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RICHARD RORTY

"PRAGMATISM IS A PHILOSOPHICAL THERAPY. IT HELPS YOU STOP ASKING THE UNHELPFUL QUESTIONS."

Things that we should probably stop talking about:
The way things really are
The authentic source of our ideals
The deep philosophical roots of political parties
The hope that philosophy might empower

Richard Rorty may be America's most influential living philosopher; he is certainly both the most controversial and the most widely read. The son of Trotskyite journalists, he grew up in New York and New Jersey, where his family farm occasionally hid Trotskyites fleeing Stalinist assassins. After studying philosophy at the University of Chicago and Yale, he took a post teaching at Wellesley in the early Sixties. He soon moved to Princeton, where he taught for twenty years.

For his first ten years at Princeton, he toiled as a standard analytic philosopher; though he taught some so-called Continental philosophers—Europeans like Hegel and Heidegger who spun dramatic, sweeping narratives about great big things like the World Spirit or Being—his work continued in the tradition of analytic philosophers, who tend to write dense, logical pieces on the structure of sentences and other narrowly circumscribed topics in the philosophy of mind and language. Midway through his career at Princeton, however, he experienced a sort of philosophical rebirth: after discovering the work of contemporary European philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, and rediscovering the work of early American pragmatists—C. S. Peirce, John Dewey and William James—he began to lose his faith in the traditional problems of analytic philosophy. Over the course of the Seventies, he published a series of papers increasingly critical of the concerns of the analytic philosophy establishment. These papers culminated in the 1979 blockbuster Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, a book taken as a wholesale dismantling of the apparatus of philosophy since Descartes.*

Philosophers since Descartes—or even, Rorty argues, since Plato—have understood our primary relationship with the

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world as one of representation. We attempt to represent the world as accurately as we can; the pursuit of truth is based on the hope that we might represent the World As It Really Is, the world in- and of-itself, the world free of the taint of human perspective and fallibility. Representation, Rorty claimed in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is a worn-out metaphor, a philosophical position that leads to endless squabbles: if we believe we have represented the world accurately, we fall victim to a blinkered and arrogant dogmatism; the other extreme, the fear that we may never overcome the gap between our subjective minds and the objective world, leads us to epistemological skepticism—the idea that we can never really know anything. Rorty suggests that we replace the idea of representations of the world with the idea of descriptions of the world designed to help us achieve particular, finite purposes. Rather than ask if we are in touch with the way the world really is, Rorty asks if our descriptions and our vocabularies help us complete our projects. Unsurprisingly, the book was dismissed by analytic philosophers, but it gained him not only a large following in literature and cultural studies departments, but a lay audience as well. After breaking ranks with the philosophical establishment, he left Princeton for a vaguely-defined position in the Humanities at the University of Virginia. He left UVA in 1998 for Stanford; after a few years of teaching part-time, he retires in June.*

Since 1979, he has published prolifically: Consequences of Pragmatism *(1982) fleshed out the broader implications of his pragmatic line of thought;* Contingency, Irony and Solidarity *(1989) considered the pragmatist take on the relationship between private self-creation and public solidarity; four collections of essays addressed a panoply of philosophers and political thinkers. With recent articles and books such as* Achieving Our Country *(1998) and* Philosophy and Social Hope *(2000), he has turned to the history and future of the American left, as well as a wide range of topical social and political issues. This interview took place at his home in Palo Alto, before he left to deliver a series of lectures at Oxford.*

—Gideon Lewis-Kraus

THE BELIEVER: You've written quite a bit about both philosophy and politics, and the relation—or lack thereof—between them. I'd like to begin by talking about your political side. In most of your earlier political writing, you talked about the need for hope and patriotic pride—faith in the idea that our country's wrongs might be redeemed—as precursors to genuinely progressive political strides. This Old Leftist-style pride was contrasted to the sullen defeatism of the academic left—people like Foucault, who once said that to imagine an alternative future is just to further our participation in the total corruption of the present system. More recently, however, you've quoted Gore Vidal and the poet Robinson Jeffers, who wrote that America was "heavily thickening to empire." Have you become less sanguine about our political future?

RICHARD RORTY: Well, at this point you have to quote Gramsci: "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." If I had to lay bets, my bet would be that everything is going to go to hell, but, you know, what else have we got except hope?

