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Book Review

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Head of the Class

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Neil Gross. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher.* University of Chicago Press. May 2008.

Richard Rorty's favorite sentence in all of Freud was from the book on Leonardo da Vinci. "If one considers chance unworthy of determining our fate," Freud wrote, "it is simply a relapse into the pious view of the universe which Leonardo himself was on the way to overcoming when he wrote that the sun does not move." On Rorty's account, this "pious view of the universe" reflected a desire to see man as what Aristotle called a natural kind, something that "divides into a central essence—one that provides a built-in purpose—and a set of peripheral accidents." To Aristotle, that central essence was the locus of human dignity; the peripheral accidents were matters of unworthy chance. Rorty spent much of his career explaining why we might all be better off if we gave up the attempt to uncover such built-in purposes, and instead located human dignity in the ability to invent novel ones. Such a view would encourage us to narrate our lives in terms of how we've adapted and enlarged ourselves to meet the chance demands of the day.

In *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher,* the young sociologist Neil Gross has tried to use Rorty's intellectual biography—his transformation from a philosopher working primarily within the narrow Anglophone analytic tradition to a digressive, itinerant intellectual on the model of his pragmatist hero, John Dewey—as a case study in an argument against certain kinds of piety. He is, however,

reluctant to advocate too enthusiastically the role of chance; his book represents an attempt to show how what he calls "the new sociology of ideas" might split the difference. Gross writes that the story of Rorty's development from a child of Trotskyists and writers through an adolescence at the University of Chicago, graduate school at Yale, and his first two teaching positions, at Wellesley and at Princeton, reflects "not Rorty's idiosyncratic and entirely contingent biographical experiences but the operation of more general social mechanisms and processes that shaped and structured his intellectual life and career." We ought to see him "not as a being spinning out ideas on the basis of a transhistorically rational consideration of their objective merits or as someone pushed this way and that by his personality or character, but as a social actor embedded over time in a variety of institutional settings. . . . [W]hat is true of Rorty in this regard is true of all other intellectuals: they are persons no less impinged upon by social mechanisms and processes than any other."

It seems a little weird that Gross would bother to point this out. It's not, however, as trivial as it seems, or at least it wasn't when Bourdieu first proposed it. For there is a case to be made that *Richard Rorty* is less a book about Richard Rorty than it is a book about the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. More precisely—or, more optimistically—it is a book about why it might be a problem for sociologists to continue to labor in his shadow, and how one might get out from under it. Bourdieu spent much of his career disabusing his colleagues in the French academy of what he called the "scholastic illusion," the idea that becoming a professor is a process of taking flight from the clumsy inheritance of the social world into the crystalline spheres of the ratiocinative one. Bourdieu suggested—often impolitely—that the generative basis for a career in thought was to be found in the lusty drive for the kind of symbolic and cultural "capital," his terms of greatest currency, that would help the thinker, and her field, achieve a higher status. In other words, the academy functions largely as an apparatus for refining and transmitting the cultural codes that serve the perpetuation of privilege. Professors, as "the dominated fraction of the dominant class," are the sentries of the class structure.

This was useful work. It convincingly redescribed the life of the academy as supervenient on social life: its devices of promotion and praise were assignations of status in the context of class warfare. Bourdieu made it harder to obey academics as disinterested intermediaries between mere appearance and Reality in the way Luther made it harder to obey the priests as disinterested intermediaries between

man and God. Bourdieu's description of the professoriate as a clerisy was instrumental for the purpose of reconsidering some of its institutional structures. His concrete proposals about the future of French universities helped make them more open and more democratic. Academics lost some of their sacerdotal sheen.

What Rorty helped to do for philosophy had a lot in common with what Bourdieu did for the professoriate at large. Rorty wanted to try to convince his fellow philosophers to give up the idea that their job is to provide epistemological certainty for "such merely 'first-intentional' matters as science, art, and religion." Rorty believed that all of these practices are necessarily social: they have developed a certain vocabulary to suit the needs of a particular community of people. The defense of any one vocabulary as final—as having no truck with the ephemeral—is the veiled insistence that one set of purposes is worthier than any competitor.

