THE INTELLECTUALS AND THE POOR
Richard Rorty

One of the first occasions on which the word "intellectual" was heard in America was in 1907, in a talk given by William James. James' title was "The Social Value of the College Bred"\(^1\), and his message was that people who had had a college education were better able to pick candidates for political office: "The best claim that a college education can possibly make on your respect, the best thing it can aspire to accomplish for you, is...that it should help you to know a good man when you see him." (106)

Here is James' unabashedly elitist account of the relation of the college graduates to their fellow-citizens:
Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great and small, and imitation by the rest of us...Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns which the common people then adopt and follow. The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world. The democratic problem thus is statable in ultra-simple terms: Who are the kind of men from whom our majorities shall take their cue?....
In this very simple way does the value of our educated class define itself: we more than others should be able to divine the worthier and better leaders. In our

democracy, where everything else is so shifting, we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries..."Les intellectuels"!

What prouder club-name could there be than this one? (110)

James was troubled by the same dangers as concern contemporary writers who worry about the use of sound bites and negative ads in political campaigns, about the influence of Rush Limbaugh, and about the number of votes received by David Duke. James' awareness of such dangers was as great as that of his friend Henry Adams, but he resisted Adams' pessimism. Adams had come to think that, as James put it, "democracy's preferences are inveterately for the inferior" (109). Nobody, James admitted, can be "absolutely certain that this may not be the career of democracy". But, he went on to say, democracy is a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure. Faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise of human reason, and no one with a spark of reason in him will sit down fatalistically before the croaker's picture. The best of us are filled with a contrary vision of a democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty. (109)

As a result of Zola having taken over the term "intellectuels" to refer to himself and his fellow Dreyfusards, it became pretty well synonomous with "well-educated and articulate people on the political left." As result of James picking it up from Zola, the
English word "intellectuals" came to refer to people were filled with the vision of democracy which James sketched in the passage I have just quoted. The proper use of this word has been contested ever since. One result is that the previously oxymoronic term "conservative intellectual" has, alas, gained currency. Another is that anti-elitists like Limbaugh have done their best, throughout the twentieth century, to make the word "intellectual" into a pejorative. There is a strong populist tradition which insists that a college education—especially the kind which James called "humanistic"—is likely to make one incapable of understanding the needs of the uneducated, unable to sympathize with their feelings and grasp their needs.

James took note of this view when he said that the name "Harvard" suggested, to many people, "little more than a kind of sterilized conceit and incapacity for being pleased". (111) He cheerfully admitted that there was some basis for this impression, and that colleges and universities in general, and Harvard in particular, did produce lots a few socially useless prigs. "But," he went on to say, every good college makes its students immune against this malady...It does so by its general tone being too hearty for the microbe's life. Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains--under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly upon the human core. If a college, through the inferior human influences
that have grown regnant there, fails to catch the robuster
tone, its failure is colossal, for its social function
stops: democracy gives it a wide berth, turns toward it
a deaf ear. (111)

I have quoted James at length for the sake of adding resonance
to his phrase "failing to catch the robuster tone." I think that
American leftist intellectuals are currently failing to catch this
tone. In particular, people on the academic left--that is to say,
the leftmost members of colleges and university faculties--are once
again getting a reputation for sterilized conceit and an incapacity
for being pleased. An immense amount of professorial energy is being
used to express dislikes and disdains, and not nearly enough to
express sympathies and admirations. The academic left needs to change
its tone if it wants to exercise a social function. Sounding the
tone it does, it is losing its audience. As a result, American
colleges and universities have become too easy a target for Rush
Limbaugh--and also for people like George Will, William Bennett,
and Lynne Cheney.