BLVR: It certainly looks like the Second Gilded Age is over. Do you have any hope that it will be followed by a new Progressive Era?

RR: It all depends. No one quite expected FDR. But on the other hand, nobody expected Bush. We didn't think, in December of 2000, that we were going to have this government. The next Democratic candidate might just have the courage to be like the guy in *West Wing*, and he might actually get elected. I don't expect this, but stranger things have happened in American politics.

BLVR: Who would be your bet?

RR: I really have no idea. Kerry seems sort of electable. I thought Bradley had an excellent chance.

BLVR: You've written in the past about the problems of the academic left being distracted by cultural politics—they've turned away from actual issues of the redistribution of wealth, the reinvigoration of the welfare state, campaign finance reform, and focused on identity politics, deconstruction, etc. Do you think that September 11 changed any of this stuff? Has the academic left changed its tendency to go in for cultural politics rather than money politics?

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RR: No. I think all that September 11 changed was to give the fascists a chance. The Republicans saw that if they could keep us in a state of perpetual war from now on—under the guise of the War on Terrorism—since you never change horses in midstream, they could keep electing Republicans more or less forever, as long as they kept the level of war hysteria going. But that's just a Republican initiative, and all the left has been able to do is react to that. It reacted to it as it would react to any other extreme right government, without particular reference to cultural politics.

BLVR: Before we continue discussing the state of the academic left, I want to get started talking about philosophy. You've written that there have been two central philosophical disagreements in the last couple hundred years. The first is the one between the universalist philosophers and the Romantic poets: the former believe that our destiny as humans is to get ourselves in touch with our immutable human nature, and the latter profess a creed of imaginative and idiosyncratic self-creation. The second distinction is the one between the philosophers, who believe that Truth is somewhere out there to be found and loved, and the sophists, who think that all we need are descriptions of the world suited to our own needs and projects. The first distinction comes down to: what's more important, who we always have been and Really Are, or who we might be in the future? The second asks: should we be concerned with something called Truth, or should we just focus on utility? Could you expand on these two distinctions? They're sort of similar.

RR: When the Romantics came along, the suggestion came to be taken seriously for pretty much the first time that we just dreamt up our ideals; they weren't out there waiting to be discovered by us, seen in the natural light of reason. Furthermore, Romanticism had an historicist component, so there was the suggestion that maybe the same ideals don't work for everybody. They just thought that it was the poetic imagination in local, here-and-now circumstances that does the good work, as opposed to the rational mind, which is always the same under all cultures, and is always more or less in touch with The Way Things Really Are, The Way the Natural Law Really Is. It seems to me that it's only since the Romantics, roughly two hundred years, that anybody has taken seriously what's now called the quarrel between the literary and the scientific cultures. If you think of the scientific culture as still wedded to the idea that there are Truths that reason will discover for us, and the literary culture as saying, well, maybe there aren't, that's a two hundred year old quarrel that is still going on. The second quarrel, the one between Socrates and Protagoras the Sophist, is roughly a quarrel about whether there's a thing out there called The Truth waiting for us to discover it, which it is our duty to love, and—now I'm interpreting Protagoras in a way that makes him a proto-pragmatist—somebody who says that we just work out solutions to contemporary problems as we go along, rather than there being a far-off goal called the Truth to be pursued. Inquiry is a matter of problem-solving in the here-and-now rather than a search for the Eternal.

BLVR: So, as far as the second distinction goes—between Socrates and the sophist Protagoras—pragmatists side with the utilitarians, the sophists. But the question of where pragmatism comes down between Plato and the Romantics is stickier, since it splits the difference. How does pragmatism fit in between those two?

RR: Pragmatism is like Romanticism in its doubts about Platonic, universal Truth and Reason. What differentiates it, on my account, from Romanticism is that the Romantics tended to exalt something called Passion, or the Imagination, or Authenticity, or Depth, which becomes what Habermas called an "other to reason"—that is, something that claims to have an authority trumping that of reason. Pragmatists don't believe that we have any faculty that has such a priori authority, and, in general, don't want to ask the question of what has innate authority or legitimacy. Our view is that you can forget whether an ideal is authentic or legitimate or universal or deep, and just ask whether it's useful for solving the problems of the day. What unites Plato and the bad kind of Romantic is the notion of your ideas having authority because of some privileged

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source, while the pragmatists, say "the hell with what the source is, let's look at the consequences."

