

Liberalism and/or Liberation: Assessing the Utopian Politics of Richard Rorty and Enrique Dussel

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Abstract

In this paper I explore some similarities and differences in the political philosophies of Dussel and Rorty. For both, the Enlightenment is understood to contain within itself two related but distinct elements. One strand of Enlightenment thought embodies a genuine yearning for political emancipation from unjustified structures of domination and oppression, while the other incorporates a seemingly intractable obstacle to genuine liberation, namely, its rationalism. However, despite a large overlap between Rorty and Dussel in their appraisal of the Enlightenment, the political lessons they take away are quite different, leading Rorty to embrace a “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” inspired by John Stuart Mill, and Dussel to embrace a philosophy of liberation inspired by Karl Marx and Emmanuel Levinas. I explore where, how, and why their political views converge and diverge.

Introduction

In the final section of the “Appendix” to his book *Philosophy of Liberation*, Enrique Dussel insists that the philosophy of liberation “is not a task for only thinkers of the countries of the Third World,” and he calls for “an international division of the philosophical labor, assigning to diverse groups and countries distinct tasks, [which] would permit us to begin a fruitful dialogue where uniformity of themes would not be demanded, nor would certain thematic objects be spurned because they are not relevant to one or another group” (Dussel 2003, 196). A central theme of Dussel’s philosophy is the notion of dialogue and communication within and between cultures and communities; Dussel himself has been involved in dialogues with philosophers and activists all over the world, and amongst his interlocutors was the American philosopher Richard Rorty. Dussel and Rorty stand as two of the most important and

insightful philosophers and political critics in the Americas in recent memory. My purpose in this paper is to explore where Rorty fits into Dussel's "international division of philosophical labor" (or if he fits at all), and what he has to learn from and contribute to the dialogue surrounding the philosophy of liberation. This dialogue can and should be a fruitful one, because the commitments of Rorty and Dussel have tremendous overlap and interesting divergences, and exploring these will help illuminate both thinkers.

I develop a number of claims about the relationship between Dussel and Rorty. First, I note a key similarity in Dussel and Rorty's approach to the project of modernity and the Enlightenment. Namely, both thinkers hope to recover and advance some of the core emancipatory insights of these traditions, while criticizing and discarding the conception of reason and rationality that emerge from these traditions. At this point, however, the differences between the two thinkers comes to light. Dussel insists on reconstructing a conception of reason that can serve as a lever for social criticism, which he refers to as "the reason of the Other." Rorty, instead, hopes to throw out rationalism altogether, and instead place responsibility for social criticism on sentiment and imagination. This difference cashes out in different hopes for political action; namely, Rorty reduces his "utopian" politics to the micro-level of the community or perhaps the nation, while Dussel insists on macro-structural changes in the global economy. I conclude by noting one unappreciated area of overlap: Dussel and Rorty's mutual cynicism about politics in the North Atlantic democracies, and the placing of their social hopes in the imagination of those on the periphery.

Our Ambiguous Enlightenment Heritage: Liberation, Foundationalism, Colonialism

For Rorty, the Enlightenment represents two steps forward and one step back. The philosophers and revolutionaries of the Enlightenment accomplished a tremendous leap forward in the moral and political progress of humanity. The French Revolution epitomized this leap forward by showing that "the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight" (Rorty 1989, 3). He goes on, "This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather than the exception among

intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society” (Rorty 1989, 3). Furthermore, the concurrent emergence of Romantic poetry contributed to this spirit of emancipation by spurring on and expanding the imagination and creativity of utopian thinkers and revolutionaries across Europe and beyond. Endorsing the thesis of Hans Blumenberg in his book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Rorty suggests that modernity and the Enlightenment accomplished a gestalt switch in the thinking of philosophers and intellectuals: instead of dreaming about Heaven after this life (or some other escape from the finite and changing world), they began dreaming about how to realize Utopia on earth (that is, making the world better for their grandchildren).

