

Introduction: Predictions Run in the Family

In the year 1936, the Great Depression loomed over American politics and society. In the same year, a journalist—a critic of Communism and defender of Socialism—published a book entitled *Where Life Is Better: An Unsentimental American Journey*.¹ *Where Life Is Better* explores “the nation’s ‘temperament’,” and it addresses the following questions: “What is going to happen? Do we have to copy Europe? What is American? What can we cherish and nourish ourselves?”² In order to address these questions with journalistic integrity, the author drove from New York to California talking to American citizens in Chicago and Detroit, Minnesota and Wisconsin, and Hollywood and San Francisco. About citizens in San Francisco, for instance, the author criticized flirtation with Communism. The author thought there must be better ways out of the Great Depression than what the American Communist Party offered America. However, one of the judgments of the author is that indeed “life is better” in California; the signature chapter of the book bears a similar title to the cover: “California, Where Life Is Better.”³ The author was in California for so long that the abandoned spouse wrote requesting to return home and to spend time with their son. Knowing the title of the forthcoming book and wanting his parent back home, their five year old son scribbled in a letter: “New York: Where Life Is Better.”⁴

Where Life Is Better makes strong predictions: the Great Depression would lead the United States of America to dictatorial rule, fascism, and participation in another world war. The

¹ For the sake of suspense, I break conventional citation standards and cite only the titles of these books—*Where Life Is Better* and *McCarthy and the Communists*—so as to conceal the identity of the author. I also rely on a secondary source—Neil Gross’s RR—to fill in some of the details about this author and these two books.

² Gross, RR, 76.

³ See *Where Life Is Better*, 269-331.

⁴ See Gross, RR, 88.

author alerts readers to these predictions in the “Introduction”: “The present is tragic enough; the years ahead will be even more tragic in all probability.”⁵ The author grounded these predictions on the weakness of democratic institutions: “We have...an established system...in the operation of which one class of the population has been encouraged...to exploit the other classes.”⁶ This exploitation makes America look like Europe prior to the First World War, and the author uses this observation to predict that America will find itself participating in another world war: “It struck me that the democratic dogma would probably crack at the periphery before it cracks at the center; that in Wisconsin and Minnesota the necessary class fission was more or less imminent”; before “that happens,” however, “the center...will...cast the dice for martial suicide in the next [world] war.”⁷ Either America would see the likes of a Communist Revolution (in the Midwest of all places!) or it would prevent such a Revolution from happening by entering into war. The author predicts that the latter will come true. Bolstering this prediction, the author concludes *Where Life Is Better* with the sobering judgment: “it will be easy to recruit the unemployed for...war.”⁸

Alongside the exploitation of the working classes, which meant the weakness of democratic institutions, the author also worried about the severe economic vulnerabilities caused by the Great Depression—which lead to tendencies toward American Nationalism and anti-Semitism found in a rising populism.⁹ The author equated the decline of capitalism with fascism:

⁵ *Where Life Is Better*, 50.

⁶ *Where Life Is Better*, 169.

⁷ *Where Life Is Better*, 170.

⁸ *Where Life Is Better*, 383.

“the logic of capitalism in its present period of decline...is the logic of fascism.”¹⁰ The more detailed yet precise version of this judgment is: “Our domestic situation is that of a progressively deteriorating social and economic anarchy, with a definite drift toward fascism.”¹¹ A reader, who read a draft of *Where Life Is Better* prior to its publication, alarmingly agreed with the author’s prediction about America becoming a fascist nation. In the published version of *Where Life Is Better*, the author included the reader’s agreement as a footnote: “At the present state of mind of our population, I am afraid the granting of such power could mean nothing but a step toward fascism.”¹² This comment leads the author to offer a definition of fascism not found in the body of the text: “Fascism...combines the maximum of power with the maximum of irresponsibility, and the domestic and international chaos which it ultimately precipitates is far more difficult to liquidate than the confusions of the quasi-democratic states.”¹³ In addition to leading the U.S.A. to another world war, the author predicts that the Great Depression will lead to electing a dictator who maximizes power but ignores the responsibility the government has to its citizens and to other countries. The result will be “chaos,” “confusion,” and class inequality.