BLVR: You've written that one of the reasons philosophy has become marginal to culture is that people are tired of the philosophical pendulum that swings between Plato and the Romantics, and between Socrates and the Pragmatists, that we don't have the patience to listen to disagreements between those who seek sweeping, synoptic universalistic grandeur and those who seek ineffable and inexhaustible depth. It seems to me that those arguments are still going on. There was an article in the *Times* in early April about the roles of philosophers, political scientists and historians in the current administration, and the writer traced the intellectual genealogy of this group—people like Francis Fukuyama, Paul Wolfowitz, Bill Bennett, Clarence Thomas, Alan Keyes, and Bill Kristol—back to the philosopher Leo Strauss [1899–1973], and his student Allan Bloom. Strauss was the epitome of the modern Platonist. He had severe doubts about democracy, because he thought that the lazy, stupid masses could never get in touch with Truth, capital T, the way that the philosophers could. As a Platonist, he thought that the Good was prior to the Right, that philosophers should strive to answer the question "What is the good life for man?" and set-up a political system accordingly, rather than allow for a multiplicity of good lives. On the other hand, Todd Gitlin has written in his recent book—*Letters to a Young Activist*—that the problem with the Green Party is that they're too hung up on authenticity and questions of spiritual purity to make prudent compromises and thus get stuff done—the Romantic side of the dialectic you've been describing. So how can you square these debates with what you've said about our commonsensical impatience with the swings of the philosophical pendulum?

RR: I guess I don't think there are any deep intellectual roots to either the Bush Administration or the Greens. That is, I think of the Greens as just expressing distaste for the two big parties. I mean, there may be a lot of stuff about deep authenticity somewhere, but I think of most of the three million votes that Nader got as just protest. Disastrous protest, as it turns out. There are some Straussians in the Bush administration, but I don't think they have any particular importance, and a lot of the people who get identified as Straussian intellectuals have nothing to do with Strauss. Bennett doesn't, for instance. I doubt he ever heard of Strauss before he met young Kristol. So I think that it's one thing to have doubts about democracy—Posner has doubts about democracy, Schumpeter has doubts about democracy, everybody has doubts about democracy. There are all kinds of things wrong with it: it's always in danger of populist fascism, representative assemblies are always corruptible by bribes. Everybody knows that. You don't have to have a view about Plato and Truth to have doubts about democracy. But, more importantly, I'm not at all sure Strauss would have been interested in voting for Bush over Gore, because he thought that American liberalism, including the welfare state, was a perfectly reasonable arrangement. Because they're both from the University of Chicago, people connect Milton Friedman and Leo Strauss, but there isn't any particular connection. Strauss had nothing, so far as I know, against the welfare state. Coming from Germany in the Twenties, he took the welfare state for granted—they'd always had one.

BLVR: But what about the rhetoric of this group of politically involved Straussians? They put everything in terms of a moral crusade in the service of Truth and Morality, and they take Plato's ideas about the necessity of a well-ordered, militarized, censoring polis as a call for a National Security State. Those things seem like they're in line with a Straussian/Platonic political philosophy.

RR: I don't see that. Every government, left or right, always engages in moral crusades. What else are they supposed to do? Especially when they make war; any war has to be a moral crusade. There's nothing in Plato or Aristotle that suggests the virtues of a National Security State. Strauss would have loathed the idea of the military-industrial complex.

BLVR: In other words, the neoconservatives around the White House—Cheney and Wolfowitz and the neocon

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Project for a New American Century—may trace themselves back to a Straussian political philosophy and a Platonic love of Truth, but that's just a pretentious philosophical gloss on an unphilosophical set of policies?

RR: Yeah, exactly.