At the same time, according to Rorty, many Enlightenment thinkers took one step backwards, as many of them jumped out of theology and into a secularized metaphysics—from one form of foundationalism to another. This secularized metaphysics was articulated as a search for absolute, ahistorical truths about Man, Reason, Nature, History, etc. That is, many Enlightenment thinkers imagined that once they escaped the superstition and mysticism of their medieval past, they would be able to transparently grasp the deep, absolute truths or essences about human nature, the laws governing the world, the logic of history, and the structures of society, not realizing that human knowledge is inescapably situated, contextual, and ethnocentric.¹

Rorty’s philosophical project is thus two-fold. He aims to help philosophers in the West overcome the impulse to search for foundations, an impulse into which they have been socialized because of the particular heritage of Platonism, Christianity, and Enlightenment rationalism. This requires a complete and total dismantling of the universal and ahistorical pretensions of rationality. We must give up the notion that all humans possess an identical faculty called “reason,” a truth-tracking faculty capable of clearly grasping all kinds of truths (if only the emotions and sentiments would stay away, of course). We must give up the notion of a transcultural and transtemporal tribunal of pure reason capable of adjudicating

various claims to truth. At the same time, Rorty wants to detach, preserve, and cultivate the other strand of the Enlightenment, which is what Rorty calls “utopian politics,” and which he understands to flow into contemporary liberalism. Thus he urges that “we need to peel apart Enlightenment liberalism from Enlightenment rationalism” by “discarding the residual rationalism that we inherit from the Enlightenment” (Rorty 2007, 55).

For Rorty, then, the paradigmatic figure of utopian anti-foundationalist liberal politics is John Stuart Mill. In his typical provocative fashion, Rorty suggests that with Mill’s *On Liberty*, “Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs” (Rorty 1989, 63). Indeed, Rorty states that “J.S. Mill’s suggestions that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word” (Rorty 1989, 63). Finally, Rorty admits, “I just can’t think of anything I learned from post-Mill readings that added much” (Rorty 2002, 65). Of course, Rorty’s insistence that Mill’s liberalism is basically the last word in utopian political philosophy is to claim that Marx’s political philosophy is *not* the last word, and that Marx in fact failed to fulfill the utopian social hopes that Mill articulated. Rorty’s Millian politics of focusing on interpersonal and institutional harm thus also aligns him with Judith Schklar’s “liberalism of fear,” according to which “cruelty is the worst thing we do” (Rorty 1989, xv).

How does this approach differ from that of Dussel? For Dussel, I might say, modernity and the Enlightenment represent one step forward and two steps back. Dussel, like Rorty, detects a strand of emancipatory thought in European philosophy during the Enlightenment, and similarly wants to separate it from its more insidious underside. Dussel insists that he does not “deny the rational kernel of the universalist rationalism of the Enlightenment,” but he does want to identify and criticize “a violent, coercive, genocidal reason,” the latter of which has accompanied the former throughout the history of European colonialism (Dussel 1995a, 75). Dussel makes explicit this two-sidedness of modernity in “Appendix 2” of his *Invention of the Americas*: “For its first and positive conceptual content, modernity signifies rational

emancipation. The emancipation involves leaving behind immaturity under the force of reason as a critical process that opens up new possibilities for human development” (Dussel 1995b, 136). He goes on, “But, at the same time, in its secondary and negative mythic content, modernity justifies an irrational praxis of violence” (Dussel 1995b, 136). In summary, Dussel’s goal in relation to modernity and Enlightenment rationality is to “transcend modern reason not by negating reason as such, but by negating violent, Eurocentric, developmentalist, hegemonic reason” (Dussel 1995b, 138). For Dussel, it is imperative to recognize the difference between these two forms of rationality that we inherit from modernity and the Enlightenment, and to recognize the consequent obligation to preserve and cultivate the practices and modes of emancipatory rationality.

It is important to note that Dussel here departs, on the surface at least, from Rorty’s position on the issue of what human rationality is capable of. For Rorty, to overcome the foundationalism of religion and the Enlightenment means to let go of the traditional pretensions of human reason as a faculty capable of discovering truths or essences that are beyond the limitations of language, culture, and history. Indeed, our claims to truth will always be bound up in our particular language (or “vocabulary”), with our particular historically produced cultural assumptions and prejudices – we can never transcend these limitations in order to access and communicate absolute truths. Dussel seems to hold a similar critique of the pretensions of that strand of Enlightenment rationality that hopes to grasp absolute, ahistorical truths. He insists on the situated and historical nature of knowledge, writing, for example, that the philosopher is never “an ‘absolute I,’” but is instead inescapably “a finite subject, conditioned, relatively determined by the everyday world to everyday praxis, joined necessarily to a historical subject, to a social class, to a people, to a subject of basic practices” (Dussel 2003, 183). In passages like these, Dussel is in agreement with Rorty on the limits of knowledge and rationality.