The American left needs to change its principal subject, as
well as its tone. Its principal subject, for almost two decades,
has been race and gender. "Class" has been thrown in as an
afterthought, but it should always have come first. Much of our
leftist intelligentsia has let itself be locked into a sham battle
with people like Will, Bennett and Cheney over cultural issues, and
that the result of their absorption in cultural politics is to abet the conservatives' attempt to distract public attention from economic facts. The so-called "conservative intellectuals" have been astonishingly successful in persuading the press and the public to line up one side or the other of various culture wars, and in suggesting that it is somehow in bad taste to incite class warfare. But we on the left have made this easy for them. For we have let ourselves be distracted from our central task, which is to remind the country, over and over again, that the rich are continuing, in their quiet, polite, efficient, ruthless way, to wage war on the poor. They are succeeding in getting more and more of the wealth of the country into their own hands. They are letting real average wages fall while productivity rises. We leftist professors have been so busy throwing ourselves into the culture wars that by now we ourselves need to be reminded of these facts.

Much of the academic left in contemporary America likes to describe itself as "radical" rather than "liberal." Readers of Foucault and Jameson acquire the same sort of contempt for "mere reformism" and for "bourgeois liberalism" which their predecessors acquired from Lenin, Lukacs, or Sartre. Radicals of this sort resist the liberal view that America has, by democratic political processes and by appeals by the college-bred to the masses, had considerable successes at reforming both its institutions and its customs--in making them, if only by fits and starts, more just and more beautiful as the decades have gone by. Liberals, of course,
quickly add that these institutions and customs are still far more unjust and ugly than is generally thought. This caveat, however, is thought insufficient by radicals. They think that the sort of changes our country has made in the past—even such vast, constitutional or quasi-constitutional changes as those produced by the Reconstruction Amendments and by the New Deal—were not signs of national virtue but, at best, of economic necessity. That is why radicals speak dismissively and disdainfully of "the system" as something which we have to replace, rather than speaking, patriotically, of a continuing struggle for reform. They strike world-weary, world-historical, man-from-Mars attitudes, and talk about "the postmodern situation" or "the contradictions of late capitalism" or "contemporary American culture", rather than speaking as members of a particular political community, a particular nation-state, with specific responsibilities toward their fellow-citizens.

They thereby lose the robuster tone. Instead of saying, for example, that it is outrageous that the schools in the suburbs are so much safer and cleaner than those in the inner cities, they say that Americans habitually fail to acknowledge otherness. They construe the sadistic victimization of blacks and homosexuals, as evidence of an overall failure of liberal democracy—one which can only be understood at a fairly high philosophical level. For only at that level can one understand relativity of identity to a choice of descriptive vocabulary, the difference between difference and
otherness, and similar matters. This philosophical level is better suited to the expression of suspicion and resentment than of reformist fervor, better suited to dislikes and disdains than to sympathies and enthusiasms. For it is the same level at which William Kristol likes to operate, the level at which Nietzscheans and Aristotelians face off across an abyss. The result is the sham battle I referred to earlier--a battle in the philosophical clouds between resentful Foucauldians and smug Straussian.

I think the American left should forget, for at least about few decades, about radicalism and about philosophy. It should resurrect the old-fashioned unphilosophical liberalism of Eugene Debs, Herbert Croly, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Michael Harrington, and get back into real, as opposed to cultural, politics. It should concern itself with piecemeal legislative reform, and forget about gaining a quasi-philosophical understanding of anything as large as "consumer society" or "late capitalism" or "modernity" or "the post-modern".

We shall not be able to give up radicalism for liberalism unless we can feel, and commend to our students, sentimental allegiance to the nation-state of which we have the immense good fortune to be citizens. For this purpose, we need to purge ourselves of the fashionable anti-Americanism which has been the most disastrous legacy of the 1960's. The vision of America which made it fashionable to spell "America" with a "k" outlasted the anti-Vietnam war movement, and mutated into a contemptuous refusal to take the American political
process seriously. This anti-Americanism has made it easy for Will, Bennett, Cheney and others to make the American left seem perverse and fantastical. These conservatives are not entirely wrong when they suggest that the colleges and universities have been recently being turning out a lot of socially useless prigs.