Despite the suggested promise of the title, *Where Life Is Better* ends in a tone of hopelessness and pessimism. The author attempts a different ending but does not succeed. The optimism of, “Life can be made better in America. Indeed, America can be made quite magnificent,” is followed by “But not by those who dream dead dreams, who plead exemption

⁹ “This structural weakness, when combined with economic vulnerability and what [the author] saw as rural populism’s tendency toward nationalism and anti-Semitism, rendered the likelihood of an American turn to fascism high” (Gross, RR, 50).

¹⁰ *Where Life Is Better*, 343.

¹¹ *Where Life Is Better*, 380.

¹² *Where Life Is Better*, 170.

¹³ *Where Life Is Better*, 170.

from struggle on one ground or another, who cry for peace but will not pay its price.”¹⁴ Only one of the concrete predictions turned out to be accurate: America entered into a world war after the Great Depression (WWII). America neither experienced fascism nor saw a dictator rise to power in the timeframe constructed and imagined by the author.

Twenty-eight years later, the same author—this time with an additional co-author—published a journalistic analysis of Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism within American politics. What is the link between the books, *Where Life Is Better* and *McCarthy and the Communists*? The connection concerns the impact of populism nurtured in the Midwestern part of the United States. In *McCarthy and the Communists*, the authors claim that “Midwestern populism” allowed for the “Totalitarian” tactics known as McCarthyism:

[EXT]Senator McCarthy is not a unique phenomenon in American political history. He stems from the frontier tradition rooted in the Midwest. The frontiersman...carved out their own fortunes and produced a new image of individualism in America. The hero of this image was independent, self-reliant, virile, strong, simple, and direct. This rough-and-ready customer had little time for education, considered culture suspiciously effeminate, and was ignorant or contemptuous of Old World refinement and Eastern gentility. The politics that emerged in the Midwest, populist and conservative alike, was closely related to this image of individualism.... In this atmosphere, simple, unsophisticated, and uncomplicated panaceas could be put forward as solutions for large, complex problems. The region became a breeding ground for demagogues and demagoguery.¹⁵[/EXT]

With this paragraph, we might think that the authors conclude that the earlier predictions made in *Where Life Is Better* have been fulfilled because of Senator McCarthy and McCarthyism. The authors of *McCarthy and the Communists*, however, disavow any and every claim pertaining to McCarthyism as a form of fascism—“people have been careless about applying the word ‘fascist’ to McCarthy”—implying that McCarthyism did not fulfill predictions made, twenty-

¹⁴ *Where Life Is Better*, 383.

¹⁵ *McCarthy and the Communists*, 110.

eight years earlier, in *Where Life Is Better*.¹⁶ The author did not co-author *McCarthy and the Communists* in order to boast about the previous predictions found in *Where Life Is Better* but, rather, to make new predictions and to offer suggestions for preventing these predictions from coming true.

If the U.S.A. continues to be defined and determined by “Midwestern populism,” the authors predict that McCarthyism will lead to a version of Totalitarianism. They describe Totalitarianism in the following terms: “Totalitarianism is a unique product of the twentieth century which demonstrates that everything is indeed possible, which plumbs the depths of human depravity.”¹⁷ They continue by claiming that Totalitarianism results from “the process of atomization of society which in our time has made it possible to translate individual men into the...unknown phenomenon of mass-man.” In addition to being a “political phenomenon,” Totalitarianism “is a spiritual movement, possessing comprehensive ideological scope and global political aspirations”—which “demands of its adherents unquestioning, inflexible discipline and an all-embracing loyalty.” They complete their description of Totalitarianism with words that deeply matter for their prediction:

[EXT]Totalitarianism depends both on the ability of the leader to harness political power and on the political susceptibility of the followers. No one can judge precisely whether any man is a potential totalitarian leader unless it is known that the society within which he moves has political characteristics that would make it prone to submit to totalitarianism.¹⁸[EXT]

The authors claim here that predicting Totalitarianism ought to be considered a difficult, serious task. They spend the remainder of their chapter thinking through the question, Is McCarthy a

¹⁶ See *McCarthy and the Communists*, 113.

¹⁷ *McCarthy and the Communists*, 114.