However, Dussel then insists that Rorty’s anti-foundationalism will not and cannot accommodate the emancipatory rationality that Dussel hopes to preserve for his politics and

philosophy of liberation. Dussel writes, “Against postmodernist irrationalism [a category in which he includes Rorty, Lyotard, Vattimo, and others], we affirm the ‘reason of the Other’” (Dussel 1995a, 175). With this privileging of the oppressed Other as the new voice of reason and origin of ethical obligation, Dussel finds his paradigmatic figures for utopian politics: not Mill, but Levinas and Marx. Indeed, for Dussel, Marxism embodies the practices of emancipatory Enlightenment rationality, because “for Marx the ‘rational’ problem consists in knowing the *origin* or *cause* of *pain*, the ‘misery’ of the worker” (Dussel 1996, 119n13). As we will see, Rorty will be highly skeptical of the capacity of human reason to probe too deeply into these issues, and it is from this disagreement over the nature and power of rationality that their larger political disagreements will issue.

As a way of exploring some of the core disagreements between Dussel and Rorty, I pose the following two questions: (1) Does Dussel interpolate a form of foundationalism into his political project, and might there be some problems with doing so? (2) Does Rorty’s anti-foundationalism (and his severe deflation of human reason) deprive him of too many tools for a truly progressive political project? With these questions in mind, I will now lay out Rorty’s Mill-inspired liberalism and Dussel’s Marx- and Levinas-inspired philosophy of liberation, and I will then more explicitly explore their overlaps and divergences.

Divergent Utopias: Rorty’s Mill vs. Dussel’s Marx

I have argued that Rorty and Dussel share a similar view of the Enlightenment, with both thinkers arguing that the Enlightenment contains a strand that is liberating and should be preserved, and a strand that stands in the way of liberation and should be discarded. This leads us to the positive political visions of Rorty and Dussel, which they draw in different ways from the Enlightenment legacy, and which leads us to the main divergence between the two thinkers. Dussel lays out his basic relation to Rorty’s thought as follows:

We can walk with Rorty a long stretch of the way, with the critique of analytic thinking, with the democrat (although he does not notice that liberalism and democracy are contradictory logics), with the one who searches for solidarity. But we cannot follow him into the extreme

ambiguities of the incommensurability of his ethical principles, in his neopragmatist contextualism, which in the end turns into an accomplice to domination, from our North-South case (which he cannot criticize by definition). Nor can we follow him in his liberal Northamericanism of Eurocentric character. (Dussel 1996, 104-05)²

As Dussel points out, his political project does have important overlap with that of Rorty. Dussel and Rorty ground their politics in a desire to build ever-larger communities of solidarity and develop institutions to alleviate human misery and suffering. However, these goals lead Rorty to adopt a Mill-inspired liberalism and Dussel to adopt a Marx-inspired philosophy of liberation. The rest of the paper will explore where, how, and why their views diverge, and will conclude with some thoughts on how Rorty and Dussel can inform and complement each other's political visions.

Two things are clear about Dussel's politics: (1) he opts for Marxism (or a Marx-inspired socialism) over liberalism in order to ground his descriptions and prescriptions about society and politics, and (2) he opts for revolutionary as opposed to reformist means for achieving his normative vision.

