else, to use Whitehead's saying) theme opposed to the Deweyan, pragmatic one, of self-creation and constructing oneself on the one hand and providing "social glue" on the other, of being a "strong poet" and his social responsibilities etc. etc., for oppositions can be multiplied almost indefinitely, using a multitude of (not only Rorty's) vocabularies and metaphors.

## 2.

The first answer is given by, for instance, the following texts: "Solidarity or Objectivity", "From Logic to Language to Play", "The Contingency of Community", "The Contingency of Language" from *London Review of Books*, or "Private Irony and Liberal Hope" from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – self-creational, ironist philosophers appear there as figures useful for the society; between freedom of intellectuals and lessening of suffering and

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, "From Logic to Language to Play", *APA Proceedings*, Special Report, p. 753 – emphasis mine.

humiliation in the world of liberal democracy there is a visible link, in accordance with a more general belief that the transformation of the way we talk brings about the transformation of what we desire and what we think of ourselves and that a poet - in a general sense of the term - is a creator of new words, shaper of new languages, being "the avant-garde of the species".<sup>12</sup> What moral vocabulary one speaks, how one judges the reality, how one looks at the world - this is decided by the imagination of strong poets, basically inaccessible to other fellow-humans (for although Freud "democratized" genius in Rorty's view, and although everyone can be a self-creating individual, possess creative unconsciousness and shape himself - as there is no single "human nature", common to all people, nevertheless not everyone can become a strong poet who imposes his vocabulary on others rather than uses the vocabulary he inherited). Thus the first solution to the dilemma: private autonomy or pragmatic utility of the philosopher consists in showing public utility of the philosopher-intellectual-self-creator-ironist. If the world is safe for the poet, it is also safe for all others, one could say.

The second answer to the philosophy/politics relations is suggested, for instance, by the following Rorty's texts: "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism", "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope" (from *Consequences of Pragmatism*), "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity", "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault" (from *Philosophical Papers*), a chapter on "Self-creation and Affiliation" from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* or "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein". They show dangers inherent to intellectuals' irony - in their power of redescribing everything and everyone. And let us remind: "Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription", and most people do not want to be redescribed because, as Rorty admits, "redescription often humiliates".<sup>13</sup> Two motives, a "Romantic" and a "pragmatic" one, as Nancy Fraser

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Language", *London Review of Books*, 17 April, 1986, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 90.

calls them in her excellent text, already referred to here<sup>14</sup>, in that second account are not to be mixed with each other; pragmatism is democratic and society-oriented, Romanticism is egotistic and potentially cruel, they are opposed to each other and require a choice: either "private irony" or "public decency" (to refer to the title of McCarthy's text).

Finally, the third answer comes from a chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* about "self-creation and affiliation", and, more generally, from the whole book, in which a separation between the private and the public sphere, as well as viewing them as incommensurable, is suggested ("equally valid, yet forever incommensurable", as Rorty says). The separation goes along the whole culture – separating e.g. poetry and philosophy from the novel and politics – to one's final vocabulary in which there are two sectors. The domain of the ironist is the private, he is not entitled to enter politics (which was Heidegger's fault) because politics, together with social problems, instrumental reason etc. belong to the public sphere. Such a philosopher – whose philosophy is "publicly useless" – cannot be the aforementioned in the first answer "avant-garde of the species", becoming rather an "aesthete" (which from a different side I am trying to show in discussions from the introduction and from the chapter on "Rorty's self-creation").

All three answers appear more or less at the same time, they do not follow one another as subsequent solutions to a stubborn problem. With different intensity they are – all of them – in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This gives birth to a noticeable tension between three chapters which in a slightly different versions appeared first in *London Review of Books* and chapters written later, also between chapters from the parts on "contingency" and on "irony" – and chapters of the third part of the book, devoted to Nabokov and Orwell. The tensions in question seem to result not so much from inconsistency of the author, from an intentional providing several possible perspectives, several mutually opposing answers, but perhaps from Rorty's inability, or still more his unwillingness, to give one convincing answer to some

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?...", pp. 303, 304.

fundamental questions, including the one about philosophy and politics.