¹⁸ *McCarthy and the Communists*, 114.

Totalitarian? They certainly think that McCarthy, himself, seeks Totalitarian power.¹⁹ Because the answer depends on “the political susceptibility of the followers,” however, their own answer must remain vague. In the combination of McCarthy’s desire for power and the tendencies of “Midwestern populism,” they see the “potential” for Totalitarianism in the U.S.A.²⁰ They predict that McCarthyism will lead either to Totalitarianism or—if not to that extreme—to a lengthy period of anti-education and anti-intellectualism in American politics and society.²¹

Before I reveal the author of these predictions, I consider the author’s predictions concerning the results of McCarthyism. The U.S.A. did not fall to Totalitarianism, but did it find itself in a lengthy period of anti-education and anti-intellectualism? One philosopher thinks so. Professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, John McCumber, has published detailed analyses and research on how McCarthyism impacted colleges and universities.²² In particular, McCumber finds that McCarthyism muzzled the mouths of philosophy professors throughout the U.S.A. for a very lengthy period—perhaps up until the 2000s. McCumber claims that McCarthyism led to the tendency within philosophy to no longer think of philosophy as a discipline relevant to society but one that only analyzed language and provided conceptual foundations for the natural sciences.²³ What we refer to as “Analytic Philosophy,” according to McCumber’s research, ought to be considered the product of McCarthyism. Now, “Analytic

¹⁹ “Senator McCarthy as a power-seeking demagogue is clearly a force to be contended with” (*McCarthy and the Communists*, 110).

²⁰ Their main distinction in the chapter, “Is Senator McCarthy a Totalitarian?” is that between “actual and potential” Totalitarianism (see *McCarthy and the Communists*, 109-124).

²¹ See *McCarthy and the Communists*, 125-147.

²² I am grateful to Brad Elliott Stone for directing my attention toward McCumber’s research.

²³ See McCumber, TD, 33-58.

Philosophy” existed prior to Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism—in the work of A. J. Ayers, Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and others—but McCumber’s insight is that it ruled itself as the only legitimate form of philosophy within the U.S.A. *because of McCarthyism*.²⁴ Doing “Analytic Philosophy” shields philosophers from being accused of impacting politics, policy, and society. In other words, it prevents philosophers from being charged with “corrupting the youth”—the famous charge against Socrates.²⁵ Although “Analytic Philosophy” remains a very high educational and intense intellectual school of thought, can it be considered “anti-education” and “anti-intellectual” in the sense of disallowing and failing to promote learning and rationality for the sake of making judgments about and against politics and society? McCumber thinks so. “Analytic Philosophy” refuses judgments against politics and society (or, at least, holds them in suspicion), and—*very much unlike Socrates*—the way that “Analytic Philosophy” works is that it makes itself a tool for the defense of the status quo when it comes to the areas of politics, religion, and science.²⁶

[A]The Reveal

The author and journalist who made these predictions was an American citizen named James Rorty.

Born in 1890, in Middleton, New York, James Rorty was educated at Tufts College in Boston. After college, he served in World War I (WWI) as an ambulance driver. When he

²⁴ McCumber clarifies: “I am not arguing that the McCarthy era is somehow responsible for the existence of Analytic Philosophy.... It has a longer and honorable history, beginning well before the McCarthy era with the work of Gottlob Frege...and passing over to the Cambridge of Bertrand Russell at the close of the nineteenth century. But it never had the kind of dominance in its homeland—Germany—that its transplanted varieties enjoyed elsewhere” (McCumber, TD, 53).

²⁵ See Plato’s *Apology*: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>

²⁶ See McCumber, TD, 59-90.

returned to the states, he became a journalist and “ran a dry-goods business.”²⁷ An aspiring poet, he spent his life writing newspaper articles and published a few books—two of which contain strong predictions about where the political climate of his day will lead in terms of American politics and society. James’s co-author for *McCarthy and the Communists* was the journalist, Moshe Decter, who worried about the similarities between the American Midwest and Germany under Hitler.²⁸ Moshe Decter was Jewish, but Rorty had no religious affiliation.

