

DEFENDING THE FREE WORLD

TERRY EAGLETON

Towards the end of his essay entitled 'Solidarity', Richard **Rorty**, having just argued that those who helped Jews in the last world war probably did so less because they were fellow human beings than because they belonged to the same city, profession or other social grouping as themselves, asks us to consider why contemporary American liberals should help miserable young American blacks. 'Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings? We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow *Americans* – to insist that it is outrageous that an *American* should live without hope.'

Rorty's case here seems to me unworkably global. There are, after all, rather a lot of Americans, of various shapes and sizes, and there is surely something rebarbatively abstract about basing one's **compassion** on such grandiosely general grounds. It is almost as though 'Americanness' operates here as some sort of meta-discourse or metaphysical essence, conflating into some unitary phenomenon the vast variety of creeds, life-styles, **skin-colours** and so on which go to compose the United States. Better, surely, to found one's ethics on a *genuine* localism, such as, for example, the city block. This is still perhaps a little on the homogenising side, since your average city block does of course contain a fair sprinkling of different sorts of people; but it is surely a more manageable basis for justice and compassion than an abstraction like 'America'. One could demonstrate compassion towards those in the next apartment, for example, while withholding it from those a mile down the street. Personally, I only ever manifest compassion to fellow graduates of the University of Cambridge. It's true that such credentials aren't always easy to establish; indeed I have occasionally tossed a coin towards some tramp whom I thought I dimly recognised as a member of the class of '64, only to retrieve it again furtively when I recognised my mistake. But it suffices, whatever the practical difficulties, as a rule of thumb, and the implications of any alternative moral strategy are fairly dire. Once one begins extending one's **compassionate** reach to graduates of Oxford too, there seems no reason not to go on to London, **Warwick** and even Wolverhampton Polytechnic, and before one knows it one is on the slippery slope to Habermas, universalism, foundationalism and the rest.

Incidentally, I haven't as yet withdrawn from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, merely adjusted my reasons for membership. I now object to nuclear war not because it would blow up some metaphysical abstraction called the human race but because it would introduce a certain unpleasantness into the lives of my Oxford neighbours. The benefit of this adjustment is that my commitment as an anti-nuclear campaigner is no longer the anaemic, aridly intellectualist affair it was when I used to think in terms of theoretically disreputable universals like 'humanity', but lived sensuously on the pulses, brought home to me as richly concrete experience. If Oxford survives a nuclear catastrophe, I really couldn't give a damn about the University of Virginia. I have, however, resigned my membership of the Christian church, as there is clearly something theoretically dubious about the Good Samaritan.

Rorty is quite correct to believe that what is at stake in these issues is something called America, though not at all in the sense he thinks. We professional America-watchers, perched in our European fastness, are accustomed to witnessing the inhabitants of the Land of the Free engaging from time to time in spasms of smug self-congratulation. It is just that we were a little slow to appreciate, being at something of a distance, that the name of such narcissism had shifted so rapidly from Reaganism to neo-pragmatism. Another version of the case can be found in Barbara Hernstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value*, which argues at one point that 'it is perhaps just as well for "our society" that its norms are a "melange", that they constantly multiply, collide, and transform each other, that conflicts of judgement are negotiated ad **hoc**, and that normative authority itself is multiple and recurrently changes hands, variously strengthening and becoming **diffuse**'.² I don't quite know what those scare-quotes are doing nervously shielding the phrase 'our society', but Hernstein Smith's formulation inspires the dreadful suspicion, surely unworthy, that she actually takes herself here to be giving a thumbnail sketch of a country known as the United States. I can't believe that this is true, but the suspicion, for all one's charitable disposition, stubbornly lingers. It would be intriguing to know what Allende would have made of that multiple, recurrently changing authority, or whether the Nicaraguans have got round to savouring the pluralist, humbly ad **hoc** nature of US political judgements. That probably doesn't matter, since if Rorty is anything to go by they can be more or less written off anyway. One doesn't get too strong a sense that **Rorty's** 'American' stretches to Peruvian peasants or El Salvador guerrilla fighters. In any case, it is relieving to know that, let's say, the CIA manifests a rich melange of ceaselessly variable norms, even if it's a little hard to appreciate when they have just been busy suborning your democratically elected government.