None of the three answers singled out here by us, none of solutions given (of which we will write in more detail in a moment), is convincing enough, either argumentatively, or rhetorically. The one that is most important of them and determines Rorty's specific position in today's metaphilosophical discussions – the solution in the form of "the private/public split" – rather cannot be maintained which I am suggesting throughout the book, especially while discussing Rorty's Derrida. I am still unable to imagine a "liberal ironist" who has separate domains of the liberal and of the ironist at his disposal which "makes it possible for a single person to be both", as the closing sentence of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* puts it. I also cannot see how Rorty himself might be the "liberal ironist" – if I were to describe him with these two terms, I would say that he is rather a liberal who due to his attachment to freedom sometimes takes the liberty to be an ironist, but who, first of all, praises irony in other philosophers (such as Nietzsche, Derrida, to a much smaller degree Foucault) which is often merely one side of them. The separation between the private and the public – this "fixed, rigid, ahistorical dichotomy", as Richard Bernstein writes of it<sup>15</sup> – cannot be maintained, for, it was itself born out of public and political views, beliefs of a liberal who is desperately seeking the possibility of building the world in which the point of reference would be freedom (rather than truth, but also rather than rationality or objectivity), the possibility of

leaving people alone so that they could dream, think and live as they wish, as long as they do not make harm to others.<sup>16</sup>

We shall return to this point but let us say by way of introduction that Rorty's passion of a moralist makes the private/public split itself a public construction, resulting from deep political beliefs, that of the "priority of democracy to philosophy" in the foreground, that

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia", p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, "Réponse à Thomas McCarthy", p. 181.



is the priority of a political choice over a "merely philosophical" one (as Rorty calls his differences with Habermas in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*<sup>17</sup>).

Let us sum up before passing on to details necessary in this context: in the first version, or first answer, irony and liberalism are equally essential for the society, irony *via* intellectuals just lends liberalism its support (thus philosophy – supports politics); in the second version, irony and liberalism are opposed, Rorty shows the "dark side" of irony; finally, in the third version, the two are neither essential for the society, nor opposed in their interests but rather kept far from each other owing to the private/public split suggested by Rorty. His difficulties in answering the question – or rather unwillingness to give a priority of one answer to any other – about relations between philosophy and politics may derive from the acceptance of the Romantic vision of the philosopher as a genius, self-creating, autonomous, idiosyncratic, unique artist as well as the view of the philosopher as a pragmatic visionary who thinks for the needs of the society, inventing new utopias and roads that lead to them from the current starting point. As Rorty does not seem to be willing to abandon any of the two – oppositional, as they seem – accounts of the philosopher, he is trying to "agree" them with each other, looking for possible solutions. The three answers result from the impossibility of convincing himself and others that it is possible. "Trotsky" and the "wild orchids" cannot be agreed (to use Rorty's title, autobiographical metaphors) but I am not sure whether the solution lies in a radical separation of the private from the public sphere, of philosophy from politics, whether the point is to reduce philosophy to the role of a useless commentary to texts from tradition and to cut philosophy – together with poetry – from the real world. I do not know whether this is desirable, I also do not know whether this is possible...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty, *CIS*, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Norris, Nancy Fraser, Richard Bernstein, Thomas McCarthy, Jürgen Habermas – *do know* that this is neither desirable nor possible. My answer is not so unambiguous, perhaps owing to the image of the philosopher and the intellectual changing right before my eyes. My short, so far, philosophical road is located only in a new atmosphere of postmodernity; so I am personally neither linked (or attached) to the modern place and modern role of the