Bourdieu and Rorty thus agreed that appeals to something more enduring than certain arrangements of contingent social practices are simply the boasts of the arrogant and the future historiography of the victors. But where Rorty saw his own task as clearing away all the junk of disciplinary arrogance to show that there is *nothing* that everything else is *really* about, Bourdieu thought that the understanding of all knowledge as social entails the revelation that everything is *really* about jockeying for status.

Bourdieu thus saw to it that one professorial cohort emerged from the whole thing with fancier vestments: the sociologists. Bourdieu preached a "reflexive sociology" in which sociology's instruments were to be directed back upon itself in at attempt to show that its own techniques were so powerful that even its own techniques could not resist its own techniques. Bourdieu redrew the lines of the reality/appearance distinction such that now only the sociologists, with their knowledge of *status*, stood in the unfiltered light of the *really* real. It was an invincible status grab. It is in this context, I think, that Gross's decision to try out his new theory on Rorty is best understood: Rorty makes it difficult to take Bourdieu quite as seriously as Bourdieu took himself.

Rorty never addressed Bourdieu's work directly; he was never quite sure what all the fuss was about. On the account Rorty would presumably have advanced, Bourdieu's sociology is a vocabulary that has served some worthwhile purposes; its claims to reflexivity, however, are at best beside the point and at worst pernicious. This is the insight Gross has tried to incorporate, and he has partially succeeded. He is careful not to repudiate Bourdieu, but to suggest instead that his own ideas be taken as a fruitful emendation. He thinks that the emphasis on status has helped us better understand how academic intellectuals make their decisions, but that it cannot ultimately account for all of the ways these actors behave. Gross introduces his book by writing that his "central empirical thesis is that the shift in Rorty's thought from technically oriented philosopher to free-ranging pragmatist reflected a shift from a career state in which status considerations were central to one in which self-concept considerations became central." This is to say that Bourdieu has got Rorty pegged until roughly 1972, when the non-Bourdieusian portion of his life began.

Gross believes that Bourdieu's theories serve well to account for Rorty's rise through the ranks of analytic philosophy to a tenured position at Princeton, one of the nation's top departments, in the sixties. Having studied unfashionable metaphysics at Chicago and Yale and gone on to write a dissertation on frumpy Whitehead, Rorty found himself ill-equipped to amass much in the way of status in a philosophical field dominated by an analytic claque. So, during his first stint out of graduate school, teaching at Wellesley, he recalibrated himself along analytic lines as a philosopher of mind, a role that would initially secure him a temporary post at Princeton and, later, tenure. Rorty converted the cultural and social capital of his parents—educated, literary associates of the New York Intellectual crowd—into a high-status position in the philosophical field with a series of strategic decisions about whom to work with, what problems to work on, and what style of approach to take.

At a certain point in his career, however, with a tenured post, a good reputation, and eventually a MacArthur grant, Rorty decided to turn away from the analytic project to write books and essays that would address not rarified problems in the philosophy of mind, which he saw as increasingly remote, but what Dewey called "the problems of man." It is around this time, Gross offers, that Bourdieu's emphasis on the strategic pursuit of status no longer seems an apt way to describe the sorts of academic choices Rorty made. Instead, Gross proposes his own idea, the theory of "intellectual self-concept."

The theory of "intellectual self-concept" goes as follows (italics in original): "*Thinkers tell stories to themselves and others about who they are as intellectuals. They are then strongly motivated to do intellectual work that will, inter alia, help to express and bring together the disparate elements of these stories. Everything else being equal, they will gravitate toward ideas that make this kind of synthesis possible.*" Gross sees Rorty's intellectual self-concept as that of "leftist American patriot," and posits that Rorty's identification as such played a greater role in his later career than his desire for status as a well-regarded analytic philosopher. "Where did Rorty acquire the intellectual self-concept of leftist American patriot, when did this occur, and what effects, if any, might it have had on his philosophy? My argument is that he acquired the identity from his parents, that it became reactivated in the 1970s in response to their deaths, the rise the New Left [sic], and other historical developments, and that its effect was to renew Rorty's commitment to American pragmatism, which he saw as giving expression to the same values."