The ideas of "multiculturalism" and of a "politics of identity" would not, I think, have become ubiquitous if the ideal of fraternal fellow-citizenship had not lost its hold, as a result of the leftist intelligentsia's increasing contempt for their own country. Substituting the new-fangled notion of "identity group" for the old-fashioned notion of "interest group" seems to me pointless mystification. What are called "identity groups" are just vulnerable and victimized interest groups, whose members are in the course of becoming clearer about the mechanics of their victimization. I hope that the left will, sooner or later, free itself from its current obsession with multiculturalism and identity politics, and get back into the mainstream of American political life. It could do so by starting to take the ordinary every-day political process seriously, and ceasing to collaborate with Will, Bennett and Cheney in pretending that culture comes first and economics second.

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The distinction I have just drawn between culture and economics, parallels that between race and gender on the one hand and class on the other. It also parallels, I should like to argue, another distinction: that between sadism and selfishness. Victimization as
a result of race and gender are examples of sadism. Victimization as a result of lack of money is an example of selfishness. The Old American Left was good at fighting selfishness, but not so good at fighting sadism. The post-'60's American Left has been good at fighting sadism but not has neglected the struggle against selfishness.

I can perhaps best expalin what I have in mind in invoking the sadism-selfishness distinction by reminding you that the first great impetus for the development of what became the New Left of the '60's was the Superme court's decision declaring segregated schools unconstitutional. In theory, this was a discovery of a hitherto unnoticed constitutional right. In fact, it was an expression of white Americans' long-delayed willingness to admit that their treatment of the descendants of black slaves was, and continued to be, incredibly cruel--their dawning realization that it was intolerable that American citizens should be subjected to the humiliation of segregation. Analogously, when the Supreme Court eventually reverses Bowers v. Hardwick, the decision which uphold the Georgia anti-sodomoy law, it will not be because a hitherto invisible right to sodomy has become manifest to the justices. It will be because the heterosexual majority has become more willing to concede that it has been tormenting homosexuals for no better reason than to give itself the sadistic pleasure of humiliating a group designated as inferior--designated as such for no better reason than to give another group a sense of superiority.
It seems reasonable to define "sadism" as the use of persons weaker than ourselves to serve as outlets for our resentments and frustrations, and especially for the infliction of humiliation on such people in order to bolster our own sense of self-worth. Most of us have been guilty, at some time or other in our lives, of this sort of casual, socially accepted, sadism. But the most conspicuous instances of sadism, and the only ones relevant to politics, are at the level of groups rather than individuals. Thus Cossacks and the Nazi storm troopers used Jews, and the white races have traditionally used the colored races, in order to bolster their group self-esteem. Men have traditionally humiliated women, and have beaten up gays, in order to exalt their own sense of masculine privilege. The central fact in white-black and straight-gay relations is that it lifts the spirits of a lot of desperate, beaten-down men to be able to say to themselves both "At least I'm not a nigger!" and "At least I'm not a faggot!"

Sadism, however, is not the only cause of cruelty and needless suffering. There is also selfishness. Selfishness differs from sadism in being less a matter of unconscious fantasy and more one of semi-conscious calculation. Sadism helps one retain a sense of one's own worth—a sense which depends on fantasies about the degraded condition of groups to which, thank God, one does not belong. Selfishness helps one retain one's money and power. If I own a business and pay my workers more than the minimum necessary to keep them at work, there will be less for me. My doing so is not sadistic, but
it may well be selfish. If I prevent my slaves, or the descendants of my ancestors' slaves, from getting an education, there will be less chance for them to compete with me and mine for the good jobs. If the suburbanites cast their votes in favor of financing public education by locally administered property taxes, there will be less chance for the children in the cities to be properly educated, and so to compete with suburban children for membership in a shrinking middle class. All these calculated actions are cruel and selfish, but it would be odd to call them sadistic.