Dussel argues that of all the political models being tried and imagined in Latin America, "only the popular and democratic socialisms prove to be a model of real liberation" (Dussel 2003, 74). Dussel includes "popular" as a necessary modifier of the political ideology of socialism because he is concerned that orthodox Marxism and socialism are tainted with Eurocentrism. However, Dussel clearly does not want to replace the vocabulary of Marxism, but merely amend it. Specifically, unless Marxism locates itself "in a real, concrete, historical setting," then Dussel warns that "Marxism degenerates into a new ideology, especially if it is not historically joined with the popular classes" (Dussel 2003, 171). Dussel points to leaders and movements that are operating basically in agreement with his philosophy of liberation, approvingly citing Castro, Mao, Lenin, and Che Guevara (Dussel 2003, 76-77). Furthermore, Dussel himself operates fully within the vocabulary and discourse of Marxism—a quick scan of his writing reveals the whole arsenal of Marxist jargon, including: alienation (Dussel 2003,

72), surplus value (Dussel 2003, 73), class consciousness (Dussel 2003, 73), class struggle (Dussel 2003, 83), ideology (Dussel 2003, 5), fetishization (Dussel 2003, 96), bourgeoisie (Dussel 2003, 97), proletariat (Dussel 2003, 73), monopolistic imperialist capitalism (Dussel 2003, 114), dialectical change (Dussel 2003, 136), contradiction (Dussel 2003, 136), and use / exchange value (Dussel 2003, 143). While it is clear that Dussel adds subtlety and nuance to the Marxist discourse that he inherits, my only point is to show that he stands firmly and comfortably within that discourse in order to make sense of the world and to ground his political vision.

In addition, Dussel makes it clear that reformist politics will suffice in Latin America. At certain points, he seems quite convinced that any program that is committed to incrementalism, reformism, piecemeal change, local interventions into particular problems without taking on the system as a whole, etc., is hopelessly complicit in perpetuating the status quo. Dussel warns, “if one chooses a reformist praxis or one that basically reaffirms the system in force, one will discard critical, holistic, or dialectical methods” (Dussel 2003, 186). Here Dussel conflates a reformist politics with a reaffirmation of the “system in force.” He goes on to suggest, “All these antidialectical, antiholistic thoughts are perfectly coherent to a praxis that reproduces the system. They are the philosophy of domination or of justification of oppression because they are anti-utopian” (Dussel 2003, 186). In his *Twenty Theses on Politics*, Dussel defines reformism simply as “action that pretends to change something but in which the institutions and the system remain fundamentally the same as before” (Dussel 2008, 111). Dussel places American pragmatist and liberal philosopher John Dewey in this category of people who “do no more than continue on the same ideological road” of defending and perpetuating the interests of “bourgeois culture” (Dussel 2003, 90-91). The worry is that reformist politics is “antidialectical,” and thus remains caught within a *logic of the same*—it takes the presuppositions and basic commitments of the system for granted, and thus will only ever reproduce the system in its fundamental make-up, merely rearranging chairs on a ship with a fundamentally unchanged direction and destination. Thus, Dussel insists that politics should never be primarily operating at the level of local and particular

problems and solutions only — this would be inevitably reactionary. Problems should never be analyzed and dealt with in isolation, but instead a politics of liberation will take on the system as a whole: “The praxis of liberation... puts *the system* into question” (Dussel 2003, 63; my italics). And again, “Radical criticism is not exercised over the parts of the system; it confronts the totality in entirety as a totality” (Dussel 2003, 186).

Consequently for Dussel, political action must aim for the *entirely new*, “that which has no place here and now”; it must be “toward the new order: utopia” (Dussel 2003, 66). To aim for any less would be to buy into the system and opt for mere reform. It should be noted that Dussel is somewhat wary of revolutionary action, and wants to reject the false choice between reformism and revolution, choosing instead the path of political “transformation,” which advocates a “radical transmutation of the political system in response to new interventions by the oppressed or excluded” (Dussel 2008, 111-112). While Dussel thus disavows a strictly revolutionary orientation, the definition he offers for transformative politics sounds in many ways similar to a traditional revolutionary politics. Either way, Dussel commits himself to a politics that will usher in a “new order,” a “utopia,” even a “new humankind,” and it is this project that Rorty will view with skepticism (Dussel 2003, 90).

