

Neil Gross

Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher.
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Philosophers will want to engage with this new book on a very important 'post-analytic' philosopher, who died June 8, 2007. The title is accurate in that the book only covers 'the making' of the prestigious philosopher, not the last decades of his life and career. Chapter 9 on 'The Theory of Intellectual Self-Concept' (234-76) may be of less interest to philosophers than to sociologists and social psychologists interested in Randall Collins and Pierre Bourdieu. This book is not a contribution to philosophy per se, but a 'case study' of a public intellectual who first gained fame in standard ways and then made an abrupt shift to neo-pragmatism and 'leftist' American 'patriotism'.

Neil Gross is a welcome new addition to Canadian sociology and is editor of the prestigious American Sociological Association (ASA) journal *Sociological Theory*. He was previously a sociologist at Harvard University. He has published in the *American Sociological Review*. In the book under review here, there is even a 'Preface for My Fellow Sociologists', though in fact Gross has written a major book on a thinker and his *Weltbild* not often discussed by sociologists or even sociological theorists. (None of the more than thirty text books on sociological theory that I have at hand even list Rorty. Some do have chapters on Hegel and Nietzsche.) Gross claims that his book is a contribution to the sociology of education and 'the new sociology of ideas'.

The book gives insight into the way in which the ivy league universities operate. It can also be viewed as a continuation of the sociology of knowledge tradition associated with Karl Mannheim. But although it is sociological, academic philosophers will want to read this excellent book to gain a deeper understanding of one perspective on Richard Rorty's life and times. Gross has produced a well written, clear account of the sociological context of a philosopher's contributions. Since some philosophers believe that it is not worthwhile to examine the historical context that prompted a philosopher's thoughts, this book will not be accepted by all. But many thinkers do accept the notion that we can learn a great deal about a writer by knowing something about his or her *Zeitgeist* and *Lebenswelt*.

Rorty was a complex thinker who made a *volte-face* during his life from analytical philosopher to neo-pragmatist philosopher. He did a great deal to re-introduce William James and John Dewey into American philosophy at a time when pragmatism was considered passé. Gross explains that the about-face is not as remarkable as it may seem once we know more about Rorty's background. His political leanings were always somewhat left of center. He dropped the analytical approach once he had established his

academic career, and he then picked up a public philosophical view that has more radical political implications. I am reminded of Philip Mirowski's thesis concerning the politically conservative implications of neo-classical economics after World War II. Mirowski argues that immediately after the war the analytical approach fit in well with the general political climate and the interest in operations research. Rorty no doubt was affected by that *Zeitgeist* for awhile.

Many philosophers (but few sociologists) will have read Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (PMN) (1979). The book was published in the same year that Rorty, as President of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, allowed a group of non-analytical philosophers to gain control. Rorty cites some of his own work from the 1960s in that book. His article (1961) comparing Wittgenstein and Peirce is noteworthy fifty years later since it provides insights into Rorty's stand on Descartes. There is continuity in Rorty's thought, but one has to search for it carefully. Aristotle, Kant, Locke, Descartes and Quine get the most extensive treatment in PMN. Gross sets that book in context in terms of academic politics and the implications of philosophical views for broader national political issues in the United States. Indeed, he intriguingly starts the book with discussion of Rorty's famous paper on 'Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories' (1965), where Rorty's argument (against James Cornman and Kurt Baier) emphasizes the idea of historical and linguistic contexts.

Rorty gave a number of interviews toward the end of his life (some of which have been collected in books) and he seems to have freely shared information with Gross, who also cites many private letters. No doubt the case of Rorty's first wife, Amélie Oksenberg, will be discussed by those interested in feminist critiques of the tenure and promotion system within America's elite universities. The way women were treated then is quite unacceptable today. To some extent, when it comes to gender stereotyping, Rorty was a product of his times. Gross argues that this book constitutes a case study relevant to the sociology of (higher) education. Like all 'case studies' this book is a good beginning. Perhaps in future some of the theoretical ideas will be examined through more case studies done by Gross or others. The excellent methodological work by those who have contributed to discussions on the logic case studies and fuzzy set theory, especially Charles Ragin, could have been utilized better (see p. 12, n. 30). That is, while Gross feels that his book should be read by sociologists as a case study of education, he nevertheless does not utilize the full range of sociological methodologies. There is an extensive literature on the case study approach and Gross could have utilized more of that sociological background. The recent Sage *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* edited by Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe (2010) was not available to Gross, but much of the literature cited in that two volume encyclopedia has been well known for quite some time. The article by David C. Jacobs on "Pragmatism" in that Encyclopedia cites Rorty's (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge U.P.) as a suggested further reading. For Gross to claim he is doing a case study and then to not review the literature on the case study approach is a bit of a weakness when we think of Gross'

book as a contribution to the discipline of sociology.

