

Philosophy as Pedagogy: With Richard Bernstein¹

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Richard Bernstein was a great teacher. That goes without saying, in part, I believe, because he had “enormous faith in what education and schooling could achieve in a democratic society,” words Dick wrote about John Dewey, but that could easily apply to him as well. The classroom for Dick, again as he said about the classroom for Dewey, “provided a model of community life.” Which did not mean, Dewey cautioned, a place where anything goes. Quoting Dewey directly, Dick let the father of progressive education set the record straight: “Doing as one pleases signifies a release from truly *intellectual* initiative and independence.” With no direction, Dewey continued, students “become listless and finally bored.”² Although Dewey was writing about young children, not university students, Dick’s philosophy of teaching relied on a similar set of assumptions about the conditions needed for serious learning to take place. For Dick, community life in the classroom was guided by a common sense of purpose, or, given the passion with which he taught, it was driven by that purpose: To create a platform, a community, to engage ideas across philosophical traditions that had previously ignored, even rejected, one another.

The time Dick spent with his students was as important if not more important than the time he spent alone, writing seminal works on pragmatism, critical theory, phenomenology and post-modernism, Hannah Arendt, Freud and Spinoza. For Dick, teaching and writing were inextricably intertwined and his students knew it. When, in 1999, the Department of Philosophy nominated Dick for a teaching award, one student wrote:

I think that it is a tremendous testament to his unwavering commitment to philosophy that he never appears to think of teaching as one more thing that he has to do. There is no question that he views his philosophical engagement with students to be the most important thing that he does.³

In Dick’s classes, students studied philosophical questions with a kind of engagement and rigor that many of them had never experienced before. As another student wrote in 1999:

² Richard J. Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 267.

³ Rachael Cayley, cited in Judith Friedlander, “A Philosopher from New York,” *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed., Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge: MIT Press: 2004) 349.

The first time I sat around a seminar table with him and a small group of students...I knew this professor was going to have a profound impact on me. Spending two hours on just one paragraph from Hegel, he challenged us to push ourselves to the limit. 'If you want to smell incense, you can go out there on 14th Street, but if you want to do philosophy, you'll come in here and SWEAT,' he said, as he banged his fist on the table.⁴

Most recently, on May 4, 2022, as the final class meeting of his seminar on American Pragmatism was drawing to a close, Dick switched registers and began speaking to his students in an affectionate, sentimental tone. I thank Olga Knizhnik, Dick's doctoral student and research assistant, for sharing a recording of those few precious moments in what was not only his last class of the semester, but in one of the two final seminars he was teaching over Zoom before he officially retired. The other was on Hannah Arendt. Speaking slowly and with emotion, Dick urged his students to embrace philosophy as their life's work, the way he had done. Dedicating themselves to philosophy would enrich their lives, he told them, the way it had his, even during difficult periods like the one he was then going through. With characteristic verve, he talked about celebrating life, and like Spinoza's free man, he thought "least of all about death." An astonishing assertion to make before students who knew that Dick had spent much of the semester shuttling back and forth between hospital and home on E. 52nd Street. But these students also knew that Dick never gave up, never once missed a class in either one of the seminars he was teaching that term, even when that meant conducting some of those classes from his hospital bed. And on top of that Herculean achievement, this lover of life had finished his book manuscript on *The Vicissitudes of Nature: From Spinoza to Freud*.⁵ On May 4th, Dick was happily back home, looking terribly frail, but his voice was strong and grew audibly stronger as he shared how much he was looking forward to celebrating his 90th birthday in 10 days.

In the time I have left, I will briefly describe Dick's early years as a teacher, in the 1950s and 60s. This was a legendary period in his long and successful life as a university professor, a time when his reputation as a teacher inspired thousands of students to march in protest against Yale upon learning that the university had not

⁴ Sara Walker Bosworth, *Ibid.*, 348-349.

⁵ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes of Nature: From Spinoza to Freud* (Hoboken: Polity Press, 2023).

granted Dick tenure. I will leave it to other members of this panel to talk about their experiences studying with Dick in later years. In my concluding remarks, I will share two excerpts from Dick's writings that reveal his ideas about education and the teaching of philosophy. Not exactly his philosophy as pedagogy but the closest I could come.