Rorty will challenge both Dussel’s Marxism and his revolutionary orientation. Rorty’s opposition to Marxism takes two lines of attack: (1) Marxism is a foundationalist metanarrative – that is, a single story that claims to unlock and understand the logic of History, with which we can “describe or predict the activities of ... the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat,” and (2) Marxism itself is a historically discredited and thus unhelpful political vocabulary with which to ground descriptive and prescriptive claims about politics (Rorty 1991, 199). From these assumptions, Rorty seems convinced that the left must forfeit its revolutionary orientation and accept a reformist politics. Regarding point (2), Rorty argues that all governments that have hitherto ruled under the banner of Marxism “have turned out to be throwbacks to pre-Enlightenment barbarism rather than the first glimmerings of a post-Enlightenment utopia” (Rorty 1999, 202). Part of this failure is rooted in the fact that

Marxism remains trapped in foundationalist thinking—it is committed to the problematic assumption that we can grasp “something about deep, underlying forces – forces that determine the fates of human communities” (Rorty 1998, 228). For Rorty, the events of 1989, and the meteoric collapse of state socialism around the globe, should be a clear lesson to intellectuals and activists that we cannot hope to have “a grasp of the shape and movement of History,” and we must “get rid of the conviction common to Plato and Marx that there must be large and theoretical ways of finding out how to end injustice, as opposed to small experimental ways” (Rorty 1998, 228). The left should distrust the “insistence on getting the ‘underlying realities’ right, on doing theory first and getting to political utopias later” (Rorty 1991b, 185). This debilitating conviction is part of what Rorty attributes to undesirable Enlightenment rationalism, which tries to develop a science of History, without admitting that History, for philosophers like Hegel and Marx, was just a “temporalized substitute for God or Nature” (Rorty 1998, 240). For Rorty, Marxism descends into foundationalism when it purports to have captured the inner workings or logic of History, the historical agency and role of the Proletarian, and the impediments to History’s culmination (capitalism and bourgeois ideology).³ Rorty insists that human rationality is (probably) incapable of spinning out a “*global* leftist strategy” because human knowledge of our social-cultural-economic situation is hopelessly limited, embedded, conditioned, etc., and thus not up to such an ambitious task (Rorty 1998, 238). There is no escaping these epistemic limits to grasp the essence of History.

That being the case, Rorty concludes that the political vocabulary of the left must change. If knowledge is radically situated (confirmed by the fact that the last big leftist metanarrative seems to have failed), then problems and solutions need to be dealt with on a more local scale, with a thoroughly fallibilistic politics of reform. Rorty suggests, “the time has come to drop the terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ from the political vocabulary of the Left” and to “stop talking about the ‘anticapitalistic struggle’ and to substitute something banal and untheoretical – something like ‘the struggle against avoidable human misery’” (Rorty 1998, 229). He further recommends that “we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than

about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes” (Rorty 1998, 229). Rorty finally adds that honest intellectuals can attempt to “spin some new metanarrative that does not mention capitalism, yet has the same dramatic power and urgency as the Marxist narrative,” but he personally has “no idea how to do [so]” (Rorty 1998, 235). Until that happens, the left should content itself with a “banal and untheoretical” political vocabulary filled with terms like “greed” or “suffering,” terms that carry much less metaphysical baggage than “bourgeois ideology” or “false consciousness.” Rorty’s point, with these suggestions, seems to leave open the possibility of a future leftist (though non-Marxist) metanarrative that is *not* foundationalist and *is* a helpful way to understand and facilitate global revolution, but he remains highly skeptical of that possibility. Until then, Mill’s liberalism—filled with relatively less theoretical and more banal terms like “harm” and “privacy”—is for him the only game in town.

It is here that Dussel stages a counterattack against Rorty’s anti-Marxist liberalism. First, it is important to note that Rorty defines liberals as “the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (Rorty 1989, xv). Rorty’s liberal will fixate on a single question, the most important question for determining liberal goals and action: “Are you suffering?” (Rorty 1989, 198). Dussel grants that this question *is* a good starting point for politics, and he suggests that his philosophy of liberation can “appreciate that Rorty raises as a central problem: ‘*Are you suffering?*’” and that ... “A ‘conversation’ between Rortyan neopragmatism and liberation philosophy could be established on the grounds of this theme” (Dussel 1996, 117). With this recognition, however, Dussel begins his critique: “One may depart from *suffering*, as Rorty or liberation philosophy do, but some additional questions still need to be asked: What type of suffering? What are the *causes* of this suffering?” (Dussel 1996, 105). Dussel argues that Rorty’s single question necessitates an unnecessarily and problematically limited political framework, one that forecloses the possibility that this *particular* instance of suffering is produced and maintained by a larger structure that can be