Rorty and Hernstein Smith, along with most other liberal or radical American critics, would appear united in their faith that difference, conflict, plurality, open-endedness and heterogeneity are 'absolute', unquestionable

goods in themselves. (I place the term 'absolute' in charitable scare-quotes, since these critics seem to have one or two problems with it). It is a position I have long shared myself. It has always struck me as unduly impoverishing of British social life, for example, that we can only muster a mere two or three fascist parties. Instead of a ceaselessly varied, robustly proliferating, infinitely differentiated fascistic scene, with energising conflicts and ad hoc negotiations between its various currents, we are stuck with the dreary monism of the National Front and the British Movement. The postmodernist imperative to multiply small narratives at all costs has certainly not caught on among our local Nazis, who seem not to have read their Lyotard. If they really took literally what many American pragmatists, postmodernists and deconstructionists have been insisting on so 'absolutely' – that difference and plurality are good in themselves regardless of their political substance – then they would surely begin to spawn into eighty-three or so different movements rather than a mere boring two or three. The political left would then be kept energetically engaged in chasing them around the country, identifying their latest shifting positions in order to combat them, spreading its forces thin as fascists popped up in the most unpredictable places.

A similar lack of internal conflictiveness and multiplicity characterises such organisations as the African National Congress. Instead of learning from American postmodernists that unity is *ipso facto* a negative phenomenon – 'closure', 'essentialism', 'terroristic totalisation' and so on – they obtusely continue to strive to achieve the maximum degree of agreement and solidarity among the people of the townships in order to bring the apartheid regime to its knees. Bishop Tutu can't possibly have read his Smith, Rorty, **Hartman**, **Hillis Miller**, Felmann, Weber, or indeed hardly any left-leaning American critic at all. He certainly cannot have been reading most American feminist critics. There is now, among all such critics, an impressive degree of consensus that consensus is inherently oppressive.

Much the same goes for the current political struggles in Northern Ireland. The trouble with Sinn Fein is its disastrous abandonment of indeterminacy, even if it has the cheek to dub itself 'Provisional'. It actually seems to believe that it is an unquestionably bad thing that British soldiers kill indiscriminately on the streets of West Belfast; that it is 'true' (things go from bad to worse) that no lasting solution to the Irish question can be achieved without the withdrawal of these troops; and that in this process the 'closure' of unified, determinate political goals on its own part may prove productive. Whether or not Sinn Fein ever achieves those goals, it can certainly kiss goodby to contributing to *Diacritics*. Far better, surely, to breed a republican movement with stimulating internal divisions, so that they could wrangle all day among themselves while men of the second paratroop regiment smashed up their furniture while pretending to hunt for arms. Such a transformed republicanism would find itself exhilaratedly unsure of exactly what it was doing when it found itself up against British guns; and though this

exhilaration would have only a brief time-span, it would surely provide a more theoretically sophisticated way to die for a number of Irishmen and women currently trapped in the metaphysical delusion that the foreign occupation of their soil is unequivocally to be denounced.

An American feminist critic wrote recently about the need to multiply different idioms – idioms of gender, of race, and – so she added – of class. It is indeed another **impoverishment** of British society, whatever may be true of the United States, that we have far too few social classes, even if there are a few monistic metaphysicians around the place who suspect that we might have one or two too many. What we should strive to ~~do~~ is to generate as many social classes as possible, perhaps two or three new bourgeoisies and a fresh clutch of aristocracies. It all adds to the rich variety of social life. 'The more classes, the merer' might then act as an appropriate slogan for radical pluralism. There is surely still room towards the bottom end of the social scale for a range of new sub-classes: there is already a kind of **lumpen** intelligentsia in Britain, given the shortage of academic jobs, and any pluralist sufficiently committed to the absolute value of heterogeneity would no doubt be able to dream up a few more ways of **skilfully** variegating our current somewhat restricted categories of oppression.

Social class tends nowadays to crop up as one item in the celebrated triptych of 'class, race and gender', a formula which has rapidly assumed for the left the kind of authority which the Holy Trinity exerts for the right. The logic of this triple linkage is surely obvious. Racism is a bad thing, and so is sexism, and so therefore is something called 'classism'. (I haven't encountered this feeble concept anywhere outside North America; its European meaning – roughly, 'class-reductionism' – is quite different). Marxists, however, churlishly refuse to subscribe to the fashionable orthodoxy that social class is a Bad Thing. Indeed they find it difficult to imagine how anyone regarding themselves as even vaguely politically radical could bring themselves to credit such an absurdity. For Marxism, the working class is an excellent thing, since without it we would never be able to expropriate the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie may be by and large a bad thing today, but it was an exceedingly good thing in its heyday, not least when it courageously resisted the brutalities of feudal absolutism and bequeathed to us a precious liberal tradition. We might even go the whole hog and hand one or two accolades to that fine class of feudal exploiters who did so much to end the slave mode of production. The pluralists and postmodernists who speak up for heterogeneous styles of thought are on the whole unaccustomed to such nuanced historical distinctions, which once upon a time went under the name of the dialectic. It is not that one is requesting such theorists to agree with these propositions; one is merely asking them to recognise that such, in effect, is what Marxism has traditionally held, and that this is a rather different theory from the abstract moralism which holds that class, like salt and smoking, is not very nice. Marxists have never been quite arrogant