BLVR: But even if it's just rhetoric, it seems to me to be fairly powerful rhetoric, and calling it rhetoric doesn't explain away the problem of their policies. In a response to the review you wrote of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* [in a 1991 issue of *The New Republic*], the Straussian Harvey Mansfield wrote that "Nietzsche said that man would rather will nothingness than will nothing. Strauss often quoted this farseeing remark… [and suggested that] communism, in its desire to put an end to class conflict, is essentially for wimps." Democratic socialism gets construed as a cowardly alternative to the bold, meritocratic fray. In *Letters to a Young Activist*, Gitlin makes exactly this point: the neoconservative movement has been so successful exactly because of its Platonic rhetoric about toughness, and the disciplined moral pursuit of the Truth at all costs. You've written that "the appeal to something overarching and invulnerable, and the appeal to something ineffable and deep, are both just advertising slogans—ways of gaining our attention." That may be true, but it seems unhelpful to dismiss the rhetoric as mere sloganeering when it seems to be working.

RR: Who is it supposed to be working on? How do you convince the public that wanting social justice, the welfare state, trade unions, maybe not a communist revolution, but a social democratic state, is wimpish? I don't see that anything in Greek philosophy or Strauss would help convince you of that. You get convinced that the welfare state is philosophically wimpish if you're a selfish greedhead to begin with. Philosophy isn't going to turn you into one if you weren't already. I think that people like William Bennett are just pandering to evangelical Christians. If there's an intellectual influence on the Bush Administration, it comes out of the Southern Baptist Convention, and those are the people who buy Bennett's books. They wouldn't know Plato from a hole in the ground. Strauss would have found it unbelievable to be linked with the Southern Baptist Convention, standing for morality.

BLVR: Let me try putting this another way. You claim that these philosophical debates between Plato and Nietzsche, between the universalists and Romantics, are really just a matter of discussion in philosophy departments. But it seems like those debates might have a more central political importance when it comes to arguing against these neoconservatives we've been discussing, even if it's just fluff, since they've decided to frame the discussion in those terms. If someone like you, someone with a pragmatic bent, came down hard against the Straussian Platonism they brandish, don't you think it would undermine their influence?

RR: I can't see it that way. Michael Lind had a piece [in the *New Statesman*] about the gang around Richard Perle and Wolfowitz, saying that this is a very small, very special group of weirdos. They're not the tip of any iceberg. They just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Cheney happened to get them all into the government at once, because he was in charge of the transition, and that's why we have this stuff going on in the Middle East. But stranger things have happened in the history of countries. Cabals do assume power in governments, and they carry all before them. If Theodore Roosevelt hadn't had the influence he did, we probably wouldn't have Puerto Rico, or occupied the Philippines. It wasn't that there was a vast swell of opinion behind Theodore Roosevelt.

BLVR: So you have no interest in meeting any of those people on philosophical terms, on the philosophical level upon which they want to be taken seriously.

RR: I just don't believe that they do. I'd be very surprised if anybody except the people who actually took the courses from Bloom, like Kristol or maybe Wolfowitz, could even talk about this stuff, or would want to. Well, actually, I wouldn't mind having a discussion with them, because I'd like to see them make the connection between Strauss and the present administration.

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I don't think they could do it for a minute.

BLVR: While we're talking about intellectuals in politics, I want to turn to the state of intellectuals on the left. Maybe it's just my generation that glamorizes New York Intellectuals like Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling, but it seems like they managed to mobilize themselves, in politics and in literature, with neither the overblown rhetoric of universalism, nor the rhetoric of unrestrained Romanticism. How do you think they managed to do this?

RR: By splitting the public from the private. The *Partisan Review* was referred to as representative of Trotskyite-Eliotic culture. T.S. Eliot for private life, Leon Trotsky for public life. You got lots of so-called Trotskyism in the *Partisan Review*, but you also got a lot of Clement Greenberg—Eliotic stuff about art and literature. And the two didn't have anything to do with each other. You just used one for one occasion and the other for another occasion.

BLVR: It seems like the heirs of Howe and Trilling—people like Michael Walzer, Michael Ignatieff, Paul Berman, you—are following in the footsteps of the previous generation's hardheaded, pragmatic, social democratic liberalism, but it seems to me tough to make the case that the people in charge of *Dissent* now, who have roughly your philosophical and political views, have the sort of impact that their antecedents did.

RR: I guess I don't see the New York Intellectuals as having had any more political impact. If you were a certain kind of student tending towards the left in 1950, you read Trilling. If you are the same kind of student in 2003, you read Michael Ignatieff. I'm not sure that one was more influential than the other.