Dick's early years at Yale and Haverford⁶

Dick began teaching philosophy at Yale in 1954, during his second year as a graduate student, in a special program for Freshmen called, Directed Studies. He was 22 at the time. Among his first students was Robert Rifkind, the son of a famous judge, who went on to become a corporate lawyer. According to Bob, Dick "was the best teacher I ever had at any institution. I was in his philosophy seminar my freshman year—he didn't yet have his PhD and had never taught before. It was amazing and had a great impact on me." While teaching undergraduates, Dick decided to write his doctoral dissertation on Dewey; its title, "Metaphysics of Experience," choosing to work on a philosopher essentially ignored by the discipline at the time, and in whom no member of the tenured faculty was interested. This, in turn, inspired Dick's students to create the John Dewey Society—later described by its founders as a precursor to The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS, formed in 1959)—and they asked their dynamic young teacher to serve as its faculty advisor.⁷

In 1958, Yale's Philosophy Department appointed Dick to the position of assistant professor, in the same year he received his doctorate—even if its tenured members continued to have little interest in pragmatism. Why? In large part, I suspect, because Dick was a very popular teacher. But, also thanks to the influence of their eminent colleague Paul Weiss, who had recognized Dick's promise early on. Many years later, Dick described Weiss "as the person who probably had the profoundest influence on me at [that] stage of my life on what it is to be a

⁶ In this section, I draw extensively on my article, published in a Festschrift marking Richard Bernstein's 70th birthday: "A Philosopher from New York," in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). For that contribution, I interviewed Richard Bernstein and, with his permission, recorded it. All quotes by him come from that recorded interview.

⁷ For an evocative description of student life at Yale in the 1950s and Dick's influence on his students, see: André Schiffrin, *A Political Education: Coming of Age in Paris and New York* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2007).

philosopher.”⁸ Let me add, as many of you already know, that Weis was the first Jew ever tenured in Yale’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences – in any department.

When Dick did not get tenure at Yale seven years later, he rejected the idea, bandied about at the time, that it had to do with the fact that he looked and sounded too much like a New York Jew. According to Dick, that was nonsense. As far as he was concerned, by the time he got to graduate school, anti-Semitism at Yale was over. Yet, he confessed, Yale was “a world so foreign to me that I thought it was a chapter out of F. Scott Fitzgerald... I thought this was Hollywood. Here I was a kid from Brooklyn and New York and Chicago...I just had no idea that this even really existed.” But even so, Dick insisted, “By the time I got there you could say that there was almost a kind of Judeophilia....Geoffrey Hartman was there, so was Harold Bloom. I never really experienced any kind of systematic anti-Semitism. I was outspoken, I mean not on Jewish issues, but on any issue.”

Yale’s decision not to tenure Dick caused a national uproar, with some suggesting, I repeat, that lingering anti-Semitism among some members of the faculty had influenced the deliberations. Whatever the reason, the case was all over the papers and remained newsworthy for a long time. To this day, people still talk about the Bernstein Affair, pointing to it as one of the most contested tenure cases in US history. Many saw the outcome, what is more, as the final nail in the coffin of Yale’s Department of Philosophy, which had already lost six faculty members between 1959 and 1964 – two of them had retired and four others had resigned to accept positions at the University of Pittsburgh.⁹ After Yale let Dick go in 1965, it took many years to restore its philosophy department’s reputation, but that’s another story.

When students learned that a university-wide committee had voted against granting Dick tenure, they staged huge demonstrations, in solidarity, they thought, with the department of philosophy, which had recommended Dick for tenure. On March 3, 1965 *The New York Times* ran an article entitled, “Students at Yale Picket All Night.” *Newsweek* counted over 1000 pickets with slogans demanding that Yale support creative teaching and reverse the decision of the committee. The actual number of protesting students, Dick recalled, was closer to 2000. An article published in *Time Magazine* quoted several members of the faculty who shared the students’

⁸ In the late 1950s, Paul Weiss, who had founded *The Review of Metaphysics* in the 1940s, asked Dick to serve as his assistant. He then turned the journal over to his young colleague in 1964.

⁹ Charles Hendel and Brian Blanshard retired from Yale in 1959 and 1961 respectively. Nuel Belnap left Yale for the University of Pittsburgh in 1961. Wilfrid Sellars and Jerome Schneewind followed Belnap in 1963 and Alan Anderson in 1964. (Belnap and Schneewind had not yet come up for tenure at Yale).

outrage, Paul Weiss, of course, but also the medievalist Robert Brumbaugh, who challenged the rumor that the reason Dick, who was only 32 at the time, did not get tenure was because he had not published enough. If that were the case, Brumbaugh claimed, “We could not have gotten tenure for Aristotle when he was 32, we could not have gotten it for Kant, and on a much homelier level, I could not have gotten it.”

In an effort to clarify the university’s position, Yale’s president, Kingman Brewster, returned the case to the department of philosophy, which had unanimously recommended him for tenure, it is true, but without enthusiasm, in a way that implied that they wanted the university-wide committee to do the dirty work for them. When asked to vote a second time, the majority of Philosophy’s tenured faculty – the only ones who could cast a vote—recommended against tenure, enraging the students even more.

