

A Memory of Dick Bernstein

David Carr

Emory University



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I am proud to claim one of the longest acquaintances with Dick Bernstein of those outside his family. I first met him in the fall of 1960, when I was in my senior year at Yale. In his memory, I would like to relate an anecdote that dates from that first encounter. It reveals a lot about him as a teacher and a person.

Although Dick was already legendary as a teacher, and I had certainly heard of him, I had not had a class with him before my senior year. The main reason was that I spent my “junior year abroad,” as it was called then, in my case at the University of Heidelberg. I had already decided to major in philosophy, and already had a special interest in German philosophy. We had no strict program, so I was pretty free to do as I pleased. I took lecture courses and seminars, and did a lot of reading, improving my German in the process. So I read a lot of Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche. By the time I was nearing the end of my stay, I decided it was time to tackle the big boy of the day, Martin Heidegger, legendary even among natives for the difficulty of his language.

So I spent most of my summer plowing through *Sein und Zeit*, which in 1960 had not yet been translated into English. (A few shorter texts had been translated, but everyone knew *Being and Time* was the magnum opus.) It was hard going, and I’m sure there was a lot I didn’t understand, but I managed to finish the reading as my rusty Holland-America student ship nudged its way into the port of Hoboken in late August.

Returning to New Haven, I wasted no time in signing up for the senior seminar, reserved for philosophy majors, taught by “Mr. Bernstein;” all our teachers were called “Mr.” (no women in sight, of course, in those days.) This is where my first meeting with Dick Bernstein occurred. He was only eight years older than I, but that difference seems large at such an early age. I think the class was devoted to the concept of experience, as is confirmed by what happened next. This would have squared with Dick’s Deweyan interests at that time; and this concept was to be considered in the work of several philosophers. Students were expected to prepare a paper to be distributed and read in class. In meeting with my new instructor, I had of course not neglected to mention my major recent accomplishment: reading Heidegger in German. I had bragged about this to anyone who would listen, and some who wouldn’t. I soon regretted it.

“Mr. Carr!” he said (for that’s how *we* were addressed in those days). “Write a paper on Heidegger’s concept of experience.” This struck terror into my heart, for several reasons. For one thing, as is well known, one of Heidegger’s conceits is to avoid standard philosophical vocabulary, preferring to invent his own terminology.

That's one reason he is so hard to read. The term "experience," or rather its German equivalent, appears nowhere in *Being and Time*, as far as I know. I might have used this as a way of dodging the assignment, but I knew this would be an easy out. Besides, as I knew very well, and as Mr. Bernstein knew as well, even if the term "experience" (or *Erfahrung*, or *Erlebnis*) didn't appear in *Being and Time*, the concept of experience surely did. It *had* to. All I had to do was find it.

So, I wrote the paper; I still have a copy of it. I even got a compliment from my instructor. I must have presented it in class, though I have no memory of this. Any details of the semester that followed are subsumed under the general memory of that peculiar combination of intensity and excitement known to anyone who has ever had a seminar with Dick Bernstein. In two years at Yale and one year at Heidelberg, I had seen nothing like it.

This initial encounter, so important (and even terrifying) for me personally at the time, is also worthy of recounting here, because it reveals certain things about Dick Bernstein, and especially about his relation to his students, that remained throughout his life.

First, he really wanted to learn about Heidegger. It must be remembered that in those days there were vast precincts in American philosophy where Heidegger's was not a name to be mentioned in polite company. It's true that this was less so at Yale than elsewhere, but learning about Heidegger was not high on the agenda of most people there. But it was for Dick, just as he later wanted to learn about Derrida and other newcomers. The "continental" label, not to mention the language barriers, never stood in his way.

Second, he turned to a very green undergraduate to help him in this task. In doing so he showed me a great deal more respect than I deserved. But the fact that he seemed to think I could do this job led me to believe that I could do it. He issued a challenge, in other words, to which I had to rise. This is something on which everyone who was lucky enough to have Dick Bernstein as a teacher will likely agree: he respected his students.

And finally: he was tough, and he was demanding. No laziness, no shortcuts, no half measures, were acceptable. And here too, perhaps especially here, he showed us his respect. So began my long acquaintance and friendship with Dick Bernstein. In the end I was even able, for a time, to be his colleague at the New School. But throughout, he remained my teacher. He taught me, and so many others, what it means to be a philosopher, a teacher, and a mensch. He also taught us that these are not three separate things.