## 3.

Let us pass to details of the three answers. The first one – ironists are publicly useful for only they produce new metaphors, new tools to cope with the reality, to change the existing world to be better and less cruel. Let us discuss a passage from the text "The Contingency of Community" (for in the chapter from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* it has been slightly modified). The ideal citizen of the ideal state would be someone who considers the strong poet to be the ideal human being. Such a citizen would think of strong poets as founders and defenders of his society. He himself can be a poet or not, can find his own metaphors for his own fantasies or not. But he would definitely be the one who thinks it obvious that it is the revolutionary artist and the revolutionary scientist – Rorty goes on to argue – rather than the academic artist and the normal scientist who embody virtues that are supposed to support his society.<sup>19</sup> Heroes of Rorty's liberal society, "the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary"<sup>20</sup>, do not have to be alienated from the society, for it is just them who are

protesting in the name of society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image.<sup>21</sup>

The aim of ironists is self-creation, private perfection, but the benefits of their struggles for their own redescriptions go for the

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philosopher (as seen most clearly in the French tradition until Sartre, or even Foucault). Therefore my final view belongs to the future, for I do not want my answer to derive from experiences of others rather than my own beliefs. But one thing for me is certain – the choice what philosophy is and who the philosopher is is an individual choice, it is a self-description to which the philosopher attempts to convince others. Some philosophers succeed in this, some do not. Some are lucky to be able to describe others, some are less lucky to be merely described by others. This is what I was taught by the heroic dimension of neopragmatism.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Community", *London Review of Books*, 24 July, 1986, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

liberal society as a whole. Rorty says that there are "fairly tight connections between the freedom of the intellectuals on the one hand, and the diminution of cruelty on the other".<sup>22</sup> Freedom of the intellectuals is negative freedom as seen by Isaiah Berlin.<sup>23</sup> If we "leave" ironist intellectuals "alone", then their imagination may become an important social tool, especially that bit of imagination that provides new descriptions. Let us remember about Rorty's (potentially) extremely dangerous belief that "anything can be made to look good or bad, interesting or boring, by being recontextualized, redescribed"<sup>24</sup> (which, incidentally, leads Bernstein to the conclusion that O'Brien from Orwell's *1984* is Rorty's true pupil who has diabolically mastered the lesson of contingency of all vocabularies; in both accounts, Rorty's from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and O'Brien's from an imagined *Theory and Practice of Oligarchic Collectivism*, man is an infinitely malleable being<sup>25</sup>). The producer of these recontextualizations and descriptions is precisely the philosopher, intellectual, the one who is a "strong poet" from among them - changing the way we talk, he changes what we are and what we think, thereby becoming "the avant-garde of the species".<sup>26</sup> As Rorty says,

There are many objections to what I have been saying, but the one which I find most disturbing says that *I am treating democratic societies as existing for the sake of the intellectuals*. I seem to be describing institutions which we constructed in order to prevent cruelty and obtain justice as if they had been constructed to safeguard the freedom of the leisured elite.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Community", p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty in his "Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy" says the following: "The ideal liberal community will be one in which respect for such particularity and idiosyncrasy is widespread, one in which the only sort of human liberty which is hoped for is Isaiah Berlin's 'negative liberty' being left alone", a typescript, pp. 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia", pp. 289-291.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of the Community", p. 14 – emphasis mine.

But reading Rorty's formulations both from earlier versions of three chapters from *London Review of Books* and their final versions from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* as well, it is hard to resist getting the impression that Rorty is an elitist. Elitism hovers like a specter over the aforementioned bits of his work. Rorty says that he is perplexed between the statement that poets' well-being is in the interest of non-poets (that is non-intellectuals, the majority of the society) and the awareness that perhaps he thinks so because it is much easier for us to identify with "poets" than with "peasants".<sup>28</sup> Honi Fern Haber, already referred to (as well as used) here cannot stand such Rorty's light-minded statements and comments angrily on them:

Is the poet really able to get outside of her own situation to understand that of another as she would have herself understood? We cannot be sanguine about the suggestion that there is no voice of the oppressed or about the consequence that the leisured elite will speak for them. ... *This is simply wishful speaking on the part of one who is already satisfied with his position as a beneficiary of rich North American democracies. But what if one is not so satisfied?*<sup>29</sup>

Thus Rorty, separating "intellectuals" from mere "human beings", promoting a Romantic vision of an artist, would be in Haber's view playing a political role: that of consolidating the *status quo*. This is quite a wide-spread view among Rorty's critics – an *apologia* for American, capitalist, liberal-democratic and male reality is perhaps the political objection most often made by leftist philosophers and social theorist (still more understandable owing to the fact that Rorty almost obsessively speaks about "us relatively leisured intellectuals, inhabiting a stable and prosperous part of the world"<sup>30</sup> or refers to himself as a "white male inhabitant

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Honi F. Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics. Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault*, p. 55 – emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 359.

of the richest part of the globe"<sup>31</sup> in almost all of his books). The conclusion of the chapter on the "contingency of community" puts forward an alliance with Romantic poets and aestheticization of the society (keeping it safe for the poets in the hope that "the poets may eventually make it safe for everybody else"), according to Dewey's view that the main tool for action for the sake of the good – is imagination.

This is as far as Rorty's first answer is concerned. Let us pass on to the second within which he shows dangers inherent to the choice of ironists as cultural heroes of his utopia and as moral advisors of the society – by means of separating a Romantic and a pragmatic theme and abandoning the belief in (direct) utility of ironism and ironists. Pragmatism is democratic and public, Romanticism, as we already wrote, is egotistic and potentially cruel, ironism is antithetical to liberal politics and solidarity.

In the oldest text I managed to locate in this context ("Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" from 1980), Rorty remembers moral objections made to textualism, that is, in his account of that time, to Foucault, Derrida, Bloom and the deconstructionist school from Yale. He notes that these are objections that pertain also, at the same time, to the pragmatic belief that there are only changing vocabularies (as "temporary historical resting places") – and thus that the very vocabulary of the liberal democracy cannot be grounded in anything non-historical and non-contingent.<sup>32</sup> Let us pay close attention to Rorty's sentences, taking his doubts from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* ten years backwards:

the stimulus to the intellectual's private moral imagination provided by his strong misreadings, by his

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Rorty in A.N. Balslev, *Cultural Otherness. Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1991), p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> In another text from *Consequence of Pragmatism*, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism", Rorty says the following: "The pragmatists tell us that the conversation which it is our moral duty to continue is *merely* our project, the European intellectual's form of life. It has no metaphysical nor epistemological guarantee of success", p. 172.

search for sacred wisdom, is *purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow-humans*.<sup>33</sup>

Rorty at that time did not have answers to such doubts. Pragmatism and textualism – in this account – were "morally dangerous"<sup>34</sup>. The eighties in Rorty's thought can also be viewed as repeated attempts to answer the question how to combine self-realization, private fulfilment – with public morality, a concern for justice, as the last sentence of the text referred to says. It seems to me that a gradual "privatization" of philosophy, relegation of it to the private sphere (and opposing it, for instance, to the novel as a vehicle of liberal progress) in the eighties, taking away its significance and aspirations – which I attempted to show in my "paraevolution" of Rorty's philosophy on a Rortyan conference in Torun<sup>35</sup> – is Rorty's escape from making a radical, and sometimes tragic, choice. "Separation from one's fellow-humans", "isolation from common, human concerns" is the "price" to be paid for the emergence of the ironist literary culture with which it is hard, if at all possible, for Rorty as a moralist to agree. How to unite "private fulfilment" and a "concern for justice" – the three answers to the question about relations between philosophy and politics outlined here are intended to account for the significance of the question and its stubborn recurrence in various forms over the years in Rorty's writing.