What is most interesting to me personally is the fact that Rorty also leaned on Charles Sanders Peirce, considered by some to be the founder of American pragmatism. (Peirce himself changed the word to *pragmaticism*, a word ‘so ugly’ that no one would steal it!) Rorty kept detailed notes of a course on Peirce taught by Rulon Wells in 1952-53. I learned a great deal from Gross’ detailed discussion of the network of scholars at Yale interested in Peirce. Clearly the idea that pragmatism was entirely neglected in the 1950s and 1960s is incorrect. Peirce was acceptable to analytical philosophers as well. But Rorty found colleagues at Princeton too narrowly focused on analytical philosophy, though to some extent his work continued to benefit from his analytic training. In this book there is also a great deal to be learned about less well known philosophers like Rulon Wells. Others, better known, like Paul Weiss and Charles Hartshorne, also come into clearer focus.

This is a history of ideas at its best. Arthur Lovejoy would probably have been proud of Neil Gross, even though Lovejoy’s work gets scant mention. (I myself learned about the history of ideas from Lewis Samuel Feuer.) I was lucky enough to hear Rorty speak at a session of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco. After the session I spoke with him only briefly. But it meant something to me because he indicated that in his opinion my interest in Charles Sanders Peirce was worth pursuing. To a large extent Rorty has not been given as much attention by sociologists as one might expect. As pragmatism becomes more important to sociologists again perhaps Rorty’s views on Peirce will also become more widely disseminated and Gary Cook’s excellent studies will be rediscovered. Recent work by Thora M. Bertilsson of the University of Copenhagen, reported in *Perspectives* (May, 2010), the newsletter of the theory section of the American Sociological Association, definitely points in that direction. (Bertilsson focuses on Peirce but her work also has implications for the use of Rorty’s neo-pragmatist philosophy.) It was fascinating to learn Gross’ insights concerning Rorty, a major contributor to a perspective in philosophy which I believe has heuristic value for all of the social sciences. Moreover, Rorty takes the American ‘New Left’ to task for its intellectualized and postmodernist attitude. In his debate with Pascal Engel, translated in a slim volume as *What’s the Use of Truth?* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007), he defends his ‘minimalist’ version of objective truth. He rejects Engel’s arguments about ‘deflationism’. I concur with Rorty that letting certain intellectual debates go may be reasonable. But it is much harder to agree with the seeming willingness to drop Peirce’s insights concerning the asymptotic nature of scientific (including social scientific) research and theorizing. Perhaps in dropping analytical debates about epistemology Rorty may have been a bit quick to drop the search for truth and meaning. The clear value of Gross’ well written and tightly argued book is that it sets some of Rorty’s more obscure pronouncements into a meaningful context and allows those who may still wish to quest for truth and meaning to continue to do philosophical work. Although there may be very little ‘progress’ in the evaluation of human thought, it may still be the case that knowing

the history of our beliefs in what is true will help us to refine our knowledge.

The views that Peirce, Habermas and Derrida have put forward about interpretive networks and ‘communities’ were questioned by Rorty. However, perhaps paradoxically, a deeper knowledge of his meaning is provided by Gross’ richly textured examination of the details of his life and work. The intellectual context makes it clear that Rorty did not necessarily mean what he said, especially if we take that at the level of ordinary, everyday American English. Despite the lucidity of his writing style, his work has deeply embedded codes that may not require ‘deconstruction’, but that do definitely require the kind of Neo-Marxian, Neo-Weberian, structurally and functionally grounded semiotic analysis advocated by Vygotsky in *Thought and Language* (MIT Press 1962). Here the importance of Richard Rorty’s father and mother, James Rorty and Winifred Rauschenbush, should not be underestimated in terms of the impact of Marxist thought. The first two chapters of Gross’ contextualize Rorty’s intellectual biography by presenting each parent in turn. It would be interesting to analyze the way in which Rorty, as an only child, was influenced by his parents’ sense of being outsiders (which Gross links to philo-Semitic beliefs) and, using Vygotsky’s Neo-Marxist social psychological ideas about play and inner speech, to examine the ways in which Rorty’s ideas constitute ‘passionate but otherwise rational discourse’ (35).

Susan Haack, in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (University of Chicago Press 1998) includes a version of an after dinner skit performed in 1995 at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP), where actor-philosophers role played Peirce and Rorty. Rorty was made to seem the ‘interloper’ who had ‘distorted the meaning of the pragmatist tradition’ (335). But perhaps that skit was a misinterpretation as much of Peirce as of Rorty. After all, Peirce’s ‘pragmaticism’ was also iconoclastic. It was *his* answer to those aspects of William James’ popularization of pragmatism with which he (Peirce) disagreed. Maybe Peirce and Rorty were not that far apart in spirit.

J. I. (Hans) Bakker
University of Guelph