

Problem-Solving Critical Contingencies: Popper and Rorty According to Cruickshank
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That Popper and Rorty have more in common than is admitted by their respective disciples is a welcome addition to scholarship by Cruickshank. In [his detailed and informed analysis](#) he masterfully continues to switch the focus on “problem-solving” from more general discussions on methodology and the role of metaphysics in debates over science and analytic philosophy. Perhaps because he is interested in juxtaposing the Popper-Rorty constellation onto Bloor’s version of the sociology of science, what Cruickshank surreptitiously accomplishes is to revive the argument that to read them fully is to appreciate their political positions and impact.

It is with this in mind that I take the liberty to offer some additional comments. First and foremost, philosophers of the caliber of Popper and Rorty cannot and perhaps should not hide in their respective ivory towers as if they are “mere academics.” Instead, their name recognition and the import of their ideas (on scientific methodology and the linguistic turn, respectively) bears a certain moral obligation to engage responsibly with the social, political, and moral issues of their time. Steve Fuller ([2004](#)) famously made this point when comparing Popper and Kuhn and illustrating the political courage of the former (World War II) in comparison to the latter’s cowardice (Vietnam war and Cold War). The issue is first to connect the different strands of one’s philosophical writings (from the scientific to the social, for example) and then contextualize them morally (if not outright judge them on moral grounds). It seems that when comparing Popper and Rorty along these lines, Popper may still fare better than Rorty, but that Rorty comes closer to the American ideal (however truncated) of public intellectual.

So, perhaps the second point to make is that another way of thinking about both of them is in terms of how they performed their putative roles as public intellectuals (see [my 2014 book](#) on the topic). On one superficial level, during his lifetime Popper enjoyed name-recognition in the UK and beyond just as much as Rorty in the US and beyond. When their names were mentioned, academics knew who they were and approximately what they said. When mentioned in circles outside the academy, I’d conjecture that Rorty’s name was more readily recognized because he wrote for popular media and was interviewed more broadly. This assessment, admittedly, comes from the west-shore of the Atlantic so it should be taken with a large grain of salt. But this doesn’t mean, as Jeremy Shearmur ([1996](#)) reminds us, that Popper wasn’t concerned with the affairs of the state. Indeed, he was concerned about political institutions, however general his statements may have been. So, on another level, perhaps less superficial, both Popper and Rorty were concerned about the affairs of the day.

Could they be considered public intellectuals? At this third level of analysis, the answer is in the affirmative, even though they may fall short of either the fully-engaged intellectual (as understood by Antonio Gramsci and Michael Walzer, for example) or the celebrity intellectual (as exemplified by the French Bernard-Henri Levy, the Slovene Slavoj Žižek, the American-Brit Steve Fuller, and one of Popper’s students the Israeli Joseph Agassi). But then there is a fourth level of analysis, the personal. The austere Popper cannot be compared to the easy-going, laid-back, and friendly Rorty; in the

presence of Popper graduate students and visitors trembled (so I've heard from witnesses), while I recall spending a wonderful lunch and afternoon in the presence of the charming Rorty in the mountains of Colorado. At this level, the comparison breaks down. Should it matter? Is this not the kind of socio-psychological reductionism Popper warns us against, while Rorty would simply smile dismissively but benignly?

The third point is that if we offer “problem-solving” as yet another focus of comparison between Popper and Rorty, then we should identify the ways in which they are similar and dissimilar. Though their respective “problems” were dissimilar, it's safe to say that they both similarly rely on critical rationalism, despised reductionism, refrained from appeal to a teleology or metaphysical absolutes (as Cruickshank points out), and are fairly open-minded and modest (fallibility and contingency are informative terms). Perhaps Rorty is more “liberal” (or a “liberal ironist” in his own terms) in what he'd count as appropriate critical engagement, inviting postmodern and continental contributions, while Popper the liberal would be more “conservative” in what should count. But these differences are as much stylistic (like their personalities) as they are methodological.

Another way to fully appreciate Popper's concern with problem-solving is his infamous “situated logic” which I have compared elsewhere to the feminist “stand-point epistemology” (1995). The point there was to highlight the ways in Popper's ideas have been forgotten, overshadowed, or simply relegated to the dustbin of conservative history rather than incorporated and acknowledged by so-called leftist political ideologues who could have benefitted from his “logic” if not from his own peculiar European background. It seems that this spirit of engaging apparent dissimilar points of views have motivated Cruickshank when presenting in the same paper Popper and Rorty, and this is a welcome (and for me a postmodern) change in mindset.

Finally, I'd suggest adding a postmodern veneer to this discussion and offer the following: Popper and Rorty alike invite anyone to their discussions. They are open-minded and welcoming, allowing outrageous hypotheses to be proposed as long as they can be tested, acknowledging the contingencies that reality and life bring about. Just like their surviving German counterpart, Jurgen Habermas, their demand for rationality is omnipresent without debilitating, necessary without being sufficient. Perhaps their legacy can be framed in postmodern terms as an appreciation for less hierarchies (scientific or political), more democratic institutions (for science as well as for society), and ever-more engagement of laypersons in the lofty affairs of academics.

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