In another text that I associate with the second answer ("Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity"), Rorty gives a direct answer to the question about the intellectual's utility: he should not be seen as serving social needs when he fulfils his self-creational needs ("a need for the ineffable, the sublime, a need to go beyond the limits, a need to use words which are not part of anybody's language-game, any social institution"<sup>36</sup>). It is no use pretending that one is the avant-garde of the humankind and serves the

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Rorty, CP, p. 158 – emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 159, n. 15.

<sup>35</sup> See Marek Kwiek, "On Some Rorty's Evolution", in English, with R. Rorty's "Response to Marek Kwiek", *Ruch filozoficzny* 50, no. 2/1993, pp. 195-200.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity", PP 2, p. 176.

wretched of the earth, Rorty tells Lyotard and other French postmodern thinkers.

The ironist awareness of the "power of redescription" is a strong weapon which can humiliate, the intellectual can thus be cruel, cold (writing "from a point of view light-years away from the problems of contemporary society", in Rorty's memorable and unjust description of Michel Foucault), and harmful. Potentially the most dangerous can be an ironist theory – and ironist theorists, like Nietzsche and Heidegger who treat themselves as examples to be followed by other people (as well as transpose ironism to politics). The private self of a self-creating philosopher cannot serve as a model for others for it is contingent and restricted to just one person. When a Romantic intellectual begins to think that other people have a moral duty to achieve the same autonomy as he himself has achieved, then his politics tends to become antiliberal, then he begins to think about "political and social changes which will help them do so. Then he may begin to think that he has a moral duty to bring about these changes, *whether his fellow citizens want them or not*".<sup>37</sup> And then he may ally with the power that brings about desirable changes – be it with the Nazi movement (as Heidegger who kept believing that he can become *the* philosopher of new, National-Socialist Germany, the creator of a new, German university etc. etc.). Europe, Spirit, Being (history, Western man, metaphysics) – thinking in terms of "a larger-than-self hero"<sup>38</sup>, a faith in a "big secret"<sup>39</sup>, make them potentially dangerous theoreticians of ironism rather than mere ironists, like Marcel Proust. Rorty draws a penetrating picture of traps waiting for the intellectual on the dark side of irony.

So it would seem that there should be a choice between the society of eccentrics, ironists, aesthetes and elitists – and a liberal society. The either/or dichotomy seems to require a choice, it can be seen as unavoidable, were it not for the third and the last Rorty's answer to the question about the knot of philosophy and politics,

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Rorty, "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault", PP 2, p. 194 – emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 99.

the answer sketched mainly in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: the idea of the private/public split, getting rid of the opposition of the two spheres by relegating them to radically separate spheres, remaining according to Rorty with no relation to each other.

In the third account traced here, the private sphere becomes the domain of ironist philosophy, the public sphere – the domain of politics. Philosophy has become "more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task".<sup>40</sup> The third answer does not require of Rorty a choice between "sublimity" and "decency", "private irony" and "liberal hope", "private autonomy" and "moral identity", to refer once again to several key oppositions from different texts. Philosophy gets devoid of any influence on social reality, ironist theory has only one use – to shape the (self)-image of men of letters, suggesting new descriptions which, nevertheless, stay clear of politics, left for social and political engineers. So the ironist philosopher does not change the reality in Rorty's view – he can only project visions of the future. As Rorty said in his reply to Richard Bernstein, the difference between them concerns the utility of theory, including philosophy as part of it, in thinking about today's political situation – as opposed to its usefulness in inventing liberal utopias. The main use of philosophy is "inventing our utopian visions".<sup>41</sup>

The French help us in deciding "what to do with our loneliness", they are useful only for private purposes, although obviously private (ironist) and public philosophers produce parallel philosophical discourses between which we do not have to choose; they have different conceptions of philosophy and philosopher which we do not have to juxtapose and favor (or reject – generally speaking, according to Rorty, we should give them equal weight and – in accordance with the view of philosophy as a tool – "use them for different purposes".<sup>42</sup>) This is as far as the past is concerned, that is, the history of philosophy in which there are Marx and Kierkegaard, or Dewey and Nietzsche; today, the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 94.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists", p. 369.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Rorty, CIS, p. xiv.



best, the least dangerous, idea is not to take philosophy too seriously, which I am discussing separately.