enough to believe that the whole of the Enlightenment was up a gum tree, and that suddenly, perhaps around 1972, we all began to read Saussure and get our act together. The crass triumphalism of this case, which like any other caricature has more than its kernel of truth, makes Georg Lukács look like Arthur Schopenhauer. It has been Marxism, not liberal pluralism, which has regularly accorded admiration and respect to its historical antagonists.

Viewed in this light, then, the 'class, race and gender' formula comes near to involving what the philosophers might call a category mistake. But this is true in other senses too. On the surface, the triplet appears convincing enough: some people are oppressed because of their race, some on account of their gender, and some in accordance with their class. But this is of course grossly misleading. For it is not that some individuals manifest certain characteristics known as 'class', which then result in their oppression; on the contrary, to be a member of a social class just *is* to be oppressed, or to be an oppressor. Class is in this sense a wholly social category, as being black or female is not. To be black or female is a matter of Nature as well as culture. This, of course, is hardly the most acceptable pronouncement to the ears of that rampant left culturalism which has held sway over recent years – a culturalism which lays rhetorical claim to the title of 'materialist' and then proceeds to suppress the most obviously materialist bits of human beings, their biological make-up. Somewhere around the early 1970s, it was as though all attention to biology became 'biologistic' overnight, just as all concern with history became 'historicist' and all preoccupation with the empirical 'empiricist'. The social oppression of women is a matter of gender, which is entirely a social construct; but women are oppressed *as* women, which involves the kind of body one biologically has. Being a proletarian, by contrast, is not a question of biology, though it is true that we working-class North-of-Englanders tend to be small, dark and stunted. There will be no proletarians in an emancipated society, though there will certainly be women and Chinese. There can be liberated women, in the sense of people who are at once women and liberated, but there cannot be liberated serfs or workers in the sense of individuals who are at once both. Moreover, the fact that one is black or female is not because there are males or whites around, as the fact that one is proletarian is entirely because there is a bourgeoisie. The social constitution of categories like black and female is, like social class, a wholly relational affair; but nobody is black because someone else is white, in the sense that some people are only landless labourers because there are gentlemen farmers around the place. This distinction may not be of great political importance, but sloppy thinking about such crucial issues is always perilous.

In any case, Marxism is not definitively to do with social class at all. As Marx himself once commented, the distinctiveness of his and Engels's discovery was not the existence of a phenomenon known as social class, which had been as salient as Mont Blanc for quite a long time. It was, Marx claimed, the much more challenging and specific thesis that the genesis, evolution and demise of

social classes is closely bound up with the development of historical modes of production. It is this which demarcates Marxism from those forms of so-called 'classism' which simply attend to the more visible effects of class oppression in the present. Once again, pragmatists and postmodernists may not agree with this hypothesis, but they have a responsibility to attend a little more closely to what exactly it is that Marxists have been arguing for the last century or so. Marxism is not just some high-sounding theoretical way of finding it somewhat distasteful or 'privileged' that some people belong to one social class and some to another, as it might be thought objectionable that some people get to attend cocktail parties while others have to make do with a **can** of beer from the ice-box. Marxism is a theory of the role played by the struggle between social classes in a much wider process of historical change, or it is nothing. And on this theory, social class cannot be said to be unequivocally a bad thing, as opposed to racism and sexism, about which there was never a good word to say.