Everyone, or so it seemed, had a different explanation for why Dick didn’t get tenure. As *The New York Times* put it politely, “Some believe that the intense outgoing philosopher, whose manner contrasts with the ironic, detached demeanor of many of his colleagues, has won few friends by his outspoken criticism of some academic procedures at Yale.” Philosophers at other institutions claimed that the “specific case of Dr. Bernstein is part of a larger split within the philosophy faculty at Yale – and in American philosophy in general – between the analytical and speculative approaches.” They identified Dick and Paul Weiss as being “primarily concerned with metaphysics and the speculative formulation of large systems of thought.”¹⁰

As the story spread across the country and abroad, invitations began to pour in from colleagues at other colleges and universities, inviting Dick to apply for openings in their departments. Thirty-six academic institutions wrote to explore the possibility of making him an offer. In the end, Dick accepted a position at Haverford College, where he remained for 24 years, until he came to the New School. He chose Haverford, he explained, because it was close to Philadelphia where his wife Carol, who had a PhD in literature from Yale, might find a teaching position as well. And this she did, first at the University of Pennsylvania, then at Bryn Mawr.

Known for his outspoken views against American racism and the Vietnam War, Dick attracted left-leaning students to his classes from Bryn Mawr as well as

¹⁰ Citations from the press, listed in the order quoted: *New York Times*, March 3, 1965, p. 9; *Newsweek*, March 15, 1965, p. 48; *Time*, March 12, 1965, p. 48; *New York Times*, March 9, 1965, p. 41 (3 separate quotes); *New York Times*, March 8, 1965, p. 23 (3 separate quotes); *New York Times*, March 9, 1965, p. 41.

from Haverford, including a certain Nancy Shapiro, better known today as Nancy Fraser. As Dick tells the story, one year in the late 1960s, he offered a course on Western Marxism where he had students read the works of European Marxists of the post-war generation like Jürgen Habermas. But early on in the semester, and I quote Dick directly, “Nancy Shapiro got up and said that this was a lot of crap. The answer was really in the third volume of *Das Kapital*.... The falling rate of profit. And she and some other students took over the class and reorganized the curriculum. It was actually one of the best courses I’ve taught,” Dick smiled, “because suddenly students were taking increasing responsibility for what was going on.”

Dick’s observation echoed John Dewey, who wrote in *Democracy and Education*:

... no thought, no idea can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself... or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he *directly* gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think.¹¹

This kind of wrestling with the conditions of the problem is what Dick aspired to achieve in the classroom and, more often than not, he succeeded. John Dewey, on the other hand, rarely did. He was apparently a terrible teacher.¹²

While Dick embraced Dewey’s pedagogical principles, he did not, at least not to my knowledge, write about philosophy as pedagogy, or about pedagogy tout court, with the singular exception of what he liked to call his first publication: *A Study of*

¹¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944 [1916]) 159-160.

¹² In his biography of John Dewey, Alan Ryan quotes Dewey’s devoted student, Sidney Hook, on his professor’s teaching style: “As a teacher, Dewey seemed to me to violate his pedagogical principles. He made no attempt to motivate or arouse the interest of his auditors, to relate problems to their own experiences, to use graphic, concrete illustrations in order to give point to abstract and abstruse positions. He rarely provoked a lively participation and response from students, in the absence of which it is difficult to determine whether genuine learning or even comprehension has taken place...” Sidney Hook, cited in Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1995) 38.

Some Aspects of Education in Israel, which he wrote for the Ministry of Education in 1958, in collaboration with Morris Eson, ten years after the founding of the State of Israel.¹³

Excerpts from Richard Bernstein's Writings

Soon after Dick and Morris Eson published their study, Dick summarized their findings for the progressive newspaper *Ha'aretz*. Although he was only 26 at the time, the article reads like vintage Bernstein. In fewer than 2,000 words, he lay out the problems facing Israel's educational system and suggested how to solve them, in a clear, no nonsense style. In one revealing paragraph, for example, he wrote:

The educational situation in Israel today is extremely serious, not simply because it has suffered under the pressures of mass immigration, but because there is a growing lack of education talent and effective leadership. In the report written in collaboration with Professor Eson, we have located some of the deficiencies and have suggested some reforms.

But, Dick warned,

Piecemeal reform can have little effect on the educational system. What is needed is an educational movement, divorced from political parties and existing institutions, dedicated to the discussion and clarification of aims and objectives, critical of abuse and deficiencies, concerned with the improvement of teacher quality, educational methods and curricula. Whether there will be such a movement of educational reform and who will participate in it and lead it are open to questions. But it is clear that education stands at the very heart of Israel's future. It will determine whether Israel is to become a second-rate Levantine country or be the locus of a cultural renaissance of "the people of the book."¹⁴

¹³ Richard J. Bernstein and Morris E. Eson, *A Study of Some Aspects of Education in Israel* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1958, in Hebrew).

