

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR R. RORTY

written for Kritika & Kontext

EGON GÁL: In the Introduction to Lakoff's book *Don't think of an elephant*, Don Hazen wrote that American people found themselves living in a country, where that considered extreme just a decade ago became a national policy. How, in your opinion, could this have happened?

RICHARD RORTY: Every leftist intellectual in the US is scratching his or her head, trying to figure out why the Republicans are succeeding in producing the massive and rapid shift to the right that is presently taking place. The leftist magazines here are filled with articles with such titles as "Why don't the workers listen to us?" "Why do the poor vote against their own interests?" "Why did Kerry lose?" "Will the Democrats ever be able to retake Congress, or are they going to be in power forever?" I have no good answer to any of these questions. I am inclined to explain Bush's re-election by the widespread feeling that you do not throw out a sitting president in time of war; the Republican "we are at war, and so we must not change leaders in midstream" strategy has, I think, worked very well indeed. But I cannot account for the complacent acceptance with which Bush's soak-the-poor-and-aid-the-rich policies are being greeted by public opinion.

EGON GÁL: You wrote that non-theists are better suited for life in a democratic society than theists. But why? Communists, nationalists and racists are mostly non - theists. Do you think that there were more theists in America when Bush won the election than in Clinton era?

RICHARD RORTY: When I wrote that, I was agreeing with Dewey's remark that "I cannot understand how any realization of the democratic ideal as a vital moral and spiritual ideal in human affairs is possible without surrender of the conception of the basic division [viz., between the saved and the damned] to which supernatural Christianity is committed." Dewey's point, I take it, was that Christians who take this division seriously are unable to treat non-Christians as



fellow-citizens of a democracy, just as racists are unable to treat Jews or blacks as fellow-citizens. (In contemporary America, as was the case in apartheid South Africa, most racists are in fact theists, and fundamentalists in the bargain.) I do not think that there are more religious believers in the US nowadays than there were in the '90's, but I do think that there are not as many as in the 60's and 70's. Religion has made a big comeback in the US. It has been becoming more important here at the same time that it has become steadily less important in all the other industrialized democracies. I have no hypothesis about why this has happened. I wish I had an explanation, but I don't.

EGON GÁL: George Lakoff wrote that people voted conservatives, even if the majority of Americans were liberally thinking because they were better at framing their vocabulary through moral arguments, than liberals. He defined frames as mental structures that shape the way we see the world. Frames shape the goals we seek, the way we act, and what counts for good or bad outcomes of our deeds. "In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out our policies." Do you think there is something in Lakoff's view that the main reason, why conservatives win and liberals lose is that political competition is not about facts, programs, or interests, but about frames and vocabularies?

RICHARD RORTY: I agree with Lakoff that rhetoric can often succeed in making people vote against their own interests. But I do not know what rhetoric - what choice of frames, in Lakoff's terminology - will help the Democrats convince a majority of the voters that their interests are not being served by the Bush administration. The Democrats have most of the country's best writers willing and anxious to help them win back power, but these writers do not seem to be able to come up with a rhetoric that catches the voters' imagination.

EGON GÁL: Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that there is no society without a set of common beliefs and values. Without a common set of beliefs there may be individuals, but no cooperation between them, and without cooperation no society can exist. What in your opinion can liberals contribute to the formation of a common set of beliefs and values in the society?

RICHARD RORTY: In the period between 1933 and 1980, Americans shared something like what Dewey called „the democratic ideal as a vital moral and spiritual ideal“. Except for the white racists who refused to accept blacks as their equals, they had a sense of the country as a moral community, a sense that gradually disappeared under Reagan, as economic inequality gradually became greater and greater. I do not know how American liberals can bring back the pre-Reagan era of fellow-feeling. I wish I did. The tone of American public discourse has, it is generally agreed, changed a great deal in recent decades. Part of this is due to a deliberate debasement of tone by the Republicans (as in the attempts of the Fox Network to besmirch Kerry's military record), but I cannot explain why this strategy has succeeded as well as it has.