Nancy Fraser describes Rorty's position in one word – "aestheticism". The strong poet is no longer an (also social) revolutionary endowed with unbound imagination, no longer is he the "avant-garde of the species" mentioned in the "Contingency of Language" – in her words, "strictly speaking, indeed, the intellectual will have no social role or political function".<sup>43</sup> Nobody can expect much from him – nobody can judge him on the basis of the utility of his theories. The traditional connection between theory and practice is broken, the result of a radical split between the private and the public being no less radical separation between theory and practice, philosophy and politics. Theory gets devoid of its political implications, politics is no longer supported by or based on theory but rather on "experimenting" (to which Rorty allude in Mexico). Thomas McCarthy comments:

Critical thought becomes aestheticized and privatized, deprived of any political or social implications. There can be no politically relevant critical theory and hence no theoretically-supported critical practice.<sup>44</sup>

And he is right with one significant reservation: he does not take into account the fact that Rorty's philosophy is *future-oriented* and not present-oriented, it focuses on the "hope" (one of key words in his writings) rather than on the change of current state of affairs (for, as Rorty often asks, "what can we do, we philosophy professors?"). According to him, there is not any end of philosophy, or end of theory; it is rather so that they gradually lose their attractive power, they become ineffective in comparison with journalistic reports, ethnography, films or – the novel (which is probably only Rorty's great, mythical dream). Rorty accepts that cultural transformation as one of the first thinkers in our philosophical culture, for others it is too hard to stand (and therefore he often stresses the "peripheral" character of

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<sup>43</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?...", p. 312.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas McCarthy, "Ironie privée et décence publique", p. 94.

philosophy as one of numerous humanistic disciplines). He also says that philosophy professors do not have any special access to weapons for fights with injustice or racism, the future of the world will not depend on them, like the dangers for future of "abnormal discourse" do not come from science or naturalistic philosophy but rather from "scarcity of food and from the secret police", as he says in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.<sup>45</sup>

The third answer to the question about relations between philosophy and politics does not seem more satisfactory than the previous two – for Rorty does not seem to be able to maintain it from some neutral point; the reference always is liberal democracy and public beliefs about the need of separation between the private sphere from the public one in order to avoid the dangers of ironism. Rorty's vocabulary within it is a political, public one, the vocabulary of liberalism which requires that radical theory should be relegated to the private sphere, leaving one vocabulary as obligatory, the vocabulary of liberal democracy loved by Rorty. Irony gives up here in front of liberalism, but for Rorty there is no other alternative. It is difficult to keep politics far from privacy for, as Foucault and Barthes, for instance, has shown, "politics is everywhere", "everything is political" – our culture, our language, our prisons, fashions, everyday choices, accounts of sexuality, norms and pathologies... The Rortyan version of relations between philosophy and politics is strongly criticized for it goes against the mainstream thinking about traditional obligations ascribed to philosophy (and to intellectuals by e.g. Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, Julien Benda in *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*, Jean-Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* or, recently, Edward Said in *Representations of the Intellectual*). On the other hand, though, even with a very charitable attitude towards the solution discussed here, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that Rorty's arguments are not fully convincing (that his redescription is not powerful enough). We fully agree with Rorty's conclusions about philosophy and politics, but we cannot accept his justification as strong enough. Although we look very sympathetically to Rorty's thinking about philosophy and

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 389.

philosopher in relations with politics, we do not find the solution in the form of the split between the public and the private really good. The searches are going on, we do hope that there will appear a more convincing rhetoric that in accordance with the spirit of postmodernity will provide convincing justification of the fact that politics and philosophy cannot be mixed.

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