

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 390 pp. \$US 32.50 hardcover (978-0-226-30990-3)

The sociology of knowledge and intellectuals is undergoing a renewal and re-organization under the banner of the “new sociology of ideas” inspired by the pioneering work of Pierre Bourdieu, Randall Collins, Michèle Lamont and Charles Camic. Neil Gross’s new book on Richard Rorty exemplifies the potential of this research program on academics, intellectuals and ideas. Gross’s careful archival research, innovative theoretical synthesis and substantive contributions are likely to help inspire a range of new studies on the sociology of philosophy and the humanities. The book is well worth a careful read.

The topic is of potentially wide interest, and the research questions are carefully defined. Richard Rorty was one of the most prominent and influential late 20th century American philosophers until his death in 2007. Tenured at Princeton, a major analytic philosophy department, Rorty was widely regarded as an important contributor to this dominant paradigm within the American philosophical establishment before breaking with orthodoxy in the late 1970s. Rorty then went on to become the nation’s leading pragmatist, an interdisciplinary professor at the University of Virginia and a controversial figure credited with (or blamed for!) creating the openings towards a more pluralistic profession exploited by students of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida and various other continental philosophers in the 1980s and 1990s. The author of such pioneering texts as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) (where he broke with analytic foundationalism) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) (where he offered his own pragmatist alternative for doing philosophy), Rorty was also a major left-wing public intellectual, particularly in *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th Century America* (1998).

There is a massive academic literature on Rorty’s thought, but Gross’s project differs in significant ways from standard philosophy and intellectual history. Not concerned with defending or attacking Rorty’s ideas from within philosophical discourse, or with writing a standard intellectual history or full-scale biography, Gross endeavors to use sociological methods and theory to explain how it came to be that Rorty broke

from the analytic philosophy establishment to become a pragmatist renegade. In doing so, Gross also wants to expand on the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins to offer his own innovative notion of “intellectual self-concept,” a potentially major addition to the intellectual tool-kit used by sociologists of ideas and knowledge. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* succeeds both in answering the narrow empirical question regarding Rorty’s career and in developing a new theoretical approach of wide relevance.

The most engaging and illuminating sections of the book are the first two chapters on James Rorty and Winifred Rauschenbush, Richard Rorty’s parents. There is a large literature on the politics of professors and the class reproduction of professors through their children. In addition, recent debates within sociology itself have revolved around the tensions between academic work and professionalization on the one hand and public intellectuals and public sociologists on the other. Gross’s study implicitly deals with a question that has generally been unasked up to now in this literature: how does being raised by public intellectuals or parents who see themselves as intellectuals, not academics, potentially shape later academic careers? Gross’s well researched and written account of the lives and careers of Rorty’s left-wing nonacademic New York intellectual parents offers a new angle on an old series of issues and important insight into the core research question of the study. There are different pathways to the public intellectual role, including involvement in intellectual movements (such as Marxism or psychoanalysis), an earlier career as a journalist, and Gross now adds, a family tradition.

Most accounts of Rorty’s work and career do not stress the fact that his parents were both left-wing anticommunist writers and numbered among the lesser known participants in a network often called the New York Intellectuals. A group of thinkers and public intellectuals represented in public memory by such iconic figures as Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling and Irving Kristol, the New York intellectuals generally came of age in the late 1930s and 1940s, often began their career as radicals Marxists of some variety (often followers of Trotsky), wrote for little opinion journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *The Nation*, and *Dissent*, and penned politically inflected social criticism outside of the mainstream academic discourse that was coming to dominate intellectual life during what Russell Jacoby called the “age of academe.” Born in 1890 in New York, James Rorty became a radical journalist and anti-Stalinist writer in the early years of the 20th century. He suffered from depression, and ended his life as an author, speaker and activist in the networks of strongly anticommunist liberals that emerged out of the efforts of the CIA-funded Committee for Cultural Freedom.

Winifred Rauschenbush, Richard Rorty's mother, was also an author and socialist, an occupation and politics that flowed somewhat naturally from being raised by her father Walter Rauschenbusch, a famous Christian writer and proponent of the social gospel. Unlike her socially conservative father, however, Winifred was a critic of traditional gender norms. She ended up studying at the University of Chicago and worked closely with sociologist Robert Park. Winifred wrote less than James Rorty over the years, especially after the birth of Richard in 1931. As a team, however, Richard Rorty's parents were highly intellectual, politically committed and reasonably well-connected in the intellectual world that their son would soon enter as an undergraduate student and then budding academic.