BLVR: Do you think that people like Ignatieff and Walzer, the present crew around *Dissent*, have any chance of playing the same sort of role in future administrations that people like Bill Kristol play now?

RR: Yeah, sure. Arthur Schlesinger went to Washington with Kennedy, and the relation between say, Schlesinger and Trilling was, I imagine, no tighter than the relationship between Robert Reich, Clinton's Secretary of Labor, and, say, Walzer. Again, I don't see much difference between that generation and this one.

BLVR: Do you think that contemporary philosophers have any chance of becoming public intellectuals, the way that Dewey and James were?

RR: I've never liked the term "public intellectual." Somebody, recently, said something like "has anybody every heard of a private intellectual?"

BLVR: I saw that, too. I think that was in a piece Nicholas Howe wrote about his father [in *Dissent*].

RR: Right. That was a good point. Some intellectuals are more public than others, because they manage to get printed in places with larger circulations than others. But it isn't as if we've ever lacked for public intellectuals. Since they are typically on the left, in periods when the right is in power they get paid relatively little attention to. But maybe their time will come again.

BLVR: You've argued that the analytic philosophy establishment has done everything it can to become more and more professionalized and insulated.

RR: Yeah, but that doesn't prevent them from throwing off people who are politically useful. Ronald Dworkin, who's sort of a hanger-on of analytic philosophy, is about as politically useful as an intellectual gets. I admit, I can't think of a philosophy professor in the U. S. since Dewey's time who has played that role.

BLVR: Do you have a sense that what you've been doing for the past twenty-five or thirty years has been effective? In April's *Prospect Magazine* (UK), the British philosopher Simon Blackburn hurled the same invectives you've spent decades responding to—charges of relativism, irrationalism, dilettantism, undermining the morals of Western civilization. This must be frustrating. Do you feel like you've gotten through to anyone?

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Made any progress?

RR: No. I don't think any larger proportion of the population is persuaded of my line of thought than was thirty years ago.

BLVR: Does that matter to you?

RR: Well, you know, it would be nice if it had been different, but I've enjoyed myself.

BLVR: Do you see yourself, in the coming years, continuing to respond to these charges of relativism, etc.? Or are you done with them?

RR: There's no particular reason to respond to articles like Blackburn's, because, as you say, it's been the same article for the last thirty years, and if I've replied to it once, I've replied to it six times already, so I don't have to do it again. I think that what I write from now on will be pretty much rehashes of what I've already written. I don't have any new ideas.

BLVR: Do you see yourself continuing in any particular direction in the next few years? More about the role of philosophy in culture? Politics and philosophy?

RR: A lot is determined by just who asks you to write something. For example, for the last year or so, I've been getting requests from German newspapers to write about the buildup to the war in Iraq, the end of the war in Iraq, the Bush Administration in general, so I've been writing little squibs in German papers. But I wouldn't have written on politics if these papers hadn't asked me to write something. And I got an invitation to write about Cold War liberalism for a conference in the fall, so I am going to spend the summer reading stuff about what they call Cold War culture. It's not like I have any long-term plans, I just sort of wait to be asked to do something.

BLVR: Do you think there have been any particularly good, distinctive challenges to your pragmatism?

RR: The thing that's made me have the most doubts about a lot of what I've said is [University of Pittsburgh analytic philosopher] Robert Brandom's work. I was saying that we should get rid of the notion of "representation" altogether. A lot of pragmatist philosophy consists in saying that there is no relation between mind, or language, and reality called The Accurate Representation of Reality, because criteria of accuracy of representation are impossible to specify, and pressing the issue leads to epistemological skepticism, and so on. I used to think that the whole metaphor of representation was so thoroughly misleading that it should be dropped, in favor of descriptions that serve our purposes, as opposed to descriptions that get at The Way It Really Is. Brandom convinced me that we could hang on the notion of representation, and that it probably would be better to do so, so as not to appear to be paradox-mongering.

BLVR: In what sense can you hang onto it?