As a crude generalization, one can say that sadism is the vice of the poor and selfishness the vice of the rich. If you don't have any money or power, and if you see no way to get any, you can restore some sense of your own worth by beating up people who have been stigmatized. If you do have money and power, you may pride yourself on never having beat anybody up, and never even wishing to do so. But your freedom from the sadistic impulses which move the uneducated and desperate masses was made possible by economic arrangements which insure that a lot of your fellow-citizens will remain uneducated and desperate.

The leftist intellectuals have always protested both against the sadism of the many and against the selfishness of the few. But it has always been hard for them to keep the necessary balance between these two efforts. The leaders of the trade union movement in the US, back in the 30's, often had to turn their backs on the needs of African-Americans in order to keep the votes of the rank
and file. White workers typically did not want to share either the factory floor or the union local with blacks. So the union leaders had to cooperate with the sadism of the workers in order to get them to protest the selfishness of the owners. Nowadays, when the left's power base is the universities rather than the unions, the loss of balance is in the other direction: the academic left is good at diagnosing complex forms of sadism, but bad at calling attention to the effects of simple, old-fashioned, selfishness.

Sadism is something we have come to understand better in this century, thanks to Freud's emphasis on the role of unconscious fantasies in determining our behavior toward individuals and groups. Thanks to the intellectuals of our century, we have come to have a far better understanding of what men have been doing to women, straights to gays, and the white race to the colored races. The thrilling sense of discovery which comes from recognizing the operation, in oneself as well as in others, of unconscious fantasies--combined with the sense of spiritual reawakening which comes from ridding oneself, at least in part, of such fantasies--has helped make Lacan and Foucault, rather than Eugene Debs and Eleanor Roosevelt, the heroes of contemporary radical intellectuals.

But this sense of discovery, of intellectual breakthrough, has distracted these radicals from the every-day selfishness which requires no novel philosophical or psychological insights to understand. Up through the sixties, the radical-liberal contrast, the contrast between Marxists and Deweyan pragmatists, was between
those who wanted to smash the capitalist system and those who merely
wanted to expand the American civic religion to include the search
for economic justice. Nowadays, however, you would hardly guess,
from listening to the cultural politicians of the academic left,
that the power of the rich over the poor remains the most obvious
element of injustice in contemporary America. The increasing gap
between what Michael Lind calls "the overclass" and the rest of the
country is also the most potentially explosive danger to the country.
For the wider that gap grows, the more analogous to Weimar Germany's
America's situation becomes, the more likely becomes a right-wing
populist revolt which will quickly wipe out all the gains made, over
thirty years, by the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement,
and the gay and lesbian rights movement.

The kind of leftists intellectual who specializes in cultural
politics offers ten brilliant unmaskings of unconscious sadism for
every banal demonstration of the selfishness which is taken for
granted in the operations of the American economy. Enormous
ingenuity and learning are deployed in demonstrating the complicity
of this or that institution, or of some rival cultural politician,
with patriarchy or heterosexism or racism. But little gets said about
how the college-bred, who typically make more than $40,000 a year,
might come to the rescue of their fellow-citizens who make less than
$20,000.

The only way to come to their rescue is through supporting the
sort of legislation which was the staple of the Old Left: laws which
raise the minimum wage, provide universal health insurance, provide free care for poor pregnant women and their new-born children, and the like. A left which gave up on radicalism and came back to liberalism would be one which assumed that there is nothing wrong with America that democracy --in the ordinary sense of free elections, free universities, a free press, a free judiciary--cannot cure. The faith that democratic institutions are, in the long run, able to overcome every variety of sadism and of selfishness is what I take James to have meant when he said that "democracy is a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure".

The anti-Americanism to which I referred earlier has weakened our faith in this kind of religion. So I think that we who have the luck to be college-bred need to remind ourselves, and our less lucky fellow-citizens, that our country has reason to be proud of its past, even though our present institutions and customs still exhibit plenty of sadism as well as plenty of selfishness. If we do not do so, we shall not be able to generate any interest in the political process among those who are suffering most, nor any hope in ourselves for our country's future.