James Rorty married Winifred Rauschenbusch, the daughter of the Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. While it seems that James Rorty never had a religious affiliation, Winifred left her Christian faith because of the neglect she felt from her overly busy father. They both identified as Communists early in their marriage but changed their mind about Communism because of the treatment of Trotsky by the Communists in Russia.²⁹ They were part of an intellectual elite within New York and considered themselves “political radicals” throughout their life together.³⁰

The five year old son, who scribbled “New York: Where Life Is Better” in a letter to his father, was their only child Richard Rorty. Winifred birthed Richard on October 4, 1931 in New York City. They remained in New York throughout most of Richard’s childhood. At the age of fourteen, Richard entered the University of Chicago as an undergraduate student. He received two degrees from the University of Chicago: a BA and a MA, both in philosophy. After Chicago, he went to Yale and earned his PhD in philosophy. He taught at Princeton University, the

²⁷ Gross, RR, 36.

²⁸ See Gross, RR, 58.

²⁹ For details pertaining to the Rortys’ relationship with Trotsky, see Rorty’s “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” 29-50.

³⁰ For more details, see Gross, RR, 29-83.

University of Virginia, and Stanford University. Richard died on June 8th, 2007 in Palo Alto, California.

Defending both popular and unpopular positions—such as Leftism, liberalism, patriotism, postmodernism, and pragmatism—Richard is now known as one of the most important philosophers in American history.³¹ Part of what turned him into one of the most important philosophers in American history is that he diagnosed and dismissed the school of thought, “Analytic Philosophy”—not on the grounds that it resulted from McCarthyism but, rather, using its own methods of analysis and apolitical argumentation against itself.³² However, the connection between his father’s prediction of McCarthyism leading to anti-intellectualism and Rorty’s critiques of “Analytic Philosophy” should not be lost on us; in chapter 1, therefore, I connect Richard Rorty’s philosophical thinking back to his father’s book on McCarthyism.

[A]Why the Dark Years?

Like his father, Richard Rorty made predictions about American politics and society. In relation to his father’s work, however, Richard Rorty articulates *when* life is better—not *where* life is better. If Rorty articulates when life is better, then why the title of *The Dark Years*??

The Dark Years? is about Richard Rorty’s predictions. I am interested also in the nature of predicting the future. Usually, we think of predictions through the lenses of either religion or science. Prophecy is the religious category for the nature of predictions. Within the natural sciences, scientists use current evidence to forecast what might happen in the future if we

³¹ For one judgment among many that attempt to capture Rorty’s importance, Mark Edmundson introduces Rorty on these terms: “Richard Rorty is America’s most controversial philosopher. His books...defend the possibility of durable ethical and political allegiances that do not ground themselves in transcendental truths” (Edmundson, “Richard Rorty Is America’s Most Controversial Philosopher,” 30).

³² See Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

continue down a similar path that we have been. Part of Richard Rorty’s work involves divorcing philosophy from both religion and science. There might be a tradition within journalism concerning making predictions about politics and society (as James Rorty does), but philosophers tend to be skeptical about making predictions.³³

For instance, Richard Rorty illustrates the overall skepticism within philosophy about making predictions. In “Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes,” Rorty finds it reasonable to dismiss *all* of the arguments found in both *The New Testament* and *The Communist Manifesto* simply because the predictions that both texts make about the future—God’s return to earth in *The New Testament* and a classless, egalitarian society in the case of *The Communist Manifesto*—have yet to come true.³⁴ On Rorty’s reasoning, in that particular essay, the failure of one prediction renders the whole system of thought faulty.³⁵

Despite his skepticism about making predictions, Richard Rorty follows in his father’s footsteps and offers predictions about America’s political and social future. Richard Rorty’s predictions concern the period in which we are now in while I write this book (2014—2020). However, he does not stop there: he also predicts what life in America will look like from 2020 to 2044 and from 2045 through 2095. In the year 1997, Rorty predicted the election of a “strongman” in the 2016 U.S. presidential race. Instead of waiting over twenty years to make another prediction, like his father did, Rorty’s next set of predictions came a year later. In 1998, he predicted the proliferation of gun violence and an increase in mass shootings from 2014—2044. In both 1997 and 1998, Rorty reflects upon how homophobia, racism, and sexism will

³³ From here forward, the last name “Rorty”—when used by itself—refers to Richard Rorty and not his father James Rorty.