¹⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, "Education in Israel," mimeographed translation from the Hebrew article that appeared in *Ha'aretz*, July 18, 1958. Translation preserved in R.J. Bernstein's personal archives.

In February, 1989, when Dick came to the New School, the Philosophy Department was not Levantine, of course, but it was singularly second rate and had been since the mid-1970s, after the death or retirement of Aron Gurwitsch, Hannah Arendt, and Hans Jonas. That's a long story that I don't have time to tell here.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that after Ira Katznelson and Jonathan Fanton recruited Dick to the New School to help rebuild the department, Dick lay out his vision for strengthening the program in the inaugural lecture he delivered in February, on the occasion of his appointment to the Vera List Chair of Philosophy ("Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds"¹⁶). Did Dick also discuss his ideas about philosophy as pedagogy? That would be a stretch, but he did reveal how he thought philosophy should be taught, particularly at the New School, given the university's intellectual legacy.

Dick made it clear that while he welcomed the opportunity to help renew the New School's distinguished reputation as a major center for the study of phenomenology, a reputation it had enjoyed from the 1940s to the 1970s, he planned to open up the department to other schools of thought as well, a change that triggered fierce opposition from the old guard. Sticking to his guns, he reminded the assembled that the legendary ideological battles between the Anglo-American and Continental philosophers, "are beginning to seem remote and irrelevant." It was therefore high time for philosophers at the New School to lay down their swords. "Scars from the wounds of these battles still remain," Dick continued,

but there are encouraging signs of the emergence of a new *ethos* – one which bears strong affinities with the *ethos* characteristic of the formative stages of the pragmatic movement. One may discover the ways in which deconstruction shows affinities with pragmatism or

¹⁵ For Dick's role in rebuilding the Department of Philosophy at The New School, see Judith Friedlander, *A Light in Dark Times: The New School for Social Research and Its University in Exile* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), chapters 17 and 18.

¹⁶ Dick borrowed the title and much of the text for his inaugural lecture at the New School, delivered on the occasion of becoming the Vera List Professor of Philosophy in the winter of 1989, from his presidential address at the eighty-fourth Annual Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, delivered on December 29, 1988, in Washington D.C. The original lecture was subsequently published in Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) 323-340, without the passages quoted here, where Dick spoke about the New School. To my knowledge, Dick's reflections about philosophy at the New School were never published, but a copy of them have been preserved among his papers and in the New School Archives.

with the investigations of the later Wittgenstein. One may realize that Hegel's distinction between *Moralität* and *Sichlichkeit* is relevant for understanding contemporary moral and ethical theory. One may realize that Popper and Foucault are relevant for untangling the complexities of historicism. These inter-weavings extend to the interplay of disciplines which not so long ago were taken to be quite distinct—philosophy and the law, philosophy and literature, philosophy and the social disciplines.

Dick also reminded the assembled that the history of philosophy at the New School did not begin in the 1930s with the creation of the University in Exile, but with the founding of the New School in 1919:

Here I want to remind you of some of the ways in which the history of the New School has been intertwined with the pragmatic *ethos*. One of the founders of the New School was John Dewey. The *esprit* that shaped the New School during its formative years reflected Dewey's deepest educational concerns about what education ought to be in an urban democratic community. Horace Kallen, one of the most sensitive interpreters of the pragmatic tradition, was among the first philosophers to teach at the New School.

"Perhaps less well known," Dick continued,

is the encounter with American philosophy that occurred when the University in Exile was established. Let me single out one strand of this encounter. Some of the first articles published in English by Aron Gurwitsch and Alfred Schutz dealt with William James...they perceived the convergence and overlap between James's investigations and those of phenomenology.... One might also mention Hannah Arendt's brilliant interpretation of the American revolutionary experience. Her analysis of political action and the public spaces that it requires bears a strong affinity with Dewey's own understanding of public political activity.

Dick then concluded:

There is a moral—a promise – in these dialogical encounters with American traditions. For the New School philosophers sought to foster a genuine engagement with what is best in American traditions. They were not simply ‘defenders’ of European traditions. Their creative contributions to philosophy are deeply marked by their critical appropriation of American traditions.

This was the great legacy of Philosophy at the New School, and Dick intended to enrich it by having students study the works of philosophers across a wide range of philosophical traditions. And in doing so, he breathed fresh life into a department that had closed in on itself in an effort to defend phenomenology against critical theory on the one hand and analytical philosophy on the other. Under Dick’s bold leadership, the department became once again a magnet for students interested in studying phenomenology and the history of philosophy, while it also offered them the opportunity to study critical theory, postmodernism, pragmatism and, horror of horrors, analytical philosophy. Traditions about which Dick taught and wrote critically, engaging one with the other.

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