RR: By saying that it's okay to use it on the retail level, but not on the wholesale level. It's okay to say that we're representing the stars better and better these days through finer and finer spectroscopic analysis and astrophysical explanations. We understand viruses and genes better than we did fifty years ago, and we are representing them, if you want to put it that way, more and more accurately. But if you ask the wholesale question—"Are we representing The Universe more correctly, now that we study genes and antimatter and stuff like that?"—that's a really bad question. All we can say is that new descriptions, vocabularies, discourses have proved useful, and, internal to those practices, discourses, language-games, we have criteria for betterness of representation. What we'll never have are large-scale, wholesale, philosophical notions of accuracy of representation, as in, "We are closer to the Intrinsic Nature of Reality than our ancestors." Making that distinction between wholesale and retail uses of representation meant a lot to me, but to a non-philosopher it might seem a quibble.

BLVR: One of the standard objections that Simon Blackburn brings up is: how can you say, for example,

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that a map is not representing a specific patch of territory, in terms of the height of the hills and the amount of rainfall, etc?

RR: No pragmatist ever questioned that there are some things you can put into relations of isomorphism with other things, and they were representations—maps, photographs, stuff like that. However, when it comes to Mendeleyev's Table of Elements—are we representing the Nature of Matter accurately? Well, where's the isomorphism? It's a tool, not a representation. If you use Mendeleyev's Table, there's a lot of stuff you can do that you couldn't do if you didn't put any stock in it. But the attempt to say: "This is isomorphic to reality in a way that a map of New Jersey is isomorphic to the coastline of New Jersey" is a metaphor that won't cash.

BLVR: Do you think that Brandom's distinction between retail and wholesale representationalism has made any headway, in terms of convincing analytic philosophers, in the places where you haven't?

RR: No. This is something that I, so to speak, read into Brandom; it's not altogether explicit in his work. I find myself beating the drums and popularizing Brandom, and I'm not always sure he thinks I am doing it right. But you popularize what you find in the book, rather than what the author thinks he put there.

BLVR: Do you think that Brandom is taken more seriously in anglophone philosophy departments than you are?

RR: Oh, much more, sure. For one thing, he argues much better than I. His arguments are much clearer and denser and better articulated and more systematic than mine have ever been. He also brings in a range of material that I simply am incompetent to handle. He understands Frege, and I don't.

BLVR: Have you ever lamented the lack of interest that philosophy departments have shown toward your work?

RR: I don't know. Maybe I did once upon a time. By now, it seems so familiar and natural, I would be surprised if it were otherwise. Maybe twenty, thirty years ago, I thought I was going to convince analytic philosophers of my views. But I haven't thought that for at least twenty years. When I wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), I didn't realize that it would be taken as a harsh polemic against analytic philosophy. I thought it was a benevolent internal reform of analytic philosophy. But nobody read it that way.

BLVR: And you've written that you were shocked at how many people ended up reading that book.

RR: Yeah, I've never quite been able to put together the fact that it didn't get any favorable reviews when it came out with the fact that it keeps right on being translated, selling, and so on. I don't know what to make of that.

BLVR: You wrote, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), that one of the reasons why so many people find pragmatism distasteful is its inability to empower.

RR: Yeah, it's basically negative and therapeutic. It doesn't have a great, big, powerful, constructive message. You can't go away inspired by the need to do something or other. You read the pragmatists and all you know is: not Descartes, not Kant, not Plato. It's like aspirin. You can't use aspirin to give yourself power, you take it to get rid of headaches. In that way, pragmatism is a philosophical therapy. It helps you stop asking the unhelpful questions.

BLVR: When you realized that you had put yourself in such a position—as the chief spokesman of a primarily negative philosophy, one that would never empower—did that require a shift in your self-image?

RR: No. If you want to change the world, you go into politics. I get my changing the world kicks out of writing polemical articles about the Bush administration for German newspapers, because that's what the crisis of the day happens to be. Being a philosophy professor, you're within the limits of the discipline, and if you happen to be a pragmatist philosophy professor, you're just

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not in the empowering business.

BLVR: That's what led me to ask those questions at the beginning about the Straussians in our government. For a young, intelligent, somewhat bookish college student, Strauss is extremely seductive. He says, "You, the young philosopher, are part of a small cabal of true thinkers who see the light that no one else sees, those who emerge from Plato's cave into the sun. You are separate from the blinkered masses, who will never know Truth, and are destined to take charge of them."

RR: Exactly, that's really the shady side of Strauss. The suggestion that you, the intellectuals, are in touch with something mystic and wonderful beyond the comprehension of the masses. That side of Strauss can be overlooked.