dealt with only through a more radical political program than Rorty's banalized liberalism would allow. For Rorty, the question "Are you suffering?" will presumably have a simple yes or no answer, and with no additional follow-up questions. Thus, the solution is likely to be a small-scale, local intervention to alleviate that particular instance of suffering. However, Dussel insists that Rorty needs to supplement this first question with two others: "*Why do you suffer?*" and "*How can I help?*" (Dussel 1996, 118). These three questions are thus what ground and guide Dussel's radical politics. For Dussel, to supplement Rorty's single question with these two additional questions is to allow for a politics that is not restricted and narrowly focused on particular problems with their particular solutions, but will instead force one to step back, realize, analyze, and criticize the larger structural factors that maintain that suffering. For Dussel, this expanded form of interrogation "demands to move from personal and private structures (ontogenetic or biographical) to social-historical and public structures (phylogentric or economic-political)" (Dussel 1996, 118). This lies at the heart of Dussel's critique, and illuminates the gap separating Dussel's philosophy of liberation from Rorty's liberalism.

Liberalism and Liberation: Metanarratives, Micronarratives, Utopia(s)

However, Dussel's attempt to distance himself from Rorty is rather deceptive — it underestimates the potential closeness of their views. Dussel would likely agree with Rorty that Marxism should not aspire to the status of a science or metanarrative, since Dussel shares with Rorty a recognition of the limitations of all human knowledge. Dussel explicitly rejects what he calls "standard Marxism" in which "the economic realm should be completely planned through political organs, thereby achieving a full *rationalization* of the economy in advance without a market" (Dussel 2008, 47). Sounding very much like Rorty, Dussel argues that this version of Marxism "represents another postulated ideal of Modernity" that should be viewed with extreme skepticism (Dussel 2008, 47). Furthermore, Dussel sounds similar to a Rortyan (or Deweyan) reformist when he writes, "There is no such thing as an everlasting institutional arrangement. The only question is when an institution should continue to operate, [and] when a partial, superficial, or profound transformation is necessary" (Dussel

2008, 109).

However, Dussel wants to reject what he sees as liberalism's built-in limitations to understanding and criticizing larger structures of colonialism and oppression that play a role in the distribution and maintenance of suffering occurring around the world. Here, Dussel thinks that Rorty's criticism of rationality goes too far. Dussel argues, "The negation of 'a' certain illegitimate use of reason (essentialist, 'metaphysical') and 'a' dominant language does not negate the necessity of an affirmation of a 'new' moment of rationality's exercise, of a 'new' liberating language" (Dussel 1996, 115). This "new moment of rationality's exercise" is described as "*liberating reason*" (Dussel 1996, 115), or "the 'reason of the Other'" (Dussel 1995a, 75). This *new rationality*, for Dussel, is linked to Marxism and its quest to identify *large underlying structures of oppression*, since "for Marx the 'rational' problem consists in knowing the *origin* or *cause* of *pain*, the 'misery' of the worker" (Dussel 1996, 119n13). Of course, everything depends on what exactly Dussel expects reason to grasp in terms of the *origin* and *cause* of suffering – if the answer is something like "global capitalism" or "bourgeois ideology," he is correct in assuming that Rorty will deny that reason is capable of going so deeply into underlying causes and structures. If the answer is something like "unfair and misallocated government investment in education or healthcare," or "a dysfunctional welfare state," then Rorty will not object. It all depends on how deeply Dussel expects reason to penetrate into (what Rorty calls) "deep, underlying forces" (Rorty 1998, 228) of oppression in order to issue forth "deep theories about deep causes of social change" (Rorty 1998, 231). The *deeper* Dussel expects this *liberating reason of the Other* to penetrate into the causes and origins of suffering, the more skeptical Rorty will be about its descriptions and prescriptions.

