

On Contingency or  
What It Means to Be a *Mensch*:  
A Sicilian Memory

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It was a rainy day in May of 2015. We were traveling back from Syracuse to my hometown, Messina. In the car there were Dick, Carol, my sister, and my brother-in-law, when all of a sudden we crashed against the wall of a badly lit tunnel. Nobody got hurt, but the car was destroyed, and it was quite clear to all of us that we had narrowly escaped death. Dick and Carol kept calm throughout the whole ordeal, and when we finally arrived at Messina late at night, they devoured the dinner prepared by my mother, eagerly asking her for recipes and Sicilian cooking secrets, as if nothing had happened. When they saw me sink into anxiety and my characteristic sense of guilt (after all, I had lured them to Sicily and organized our Syracusan expedition which had nearly killed them), Dick yelled at me with his cheerful loud tone: “Cinzia, you are a Marxist! Be coherent: you ought to accept contingency! Unforeseen things just happen!”

In the following days we traveled around Sicily—by train this time—visiting Palermo, Monreale, Segesta, and the Valley of Temples, and eating an insane amount of granitas, a Sicilian sweet specialty, for Dick wanted to personally verify my claim that Messina’s granitas are the best of the whole island. During those beautiful days together no word was spent by them on that terrible car crash and—as far as I know—Dick and Carol never told anybody what had happened on the motorway from Syracuse, I suspect out of consideration for my feelings of guilt (and probably to escape scolding from their children).

This is a dear and important memory: those days were the moment where I realized to what extent Dick was a *mensch*. I remember that I kept thinking: who else would be able to react to such a traumatic event with such calm, intelligence, elegance, and care for the people around them?

During our Sicilian trip, in which he fell in love with the Doric temple of Segesta, Dick kept repeating to me enthusiastically: “Cinzia, I really am an ancient Greek!” Dick’s first philosophical love was for Plato, with whom he continued a passionate romance throughout his life. I have often wondered about the reasons for this long-lasting Platonic passion, which he had in common with me. Certainly, Dick shared several traits with Plato’s Socrates: he was a little *daimon*, a Silenus or a satyr, ironical and bizarre, *atopos*, possessed by the god of philosophy and reveling in a permanent Bacchic philosophical frenzy, passionate about people, always immersed in multiple philosophical dialogues with others... and asking annoying questions at philosophical talks. Most importantly, Dick was right about being, at core, an ancient Greek, as for Dick philosophy was not a mere academic discipline requiring professional expertise (although, he was also a rigorous scholar, and in this sense a

“professional”). Philosophy was his own life and a way of life. Philosophy, moreover, was always done together with others, and this is probably one of the reasons why he loved Plato’s dialogues so much: for philosophy in Plato is always a practice lived together with others, in an ongoing conversation.

Dick’s works on Hegel, American Pragmatism, the problem of evil, Hannah Arendt or Freud, as well as his courses and his philosophical dialogues with students were never divorced from the central question of ancient Greek philosophy, the question about how we ought to live our life and about what constitutes a good life. The question of the good life was always also a political one, because a good life was for him a life spent well with others, creating meanings with others through our practices, contributing to the communities of which we are part, doing ultimately our job to give sense to our presence in the world. Dick’s political engagement is well-known, from his participation in the civil rights movement (and he was particularly proud of having been included as a suspect in an FBI file) to his involvement with *Praxis* and, in recent years, his commitment to the University in exile and seminars and conversations with endangered scholars. He was always ready to jump into action whenever he thought he was needed, with his characteristic generosity and wisdom: he was my comrade of many battles at the New School.

Differently from Socrates, and despite his irony, he was not just a gadfly or a midwife, he was also a builder. We owe the very existence and flourishing of the New School philosophy department to his relentless work and vision, as—together with Reiner Schürmann—he defended against all odds the necessity and importance of philosophy at the New School. But teaching was probably his greatest passion. In the last months of his life, he repeated to me with pride that, thanks to the help of his research assistant, Olga Knizhnik, he was managing not to skip a single class of his graduate seminars. This concretely meant teaching a few classes from his hospital bed and from emergency rooms, in what I consider an ultimate gift of devotion and love to his students.

The New School philosophy department will now have to face the difficult task of thinking of itself without Dick. Any time I think of it, I hear in my head Dick’s enthusiastic and cheerful voice, yelling from across the hall, and I see him running here and there, with a smoothie in his hand and the usual smudge on his shirt. I wonder what the department will be in the coming years, without this little *daimon* infecting anyone around him with the madness of philosophy. But as Dick would have said with his ironic smile: “Cinzia, you know, we all have to die. Things will go on. OK?”