BLVR: Overlooked, sure. But that seems to me the source of the arrogance of these people who fancy themselves the new breed of philosopher-kings, the people who you think shouldn't even be calling themselves Straussians. But maybe it's just general arrogance, as opposed to special philosophical arrogance.

RR: But it's exactly the same arrogance you got in French Marxists of the fifties. They, too, knew something that the poor wimpy social democrats and the masses would never understand. The arrogance of the intellectuals is the same on the left and the right. And if you want something to be arrogant about, Marx gives you a much better way of being arrogant than Strauss does. Marx has at least some claim to be in on the actual problems of the day, and Strauss and Plato sure as hell don't.

BLVR: But, in some way, that's why it seems like it would be so frustrating to be in Walzer's position, or Ignatieff's position, or Gitlin's position, where you know that the sort of pragmatic, means-end, campaign-oriented liberalism that you're offering is never going to fire up the crowd.

RR: I'm not sure about that. It isn't going to fire up the crowd, but it might fire up the saving remnants. A whole cluster of Progressive Era intellectuals—John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Herbert Croly and Walter Lippman—were pretty good at creating a core of people who went to Washington and served Roosevelt and Truman and exercised considerable power, even though they didn't think they had a secret that only the wise knew, a la Strauss, and they didn't think they were in on the movement of history, a la Marx, but they thought there was a lot of good work to be done.

BLVR: That's what I was asking before. How did those people manage to congeal some sort of movement around their pragmatic, non-empowering liberalism?

RR: Well, if you elect the right Democrat, they'll all be in Washington the next day. There are plenty of them sitting there waiting for the phone to ring. You get the impression from people like Reich and Stephanopoulos that the best and the brightest that Clinton brought into his administration were all horribly disappointed by the end of the first four years. I don't know whether that was Clinton's fault, or the fault of the Republican Congress, but they went away. I just don't think that there's a lack of bright, educated, intellectually sophisticated, social democratic liberals in the United States. Nobody is inviting them to Washington at the moment, but all it would have taken for them to be in Washington would be if all those guys who voted for Nader had voted for Gore. Someday I want to write an article about the year that the left stabbed itself in the back, resulting in the election of Berlusconi, Chirac and Bush. In all three countries, the left managed to just blow it.

BLVR: Do you think it was the "*Nach Hitler, uns*" mentality? The idea that Hitler was so wacko, there was bound to be a public uprising against him, and politics would swing back the other way, toward the social democrats.

RR: I trust not. That would be so foolish. I wouldn't think that anyone would believe that.

BLVR: But didn't that play a role in '68? Gitlin says that he never even thought about voting for Humphrey.

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Nixon, they thought, was such an obviously terrible choice that the rest of the country was bound to be radicalized.

RR: Nobody over thirty ever thought that. I don't know how the students convinced themselves of that.

BLVR: I heard students my age making that argument two years ago.

RR: Really?

BLVR: Yeah.

RR: I guess that they didn't foresee John Ashcroft.

BLVR: Probably not.

RR: I remember sitting around the Princeton philosophy department lounge in '68, and I turned out to be the only person in the room who was voting for Humphrey. The question was whether to vote for Eldridge Cleaver or Jesse Jackson. I suggested that perhaps one should vote by figuring out who one thought would do the best job as president, and everybody just smiled at me.✯

More from Margot Livesey, continued from page 89:

ML: Oh, I'm contradicting myself. You were asking why go into an MFA program and I said something about writing not being cherished, people scribbling is not seen as a great thing and if you go to a program, people want you to do this thing.

BLVR: And in the world at large, people seem to want to know what the writers *du jour* are doing.

ML: I don't know if you've ever read Sartre's autobiography *Les Mots* [*The Words*]. He says that one of the things that made him want to be a writer was a photograph he saw of people waiting in the docks in New York for the boat that was bringing Dickens to one of his reading tours. The idea that so many people would be paying attention to you when you weren't there was one of the compelling reasons he wanted to be a writer. He wanted to feel that when he left the room he'd still in a sense be there. I claim no such influence myself but there is something apt about it.✯

Big frame, no picture, short caption funnies

Lara Flynn Boyle is very thin.