Where, then, is there any overlap in their political visions? Dussel is correct to point out, "Rorty's ironical nominalist practice tends to take all meaning away from the 'Great Words' of the 'Great Narratives' which had been used by the left, such as capitalism, working class, ideology... Marx's discourse, as so many other apocalyptic narratives, disappears from the

Rortyan horizon” (Dussel 1996, 116). Dussel is worried that this Rortyan move “leaves the poor without words” (Dussel 1996, 117). However, this suggestion assumes that the poor are only capable of articulating their sufferings, hopes, and dreams in the vocabulary of Marxism. Rorty, I argue, is willing to deprive the poor of the language of Marxism, but is hopeful that they will be capable of generating utopian thought in another idiom. It is here, then, that I want to explore the ways in which Rorty and Dussel can be seen as complementing each other’s political visions. Dussel inaccurately paints Rorty to be an ardent defender of the status quo—a complacent defender of the late-Cold War market fundamentalism that swept across the United States and Western Europe. He complains that Rorty’s “radical critique of language does not direct itself against the dominant language (of Hayek’s or Friedman’s neoliberal and conservative market economy, for example), but, instead, against the beaten, criticized, and stammering language of the poor and exploited” (Dussel 1996, 116). This is not a fair rendition of Rorty’s position.

Rorty notes that American liberals like himself are becoming increasingly convinced that “‘the cycles of reform and reaction’ that make up politics in the United States are simply not up to the demands of the times” (Rorty 1991b, 179). Instead of being content with the ascendance of the neoliberal doctrines pushed by Reagan and Thatcher and the erosion of the Keynesian welfare state, Rorty is desperate for a new political vision for the left, but woefully admits to his “inability to imagine any better goal than the next cycle of reform” (Rorty 1991b, 179). Rorty thus articulates two convictions: (1) the age of metanarratives is over, and there will probably never be another “*global* leftist strategy” (Rorty 1998, 238), nor should there be, and (2) the rut of “reform and reaction” (Rorty 1991b, 179) into which American liberalism has fallen is probably not up to the task of problem-solving in our challenging new world.

Rorty’s two convictions, however, point hopefully toward utopian political thought on a smaller scale. He contends, “Political imagination is, almost always, national imagination. To imagine great things is to imagine a great future *for a particular community*, a community

one knows well, identifies with, can make plausible predictions about” (Rorty 1991b, 184). He concludes, “Political romance is, therefore, for the foreseeable future, going to consist of psalms of *national* futures rather than of the future of ‘mankind’” (Rorty 1991b, 184).⁴ Rorty holds out hope that utopian *micronarratives* (narratives about liberation without aspiring to be global strategies) will spring up around the world, offering utopian political visions at the national level without assuming that any particular vision is at the same time a template for a global leftist program of liberation. Rorty hopes that these utopian micronarratives can be tried out in various contexts by various peoples dealing with various sets of problems, and these examples may or may not then be useful lessons for liberals in the United States increasingly convinced that our liberal micronarrative may need some (serious) reworking.

As an interesting and illuminating side note, Rorty once admitted to Dussel that Marxist vocabulary and terminology may, indeed, make up particular micronarratives about liberation in certain local circumstances. In a fascinating exchange (at a conference), Dussel asked Rorty about the plight of someone living in absolute poverty near death: “which language will be, ‘pragmatically,’ more useful: either the banalization or the serious consideration of Marx’s language which tries to rationally explain the *causes* of their pain.” Rorty replied, “Marx’s language would be more useful” in that particular situation. This is an interesting admission, which is not found elsewhere in Rorty’s writings, that Marxist vocabulary may be pragmatically useful in certain cases, as long as it does not aspire to the status a global metanarrative (Dussel 1996, 127n110).

I will end with quotes from Rorty and Dussel that point toward an important convergence in their political thinking that has not yet been appreciated. Both are skeptical about the problem-solving capabilities of Northamerican liberalism, and both are convinced that genuinely utopian thought will only emerge from the periphery. Rorty writes, “if there is hope it lies in the imagination of the Third World... [My best hope] is that somebody out there will do something to tear up the present system of imaginary significations within which politics in (and between) the First and Second Worlds is conducted” (Rorty 1991b,