There is another possible political error encouraged by the class, race and gender triplet. What these social groupings have in common is of course the fact that they are variously oppressed, denied their full humanity; but Marxism's interest in the working class is not at all in the first place to do with the fact that they are denied their full humanity. The proletariat is not a potential agent of revolutionary change because it suffers a good deal. As far as suffering goes, there are many better candidates for revolutionary agency than the working class: vagrants, perhaps, or impoverished students or prisoners or senior citizens. Many of these individuals suffer more than your average worker who drives a Renault and holidays annually in Greece. I do not wish to be misunderstood here: some of my best friends are vagrants, impoverished students, prisoners and senior citizens, and I have no personal grudge whatsoever against any of these groupings. But none of them is even potentially an agent of socialist transformation, as the working class is. Unlike the latter, these groups are not so objectively located within the capitalist mode of production, trained, organised and unified by that very system, as to be able to take it over. It is not Marxism which selects the proletariat as a potential revolutionary instrument, but capitalism, which as Marx wryly commented gives birth to its own gravedigger. Radical politics is not just a matter of looking around the place, determining who is most needy or desperate, and backing them against the system. Historical materialists can leave such a strategy to guilt-stricken middle-class liberals.

Marxists have always held to a belief in the unity of theory **and** practice, sometimes rather piously so. Some years ago I used to sell political newspapers with a comrade who once told me, in solemnly self-righteous terms, that he 'derived his theory from his practice'. No doubt this meant that he had arrived at his judgement that Luxemburg's theory of imperialism had the edge over Hilferding's by selling newspapers outside the Oxford branch of Woolworth. Piety apart, however, it is a traditional tenet of Marxism

that radical theory, bereft of any practical political context, will tend to fray at the edges and sag in the middle. This seems to me exactly what is now happening in some areas of radical American thought, given the apparently intractable practical problems which the political opposition in that society faces. When one stumbles across a formulation as fatuous as **Rorty's** comments on Americanism, one can be reasonably sure that there is more at stake here than a simple lapse of individual sensitivity. 'Dig **here**', such comments signal, and you are likely to find a deeper historical deadlock and disorientation. The reverence lavished on the work of **Michel** Foucault by the new historicism is a similar case in point. Viewed from eight thousand miles off, that enthusiasm for Foucault has a good deal to do with a peculiarly American left defeatism, guilt-stricken relativism and ignorance of socialism – a syndrome which is understandable in Berkeley but, as I write, unintelligible in Beijing. The unconscious ethnocentrism of much of the US appropriation of such theory is very striking, at least to an outsider. What seems on the surface like a glamorous theory of the Renaissance keeps **turning** out to be about the dilemmas of ageing **1960s** radicals in the epoch of Danforth Quayle. I write this article while the Chinese students and workers are still massing outside the Great Hall of the People; and I find it rather hard to understand why the neo-Stalinist bureaucrats have not, so far anyway, moved among the people distributing copies of **Derrida**, Foucault and Ernesto Laclau. For the Chinese students and workers to learn that their actions are aimed at a 'social totality' which is, theoretically speaking, non-existent would surely disperse them more rapidly than water cannons or bullets.

Given the fact that there is at present little thriving socialist culture in the United States, it seems at times to pass there as quite unexceptionable that some (if by no means all) theorists engaged with particular emancipatory struggles – ethnic or gender-based, let us say – appear as ignorant of or insouciant about socialism as Mr Quayle himself. Another disabling effect of this relative paucity of socialist theory and practice is that a good many American theorists who don't much like Marxism do not need, or are perhaps unable, to confront it head-on. It only takes a faint whiff of leftist paranoia to see much current American postmodernist and post-structuralist theory as a splendid strategy for trying to undermine Marxism without actually suffering the embarrassment of politically engaging with it. We hear very little about why exactly Stanley Fish has not rushed to espouse the theory of surplus value, or what Richard Rorty thinks of neo-colonialism, or the precise nature of Jonathan Culler's views of feudal absolutism. We do not hear this, because there is in fact no need. You can save yourself the trouble of a detailed involvement with these issues, which does after all require rather a developed knowledge of Marxist traditions and quite technical bodies of thought, simply by trying to pull the ontological and epistemological carpet out from under radical thinking as such. Why bother to debate whether this or that Marxist concept does its job when you can argue instead, much more grandiosely, that

all social analysis is blinded and indeterminate, that the 'real' is undecidable, that all action beyond a timorous reformism will proliferate perilously beyond one's control, that there are no subjects sufficiently coherent to undertake such actions in the first place, that there is no 'total' system to be changed anyway, or that there is such totality but it is always terroristic, that any apparently oppositional stance has always already been included within what it resists, and that the way the world is is no particular way at all, if indeed we can know enough about it in the first place even to assert that?