³⁴ This essay can be found in Rorty, PSH, chapter 14.

³⁵ For my full analysis of this essay, see Goodson, SM, chapter 10.

come to define American politics and society in the middle part of the 21st century. He labels the years from 2014—2044 as the “dark years” of American society. Also in 1998, however, he predicts that American politics and society will be defined eventually by (Pauline) love and (Millian) sympathy from the years 2045—2095.³⁶

In this book, I explain and evaluate Rorty’s predictions concerning the years 2014—2095. I find this exploration worthy because Rorty’s predictions lead us back, conceptually, to thinking through the significance of hope.³⁷ While I explain and evaluate Rorty’s predictions concerning the years 2014—2095 in the first part of this book, in parts two and three I think through the significance of hope—both agreeing and disagreeing with Rorty’s writings on hope and how hope relates to social life.

Three important points need to be made up front about Rorty’s predictions. First, his timeline is not always clear.³⁸ Clarity comes only through the rational reconstruction of a variety of arguments found in three different texts: *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1997), *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1998), and *The Future of Religion* (2005). In this book, through the rational reconstruction of a variety of Rorty’s arguments, I do my best to clarify Rorty’s predictions and his timeline concerning the 21st century.

³⁶ As in Paul of Tarsus (St. Paul or the Apostle Paul) and John Stuart Mill.

³⁷ In this way, *The Dark Years?* serves as a needed sequel—at the political and social levels—to *Strength of Mind: Courage, Hope, Freedom, Knowledge*.

³⁸ In some lectures and previous publications, I have claimed that Rorty predicts forty years of darkness—Rorty also says forty years in at least one publication. However, the math does not work for this because he is rather clear that 2045 will be the year that marks the absolute end of the “dark years.” My hunch is that Rorty used “forty years” for rhetorical purposes because it sounds so “biblical.”

While many of Rorty's predictions have come true (shockingly), the second important point is that he has already missed the mark with other predictions. I present both what he gets right and what he gets wrong. In other words, I avoid the fallacy of cherry picking in my presentation of Rorty's set of predictions. Does the failure of some of his predictions render the whole system of Rorty's predictions faulty? I remain interested in the nature of predictions because of questions like this one.

Third, scholars of Rorty's philosophy tend to discuss his *hopes* for American society as if he thought we (Americans) could live into them during the period of Rorty's own lifetime.³⁹ In what will be taken as a controversial move within scholarship on Rorty's philosophy, I treat Rorty's philosophy of religion and political philosophy—both his writings *prior to* his predictions and *after* the predictions—not as a vision of hope that Rorty developed for his own time but, rather, as pieces of a greater vision for American life after the “dark years.”⁴⁰ In other words: I read Rorty's defenses of Leftism, liberalism, and patriotism as what he thinks will be the case from the years 2045—2095.⁴¹

I put the word “hopes” in italics in the previous paragraph because this third point, and the emphasis on hope, provides an opportunity to state the thesis for this book. Rorty's philosophy of religion and political philosophy provide us with a type of “social hope” about what the U.S.A. can and will look like—*the country we can achieve*. According to my interpretation of his work, for Rorty, this “social hope” will come about only after we survive the

³⁹ I, too, wrote about Rorty's neo-pragmatism in this vein. Only when planning and researching the present book did I realize that his predictions might alter the timeline for his insights concerning the philosophy of religion and political philosophy.

⁴⁰ This includes Rorty's reflections on “the future of religion,” which he published only two years prior to his death.

⁴¹ An obvious challenge to my third point comes in the form of one of Rorty's book titles: *An Ethics for Today*. I address this in chapter 5.

“dark years.” My claim, against Rorty, is that we can *hope* to “achieve our country” sooner—not after going through the “dark years”—but in the near future...as early as the 2020s. I argue that the responsibility of intellectuals and scholars, in our present moment, involves the cultivation and promotion of “social hope”—sometimes on Rorty’s terms, other times against them—and this responsibility stays with us whether we avoid or continue the “dark years.” Instead of using Rorty’s phrase “social hope,” I defend three other versions of hope: melancholic hope, pedagogical hope, and redemptive hope.