192).⁵ Similarly, Dussel writes, “Only in the liberation of the periphery, within the peoples of the periphery... is there the possibility of a future world culture that can bring about a qualitative leap to originality, newness” (Dussel 2003, 75). Both thinkers suggest that we look toward the periphery to find original and creative experimentation in political emancipation. This is a lesson that US liberals should take seriously. Today, new social movements and leftists of all stripes are taking power and enacting reform all across Latin America, but many US liberals have not taken the notice of this that they should. Dussel celebrates, “The winds that arrive from the South—from Nestor Kirchner, Taboré Vásquez, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, Fidel Castro, and so many others—show us that things can be changed” (Dussel 2008, 101). And it is this final point on which Dussel and Rorty converge. While Dussel seems intent that “Marx has still a lot to say” concerning the problems we face, and Rorty seems intent that there is no serious alternative to a liberal reformist orientation, both thinkers direct our attention to the global periphery for utopian thought in our time (Dussel 1996, 116). In attempting to synthesize the political visions of Rorty and Dussel, Lenard Skof suggests that utopian thinkers need to work out how to capture the “basic communal values” that many people “were utopically hoping for within their older (Communist) regimes,” while insisting that this be achieved “without annihilating the most valuable norms of [the] European liberal political tradition” (Skof 2008, 60n32). It is that difficult task towards which Rorty and Dussel point us.

In conclusion, Dussel and Rorty both demonstrate similar yet divergent interpretations and appropriations of our Enlightenment heritage. For Rorty, the Enlightenment offers us a yearning for liberation from various structures of oppression, a yearning best articulated by J.S. Mill. However, the Enlightenment faltered by offering up a conception of rationality that aspired to grasp the deep forces and structures governing human History, and that led to the problematic and pretentious leftist metanarratives of liberation, including Marxism. For Dussel, the Enlightenment contained a yearning for liberation, which was best articulated by Marx. This yearning, however, needs to be stripped of its corrupting Eurocentric trappings, and tailored to the particular situations and problems of the struggling peoples of the global

periphery. Bringing these philosophers into conversation should help us understand the potential contributions and deficiencies of each thinker to the project of alleviating human suffering.

Indeed, this project to alleviate human suffering is a project shared by Dussel and Rorty. From Rorty, we learn that our utopian thinking should resist the impulse to spin out a global solution to all problems of suffering everywhere, and should rather content itself to speak competently about problems and solutions on a smaller scale. We should resist the urge to identify a single protagonist to the story of human History, like the Proletariat, with a single obstacle in the way of liberation, such as Capitalism or Bourgeois Ideology. From Dussel, we learn that dealing with the problems of human suffering should not foreclose, at the outset, that solutions might have to be radical and large-scale. And from both thinkers, we learn that the best promises of utopian thought and experimentation are not likely to come from what Dussel calls the “Center,” the dominant liberal democracies of the North Atlantic, but are instead more likely to come from the “Periphery,” from the struggles of oppressed peoples at the edges of empire. These lessons should be taken to heart by liberals and radicals everywhere.

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NOTES

¹ While Rorty uses the benign-sounding term "foundationalism" to describe the philosophical assumptions behind Platonism, Christianity, and the strand of undesirable Enlightenment rationality, and while he does not anywhere in his work explicitly connect this foundationalism to colonialism or violence, the connection could easily be made. To be a foundationalist means to

presuppose that truths can be discovered that are not conditioned by language or historically produced prejudices, and this assumption thus covers over the fact that knowledge is always thoroughly historical and situated. When people think they have reached epistemic foundations, they believe that they possess the absolute truth, and thus the “conversation” ends because the “truth” is found. With this assumption in hand, colonial expansionism would have a convenient rationalization. Thus, Rorty’s anti-foundationalism seems similar in spirit to Dussel’s project of critiquing “genocidal reason” (Rorty 1979, 159).

- ² Chantal Mouffe offers a similar critique of Rorty: “Rorty’s position, however, is problematic because of his identification of the political project of modernity with a vague conception of ‘liberalism’ which includes both capitalism and democracy” (Mouffe 1993, 32).
- ³ Rorty borrows heavily from Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* on these points.
- ⁴ In this particular passage, Rorty is writing approvingly of and hopefully about the contemporary Brazilian social theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger.
- ⁵ Apparently, in an email exchange with Richard Posner, Rorty refers to this line as “the dumbest thing he had ever written.” If Rorty explained this sentiment further in the email, Posner does not fill us in. Regardless of Rorty’s apparently changed views, I still find this sentiment to be both interesting and powerful, and a promising way to open the conversation between Rorty and Latin American philosophers and activists.

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