One of the benefits of trying to scupper a radical politics in this way is that it doesn't make you appear quite such a red-neck **reactionary** as you might otherwise look. You can seem to be talking about the ineluctability of belief systems or the fact that institutionality goes all the way down whereas in fact you are **talking** about preserving the possibility of turning a fast buck. Richard Rorty is at least honest enough to admit that he is strenuously defending the Free World, which is more than can be said for most of his apparently avant-garde colleagues. Most of the positions I have just enumerated above suffer from the embarrassment of differing hardly at all from good old-fashioned liberal humanism; most of them, in fact, can be found **lurking** around as far back as *A Passage to India*. But they have now been dressed up in rather flashier theoretical guise. It would appear, in fact, that not all that much has changed since the good old post-war days of the End of Ideologies, when American sociologists were prone to argue that the Soviet Union was in the grip of a fanatical metaphysical ideology whereas the United States saw things more or less as they actually were. Sending your tanks into Czechoslovakia is an effect of logocentric delusion; bringing down the elected government of Chile is a piece of modest, pragmaticsocial engineering. It is true that not many American theorists these days are much enamoured of the concept of seeing things as they actually are; but the current distinction between the ideologico-metaphysical and the micropolitical (which sometimes seems to mean a politics so tiny **as** to be invisible) is among other things a variant on the end-of-ideologies epoch. To call your micropolitical pragmatism Foucaultianism separates you less than you might think from the post-war intellectual wing of the CIA.

One of the problems, however, with this ontological and epistemological undercutting is that it leaves political radicals with far too much elbow room, and so fails to achieve its purpose. We are extremely happy to admit that there is no transcendental vantage-point outside particular belief systems from which to launch a critique of Western society; in fact some of us hold that Marxism had been tediously insisting upon this fact long before the pragmatists got round to mentioning it. We do not mind in the least being informed that what we are doing is merely **carrying** on the conversation that is Western **civilisation**, a set of moves within an existing language game, as long as we **can** be allowed to get on and do it. If we in Britain are permitted

to pull out of NATO, scrap our **so-called** independent nuclear deterrent, **socialise** industrial production under workers' self-management, dismantle the structures of patriarchy, return the Malvinas to the Argentinians and recall the troops from Northern Ireland, then it is really neither here nor there in our view whether what we are doing remains dismally imprisoned within a metaphysical problematic. Our theoretical opponents must either tell us that this means that we cannot really do it, a case which has a somewhat implausible ring to it, or that we should not really do it, in which case they are going to have to engage in a little more detailed political argument than they customarily do. They will have to come out from behind the cover of general theories of belief or anti-foundationalism or anti-logocentrism or the ontological ineluctability of micropolitics and let us know a little more clearly why they would like us to remain in NATO.

Somewhere in the later nineteenth century, the capitalist system found itself confronted by an awkward choice. Either it could continue to try to justify its activities by an appeal to metaphysical foundations, or it could simply abandon this whole project as a bad job. Neither alternative was very appealing. The problem with the former strategy, then as now, is that if such a society appeals to metaphysical values as part of its ideological self-legitimation, it will only succeed in exposing the farcical gap between such high-toned ethical or religious imperatives and the squalid nature of its actual marketplace practices. This is so because those practices belong to a rationalising, **secularising** current which tends continually to erode and discredit the very metaphysical discourses which are still necessary to it as a form of self-validation. Caught in this rather painful cleft stick, nineteenth-century bourgeois society was offered by Friedrich **Nietzsche** an alluring way out: don't bother trying to justify your practices at all. Forget about **God**, truth, morality, History, the state: let **your** activities become their own splendid, self-grounding justification, as marvellously self-born and self-generative as the work of art. It was, in fact, an aestheticising solution, and **present-day** American spokespersons for the death of meta-narrative and the collapse of ultimate legitimations are its aestheticising inheritors. Bourgeois society, however, was prudent enough to reject **Nietzsche's** audacious suggestion, and continues to do so today: it is canny enough to appreciate that without some perfunctory talk of God, Freedom and this Great Country of Ours, the marketplace is going to look rather a shaky, discreditable answer to the Meaning of Life. The seductive dream of throwing up the business of justification altogether, however, never quite receded, and in the midst of a sharp rightward-turn of the capitalist system is now once more back on the theoretical agenda. What Richard Rorty and his kind are saying to us is that there is no ultimate justification for the Western way of life. And this is exactly what we Marxists have been saying for a rather longer time.

THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1990

NOTES

1. **Richard Rorty**, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, England, 1989), p. 191.
2. **Barbara Hernstein Smith**, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1988), p. 94.