The middle section of the book takes us through Rorty's studies at Hutchins College of the University of Chicago, his MA and PhD at Chicago and Yale respectively, his career as a professor at Wellesley College and Princeton, and his later appointment as an academic star at the University of Virginia. Gross succeeds in narrating the evolution of Rorty's thought as he comes in contact with influential professors (not all famous or known to contemporary scholars), begins publishing and carving out an intellectual identity and agenda, negotiates his way into jobs, and moves up the steeply hierarchical and highly competitive American academic system. Gross manages to sensitively talk about Rorty's life, ideas, and career simultaneously, successfully showing how they interact. For example, Gross tells the story of how Rorty's divorce from his philosopher first wife while at Princeton alienated him from his colleagues, and helped push him from this important center of analytic thought to the University of Virginia, where he essentially left the world of academic philosophy for an interdisciplinary position and mission.

The final two chapters represent Gross's most important theoretical and sociological contributions, as he moves from a chronological intellectual history in order to generalize from the case. "The theory of intellectual self-concept" gives us an excellent summary of the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, while compellingly arguing that their theories are oversocialized: they emphasize "fields" (Bourdieu) and "interaction ritual chains" (Collins) and do not give adequate attention to the internal conceptions of individual selves that shape the production of ideas in ways that are not purely structural. The sociology of ideas needs a social psychological foundation, and Gross does a nice job of synthesizing various symbolic interactionist, academic social psychological, and neo-Freudian theories to offer us a useful conceptualization that moves the literature forward. The final chapter attempts to use this model to theoretically reexamine the story of Rorty becoming a critic

of analytic philosophy after having been a major part of the analytic establishment.

The new sociology of ideas is based on the assumption that sociologists can tell us things about intellectual history and the creation of ideas that existing academic approaches do not. By these criteria, Gross's book succeeds in a variety of ways. The sociology of ideas is an ambitious intellectual project because in order to do sociology *on* ideas, one must first master, in this particular case, both 20th century philosophy and the history of ideas in contemporary America. Philosophers will likely be skeptical of anyone attempting to write about philosophical ideas from outside their professional networks, but Gross does a nice job of presenting the basic story of Rorty's break with analytic philosophy, and the content of his pragmatist innovation and original synthesis of various continental and American intellectual traditions. To tell the story of Rorty and American intellectuals, Gross had to get into the archives as an intellectual historian would do. To put the story of Rorty and his parents into context, Gross had to synthesize the existing literature on the New York intellectuals and the contemporary American academic social sciences and humanities. The book is a contribution in all these ways, but Gross's efforts were centrally concerned to go beyond traditional intellectual history by using sociological theory to *explain* Rorty's break with analytic orthodoxy. I believe he has succeeded, making a strong case that the conventional wisdom on Rorty does not take adequate account of the intellectual influence of his parents' politics and ideas. Gross's story rejects an account of a sharp break with analytic orthodoxy, instead emphasizing how Rorty's criticisms of mainstream academic philosophy and his intellectual identity as an "American left-wing patriot" is fully consistent with the views he internalized and developed as a young man before his formal graduate academic training. From this perspective, the requirements of academic tenure in the highly rigorous and competitive mid-20th century American academy helps explain Rorty's detour on his way to the post-analytic pragmatist ideas that secured his academic fame and intellectual contributions. The case study thus also raises a range of important questions about how intellectual self-concept shapes careers and intellectual decision making in a variety of structural conditions, which neither Bourdieu nor Collins successfully theorized. The book should be read, studied and built on, and now is essential reading for scholars of intellectuals.

The study has limitations, of course, and further work is to be done. There are limits to how much one can generalize from one case, as Gross would be among the first to concede, particularly as the author of a rigorous *American Sociological Review* article that used a random sample of

philosophers to predict what sociological factors determine the choice of pragmatism as a theoretical orientation. In my view, we need more paired or network comparisons (perhaps looking at more of the New York intellectuals than the most famous ones, for example) in order to move beyond the problems caused by a sample of one, while maintaining the focus on the content of ideas that was central to the success of Gross's book and to the promise of his broader program in the sociology of ideas. While I was basically convinced by the narrative and analytic discussion of the academic and philosophical fields offered in the book, one could argue that the case material calls for a more critical view of Bourdieu's field theory. Bourdieu's own theory, to be sure, gives us concepts to help understand how cultural capital is transferred from one field to another. Nonetheless it is striking that a major event that pushed Rorty into the upper levels of philosophical stardom and academic upper mobility was a review, not in an academic journal but in the *New York Review of Books* (albeit by the scholar Quentin Skinner). Our theoretical understanding of intellectual reputations and careers could do more to understand the complex interpenetration of elite intellectual networks and magazines with academic journals and professions, a theoretical angle that could lead us to tell the story of Rorty's fame with less focus on academic institutions and more attention to what Charles Kadushin called the "American Intellectual Elite." Rorty is not the only academic superstar whose intellectual self concept is less than fully academic, as the examples of Daniel Bell, Edward Said, Frances Fox Piven, Cornel West, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor would suggest. Having said that, the story of academic social mobility that Gross tells is compelling, the book is a terrific read that is likely to become a classic, and the theory of "intellectual self-concept" is well worth building on and developing.

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