Gross never quite finds a satisfactory way to formulate his feeling that Bourdieu's emphasis on status might not be *the* definitive way to account for the decisions of intellectuals. He refuses to align himself too closely with one usual criticism of Bourdieu, the rather commonsensical charge of reductionism. Gross seems concerned about not reductionism but determinism, and, beyond that, cynicism. Gross has chosen Rorty's career for his case study because it seems to provide exactly the sort of field-defying anomaly that also might account for the unusual academic career of, say, Pierre Bourdieu. Gross seems to want to recover for Rorty a sense of agency that derives from more than simply his position in his field, a reserve of integrity that allowed for a conscious break from the "unconscious strategies" of status-seeking.

Gross hedges his bets (strategically). He nods to Bourdieu in making assurances that the intellectual self-concept arises in the context of the intellectual field, so it's never entirely free from considerations of status and privilege. At the same time, he waves obligingly in the direction of indeterminacy by saying that an intellectual self-concept is, naturally, a fluid thing that changes over time. But in his less vigilant moments, Gross makes clear how he'd prefer to think of the "intellectual self-concept." Despite the influence of the intellectual field on the development of the intellectual self-concept, he says at one point, "it is not primarily in terms of their

field positional significance that the latter kinds of identities, at least, have *meaning* for the actors concerned. They see them as core aspects of themselves, some involving commitment to ultimate values."

The intellectual self-concept is betrayed as a matter of ultimate values: it signifies fidelity not to some social externality but to something internal, deep, and true. Gross leaves it to Erik Erikson to make the point to the greatest Romantic effect, quoting from Erikson's book on Martin Luther. "I could not conceive of a young great man in the years before he became a great young man without assuming that inwardly he harbors a quite inarticulate stubbornness, a secret furious inviolacy, a gathering of impressions for eventual use within some as yet dormant new configuration of thought."

Gross ends up trying to turn Bourdieu on his head. He has replaced a story about obedience to an all-encompassing environmental force with a story about the dictates of an adamantine inner one. What he has taken over from Rorty is the idea that a teleology of social status may say more about the self-importance of sociologists than it does about the behavior of actual people. But Gross cannot untether himself from teleology.

Rorty himself would have said that recourse to a "secret furious inviolacy," as grand as that phrase is, is just another form of the relapse into the pious view of the universe. Rorty would have been fine with the word "strategic" in its ordinary conversational use: there are plenty of things academics, and others, do for strategic purposes. But Gross's attempt to make "strategic" a special explanatory category—his insistence on the difference between strategic action and action that is consonant with the intellectual self-concept—is just another way of restating Aristotle's attempt to divide man into essence and accident. For Rorty, the essence/accident distinction begged all the important questions; it was already operative in terms of a particular descriptive vocabulary. In Gross's case, the "ultimate values" he refers to are necessarily those that are *not* "strategic."

What was salient for Rorty was always the discursive community to which one is held to account, the series of conversations we have to have as we justify what we do. Gross quotes at length from one of Rorty's best-known essays of the early eighties, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," but seems to have missed its crucial passage, worth quoting at length, where Rorty suggests that we

> think of the moral self, the embodiment of rationality, not as one of Rawls's original choosers, somebody who can distinguish her self from her talents and interests and views about the good, but as a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it—no substrate behind the narratives. For the purposes of moral and political deliberation, a person just is that network, as for purposes of ballistics she is a point-mass, or for purposes of chemistry she is a linkage of molecules. She is a network that is constantly reweaving itself in the usual Quinean manner—that is to say, not by reference to general criteria (e.g., 'rules of meaning' or 'moral principles') but in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust to meet the pressures of the environment. On a Quinean view, rational behavior is just adaptive behavior of a sort which roughly parallels the behavior, in similar circumstances, of the other members of some relevant community. Irrationality, in both physics and ethics, is a matter of behavior that leads one to abandon, or be stripped of, membership in some such community. For some purposes this adaptive behavior is aptly described as 'learning' or 'computing' or 'redistribution of electrical charges in neural tissue,' and for others as 'deliberation' or 'choice.'

You could go through this passage and replace "moral" with "careerist" and "rules of meaning" with "strategies of status-seeking" and it would be a more elegant and persuasive description of how intellectuals make choices than the theory of the intellectual self-concept. You don't need to identify some actions as constitutively "strategic" and others "syntonic" (in the language of American ego psychology) to account for this course. You can just say, simply and more accurately, that at this stage in his life Rorty felt as though his primary interlocutors were people within the philosophy departments, and he arranged himself in a way such that he could have with them the conversations he wanted to have.

