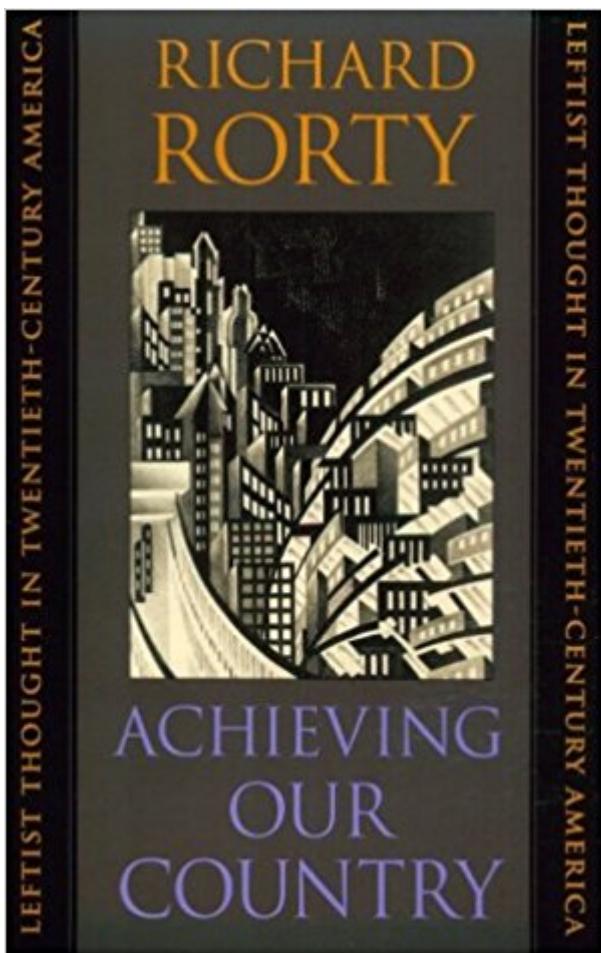


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Achieving Our Country : Leftist Thought In Twentieth-Century America



Synopsis

Must the sins of America's past poison its hope for the future? Lately the American Left, withdrawing into the ivied halls of academe to rue the nation's shame, has answered yes in both word and deed. In *Achieving Our Country*, one of America's foremost philosophers challenges this lost generation of the Left to understand the role it might play in the great tradition of democratic intellectual labor that started with writers like Walt Whitman and John Dewey. How have national pride and American patriotism come to seem an endorsement of atrocities--from slavery to the slaughter of Native Americans, from the rape of ancient forests to the Vietnam War? *Achieving Our Country* traces the sources of this debilitating mentality of shame in the Left, as well as the harm it does to its proponents and to the country. At the center of this history is the conflict between the Old Left and the New that arose during the Vietnam War era. Richard Rorty describes how the paradoxical victory of the antiwar movement, ushering in the Nixon years, encouraged a disillusioned generation of intellectuals to pursue "High Theory" at the expense of considering the place of ideas in our common life. In this turn to theory, Rorty sees a retreat from the secularism and pragmatism championed by Dewey and Whitman, and he decries the tendency of the heirs of the New Left to theorize about the United States from a distance instead of participating in the civic work of shaping our national future. In the absence of a vibrant, active Left, the views of intellectuals on the American Right have come to dominate the public sphere. This galvanizing book, adapted from Rorty's Massey Lectures of 1997, takes the first step toward redressing the imbalance in American cultural life by rallying those on the Left to the civic engagement and inspiration needed for "achieving our country."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are many shameful incidents in America's past: the institution of slavery, genocidal assaults on the indigenous peoples of this continent, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and so on. What should our response to such acts be? Should we regard the nation as irredeemably tainted by sin and spend our time cataloging its evils, or should we acknowledge its shortcomings and make a conscious effort to turn it into a better nation? Philosopher Richard Rorty believes that there is hope for America, but that today's Left is not meeting the challenge. He contrasts the cultural, academic Left's focus on our heritage of shame (which, he admits, has to the extent that it makes hatred intolerable had the positive effect of making America a more civil society) with the politically engaged reformist Left of the early part of this century. "The distinction between the old strategy and the new is important," he writes. "The choice between them makes the difference between what Todd Gitlin calls common dreams and what Arthur Schlesinger calls disuniting Americans. To take pride in being black or gay is an entirely reasonable response to the sadistic humiliation to which one has been subjected. But insofar as this pride prevents someone from also taking pride in being an American citizen, from thinking of his or her country as capable of reform, or from being able to join with straights or whites in reformist initiatives, it is a political disaster." Not everyone, to be sure, is going to agree with Rorty's ideas. But his approach to civic life, which is pragmatic in the tradition of John Dewey and visionary in the tradition of Walt Whitman, is bound to provoke increased discussion of what it is to be a citizen, and his call for a renewed awareness of the history of American reformist activism can only be applauded. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Rorty contrasts two views of America: those of the Old Left and of the New Left. The Old Left he associates with Walt Whitman's "American Dream" and John Dewey's idea of an ever-evolving secular society of varied, autonomous agents whose evils are remediable because they result from failures of imagination. The New Left he associates with spectators who damn America for such past "atrocities" as slavery, the massacre of Indians, and the Vietnam War. Rorty claims that the Old Left was stubbornly reformist, whereas the New Left collaborates with and thereby empowers the Right by supplanting real politics with cultural issues. He urges the New Left to understand that our

national character has not been settled but is still being formed. The book contrasts the two Lefts clearly enough, but the rest of it is rather foggy with occasional flashes of light. For larger academic libraries only. A Robert Hoffman, York Coll., CUNY Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Richard Rorty's book, Achieving Our Country, is a must read for anybody fed up with today's politics of hate and who want to perform some constructive action to help re-claim a constructive climate in American society. His introduction is worth reading alone! While the first printing was, I believe in 1997, it is timely in its characterization of what is currently happening in American politics and society. His premise is that there are a lot of angry young people standing on the sidelines is an apt one. Unlike Egypt where Twitter and Facebook helped spur a revolutionary social experiment (of which time will tell), American youth sit ensconced and isolated with their laptops and just bitch (my take from my experience). His essay goes on to show who the idealism of the New Deal liberals that reformed American society (he also delineates between reformers and radicals) succumbed to its own success and attachment to the past. It took the radicals of the 60s to overcome the inertia and begin a new social revolution. In contrast to today's reactionary/radical christian movement, the revolution of the 60s as Rorty explains was a revolution forward, not an ideological movement to the "good old days." Indeed, what Rorty proposes is to re-examine the "spirit" of Walt Whitman and John Dewey to revitalize thought and experimentalism in American society. (A proposition that I heartily agree with!) Unfortunately it takes courage and being a "little hungry", not complacently anger in the confines of an internet game room. Rorty's last essay is almost prophetic in describing the rich/poor gap within the world. He quotes some general statistics that are being experienced today as the super rich begin to build their own dynasties, and "neo-liberal" economic ideology preaches "privatize everything" and let's not have anything called an "american spirit" which is a spirit of constructive growth and experimentation. (A principle tenet of philosophical pragmatism as edified by John Dewey and others). The key action Rorty states is that to be proud of one's country means to have the courage to constructively criticize it and take action to make it better, and considering that with the internet and other technological advances, we must all have the courage to look at each other as citizens of a country and of a planet. I have a hard time holding on to a copy of this book because I keep giving it to people. I think I am on my eighth copy. I now buy at least 2 at a time. I was just visiting friends in Oregon and their 20yr old son has left for Egypt for a year of study. He is a bright boy and had inherited the intelligence, grounding and courage of his parents. Luckily, I had a copy with me. It will be young people like him that might just try another grand experiment!

Very well written and a great read. Rorty called it in '97 predicting the rise of a strongman candidate who would surprise the left wing and win the presidency. Whether you are conservative or liberal this is a must read.

Important book for the Left to come to terms with how far we've gotten off track.

If you are concerned about the long term positive growth of our society or even if it will survive, read this book.

Rorty, in his diagnosis of problems of leftist thought in 20th century America, accurately predicts the rise of Trump. The argument is as follows: when parties of the left (in the US, this is the Democratic Party) abandon economic issues for cultural issues this leaves an opening for a populist from the right to come in and take natural left wing constituencies and for that right wing populist to obtain power. Trump won many industrial areas in the Midwest where workers, and former workers, turned out and voted for the Democratic Party for generations. Trump is now meeting with union leaders as president. An academic philosopher writing in the mid 90s told the story of the 2016 presidential campaign better than many current commentators. This book also contains many insightful passages on philosophy, literature, movements and campaigns, in addition to accurate political predictions. Rorty manages to make very dense material very readable. There is a lot of discussion about philosophy but I flew through those pages. Highly recommended.

Everyone and anyone that wonders about what happened in 'Pubs vs. Dem's in 2016 should read this. Any committed Dem should read it to understand the mistakes of the Left, and every committed 'Pub should read it to know where to deliver the KO blow in any debate or election. The guy was prescient.

It's ok

Eerily prescient

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