At a certain point, however, Rorty became frustrated with those conversations, and sought to participate in the discussion of a wider community. He acted, at least by the lights of a philosophy department, irrationally. But this was because he had

been persuaded, or persuaded himself, that the rationality—which is to say, what counts as an acceptable justification for a belief or an action—of a different community was better suited to his purposes. If you had asked him what his purposes were, he would have said something like, "Oh, you know, the purposes of reading and writing good and useful books, working toward social justice, having meaningful relationships." This does not mean, as Gross says at one point, that "he came to see other broad-minded humanists such as Skinner or Foucault or Derrida as his *real* interlocutors" (my emphasis): it means that he had gotten sick of the repartee in one crowd and taken up with another, more interesting one. He had tired of the If-P-then-Q school of compelling reasons. The only *strategy* involved was the strategy of putting himself in a position where he would find the talk livelier, more enriching, more satisfying, etc. No action is more or less strategic in some ultimate sense than any other. There are decisions that will allow us to live with ourselves—which means, roughly, being able to contribute on our own terms to communities in which we comfortably belong—and decisions that will not.

So, sure, Rorty saw himself as a "leftist American patriot," but he also saw himself as a "follower of Wittgenstein" and a "reader of Nabokov" and—to the lasting befuddlement of many of his friends and admirers—an "inveterate birder." When he was young, Rorty once wrote, all he wanted was something that would allow himself the chance to, in Yeats's phrase, "hold reality and justice in a single vision," where reality meant the wild orchids of northwest New Jersey and justice meant the Trotskyist campaigns of his parents' circle. Rorty hoped philosophy might help him manage this trick, but he eventually learned there was no coherent, Platonic way to connect up his private idiosyncrasies with his public hope, and that he might as well stop trying to find one self-description that would make of him a natural and convincing whole. This attempt to find such a unitary self-description on Rorty's behalf is precisely the cause that Gross has taken up, and, of course, failed to carry out.

What Gross has, however, done very well is show what it was about analytic philosophy that, by the late sixties, began to bore Rorty. Part of it, surely, were the pull factors Gross describes, which had to do with his growing desire to be part of a

milieu similar to that of his parents'. These are all fairly obvious points, but Gross—who devotes a chapter apiece to James and Winifred Rorty—makes them competently. But the better errand of Gross's book is the archival work he has done to chronicle Rorty's increasingly choleric feelings about the analytic establishment.

Over the course of his early career, Rorty used the tools of analytic philosophy to dismantle its edifice from the inside, arriving ultimately at what he called a "Wittgensteinian, deflationary attitude" toward its problems. Gross writes that, "as Rorty saw it, few of his Princeton colleagues shared this attitude. Because they did not, they were inclined to take themselves too seriously, to think that the philosophical school they represented was of greater world-historical interest than it actually was, and to eschew work done in other traditions and styles."

This seems right as far as it goes. But here is where Gross's use of a certain kind of Romantic, pious template forces him into an artificial and melodramatic interpretation of this sort of situation. He believes that Rorty's "early work be seen as representing a moment of conforming to disciplinary status structures," as Bourdieu would have predicted, and that his later work "and exit from philosophy may be read as a rebellion against disciplinary authority" as presumably fueled by Rorty's own secret furious inviolacy. This commits him to describing Rorty's turn from analytic philosophy to pragmatism as the moment of Rorty's break from obsequiousness into self-assurance: it is what happens when a philosopher stops being polite and starts being real.

But there are ways to describe Rorty's departure from analytic philosophy that do not require such discontinuities, and that do not require a contrived distinction between strategic and syntonic behavior. Rorty had entered a discipline because he found it interesting, struggled to work near its center in the hope of taking part in as many of its conversations as possible, and left because it had gotten so awfully boring. American analytic philosophers were, for the most part, providing increasingly arcane attempts to secure epistemological certainty—to "put philosophy on the secure path of a science." But Rorty thought that analytic (in the writings of Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, both followers of Wittgenstein) and continental (in the work of people like Heidegger and Gadamer) philsophy were converging on an understanding about why this was a futile, unnecessary, and occasionally pernicious ambition.

Rorty liked to say that he was just trying to change the subject, and he was only sort of being flip. Like Freud, who thought that the goal of analysis was to work through our neurotic problems in order to better deal with our regular, everyday ones, Rorty thought that the question of epistemology was an obstacle to the (necessarily vague) goals of personal and cultural enrichment. These are necessarily vague because we won't know what those goals look like until we invent new ones, which is the point of conversation. The decision to leave one community and take up with another is a matter of finding a new set of problems, and a new dream of solutions, more important than the old ones. But one doesn't know what a new conversation will be like until one tries to take part. This is what it means to say that Rorty followed Dewey in replacing the quest for certainty with the indefinite hope of experimentalism. Rorty loved the first stanza of Stevens's "On the Road Home," which describes the glow of new experiment: "It was when I said, 'There is no such thing as the truth,' / that the grapes seemed fatter, / the fox ran out of his hole."

Gross seems to dimly understand the object lesson this has for him as a follower of Bourdieu; this is where his own book is potentially most useful. The philosophical conversation had gotten so bad precisely because the analytic philosophers had been so successful in convincing themselves that only they had a clue about what was *really going on*, that everything done in any other discipline was frivolous and epiphenomenal and not worth worrying about. This is the peril of hermetic rigorism and abject professionalization: if you believe that whatever it is you have chosen to hypostasize—truth in epistemology, the class structure in economics, the drive for status in social relations—is the only thing ultimately worthy of discussion, you stand a good chance of finding yourself on the defensive, with fewer and fewer people to talk to and increasingly occult things to talk about. Whenever a discipline becomes too self-congratulatorily reflexive, when it thinks, for example, that the corrections to the blind spots of sociology will be illuminated in an infinite regress of *ever more sociology*, that discipline has become moribund.

In the late sixties, Rorty began to refashion himself as a participant in wider communities because American philosophy was, even to the most casual observer, irrelevant to the rest of American cultural life. But it was a moment where sociology had yet to succumb to the pressure to professionalize. (Gross's book is fine on the causes of disciplinary professionalization: vast increases in postwar university enrollment due to the GI Bill and a general rise in affluence, coupled with Cold War interest in university science and a new, post-Hiroshima admiration for the

structure of scientific inquiry, among other factors, led to a need for bureaucratic entrenchment designed to credential more efficiently the growing middle class and to gain funding by aping the guys over in the physics building.) While philosophers were writing articles in Zapf Dingbats for a select conspiracy of moon-men, sociologists were still happy to write books like *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

In light of what has happened to sociology since then, I suspect it is no accident that Gross has written a book in which attentive fidelity to disciplinary objectives is characterized as "strategic," and in which a thinker becomes interesting and broadly relevant once he's decided to inquire, in a mood of expansiveness and curiosity, about what other thinkers see as the centers of human life. I'd like to imagine, then, that the secret furious wish of Gross's book is the idea that he might, in unsettling the reliance on ideas of status and strategy by gesturing toward a more robust way to talk about academic decision-making, assist in the rehabilitation of his field. He might help his colleagues in sociology withdraw from the suicidal intoxication of professional knowingness. Even if he only succeeded in part—if he clings to an obverted relic of the old piety—he has still chosen a subject notorious enough to get his book read by people outside his department, and even outside of the academy. And he has chosen a model whose own career might encourage his colleagues within the department to embark upon more variegated exchanges with odder partners.

But Rorty is instructive if you want to leave a discipline, not if you want to save one. Rorty's last year in the Princeton philosophy department was 1981. For the next sixteen years he was University Professor of the Humanities at the University of Virginia. He retired out of Stanford's Comparative Literature department, though his initial hope in moving west was that he might be named Transitory Professor of Trendy Studies. Philosophy, for its part, is less relevant than ever; its graduate programs continue to attract students drawn to haughty ascetic ideals of purification rather than aspirations to the enlargement of the self. Rorty, from time to time, seemed genuinely sad about this. The publication of *Richard Rorty* got Gross tenure. With the strategic portion of his career thus concluded, one wonders what Gross's own intellectual self-concept might do for the sociological project. +

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