

Philosophical Equanimity
and Hermeneutical Finesse:
On Richard J. Bernstein

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Richard J. Bernstein was my *Doktorvater*, and he recruited me to come to the New School for Social Research as a graduate student in 1991. But the story of how this came to pass is full of unexpected detours. After college and a year of student activism, I decided to study theology of liberation, to which I had been exposed as an activist working with the Peace Center and CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador). I had also done three years of intense activism around getting Rutgers University, where I did my BA, to divest from South Africa's apartheid regime. We also did activism around questions of sexual violence on campus; during the years I was a student there, several women students had been raped. I knew I wanted to work on a Ph.D. I also knew that I needed to study the Latin American theology of liberation, which I still consider one of the most important social and intellectual movements from Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. As an undergraduate, I pursued a BA in philosophy, but most of the courses I took were in the political science department, where Steve Bronner taught. He taught many seminars on Marxism, Western Marxism, and of course critical theory. Under Bronner we studied György Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch. I took several such classes with Bronner. Thus, I came to think of the theology of liberation as a form of critical theory. At first, this seemed like a novel idea to me; eventually, however, as I studied both traditions more, I came to see how much the theology of liberation had been influenced by figures like Bloch, Marcuse, and Benjamin. In fact, through the work of Jürgen Moltmann many aspects of Frankfurt School percolated into some of the thinking of some of the theologians of liberation theology.

At the time, in the late eighties, there was only one place where one could study the theology of liberation, and this was Union Theological Seminary in upper Manhattan. I was fortunate and delighted that I was accepted into the program. When I applied, Cornel West was still in the faculty, and I got to meet him during recruitment week. I had already read him. I was eager to work with him. However, the year I began my studies, he left for Yale University. Still, there were many other fantastic faculty in the seminary: James Cone, James Melvin Washington, Beverly Harrison, and other very important scholars of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In 1989, when I began my MA at Union, I was most fortunate to also have

as teachers two visiting scholars: Enrique Dussel and Edmund Arens.¹ I took seminars with both, and I developed friendships with both.

One of the perks of attending Union Theological Seminary was that I could take courses across the New York Consortium of Universities. I could, therefore, take seminars at Columbia University, The New School, NYU, The Graduate Faculty, Teachers College, and of course the Jewish Theological Seminary. I already knew a lot about the New School and its social-democratic origins and radical orientation, so I looked to see what courses they were offering. I saw that Dick Bernstein was giving a seminar on Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which would take two semesters. I wrote to ask his permission to register for his seminar, which he granted. I signed up and this is how I got to meet and work with Dick.

He immediately took interest in my own philosophical-theological interests, and in particular my interests in the interaction between critical theory and the theology of liberation. I had told him that I had gone to Union Theological Seminary to study with Cornel West, and his "prophetic pragmatism," and that to my disappointment, he had left for Yale University. As I was about to graduate from my MA in systematic, i.e., philosophical, theology, he encouraged me to apply to the New School, I suspect because of my robust philosophical background and distinct interests. I also applied to the Harvard Divinity School. For the New School I wrote in my personal statement that I wanted to study Frankfurt School Critical Theory, in particular Karl-Otto Apel, Bloch, and Habermas. For Harvard Divinity School, I wrote that I wanted to study Habermas's relationship to theology. I had already read Helmut Peukert's important work on grounding theology on the basis of the theory of communicative action, and because I had become friends with Arens, I had read several of his works that aim to do the same. I wanted to follow in their steps. Once again, I was fortunate to be accepted to both The New School and the Harvard Divinity School, the latter offering a very generous and substantial package that included a stipend that would allow me to study without having to work. The New School, which everyone knew at the time, did not have the resources to fund most of its students back then; yet, they did offer me a funding package, but it fell far short of what Harvard had offered. (The New School has since changed their policy to accept only students they can fully fund.) I know that Dick had intervened on my behalf to get the best funding package that the New School could offer at the time. It

¹ I have an interesting anecdote from this year. On November 9th, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell, Dussel was having dinner with Agnes Heller and Dick Bernstein, after giving a talk about Marx and his four redactions of *Capital*. He told me this the next day or a couple of days after.

was a very tough decision. I thus sought Dick's advice. I showed him both letters. He proceeded very methodically to delineate the pros and cons of a Th.D. versus a Ph.D. in philosophy. Further, in the early 90's, the New School was undergoing a major reconstruction. Seyla Benhabib, Agnes Heller, and Nancy Fraser had been hired. Albrecht Wellmer was a frequent visitor, as would be Jacques Derrida, who often came to the Cardozo Law School and the New School. Further, Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas had taught there, as well as many of the German exiled phenomenologists.

Dick said, and advised me, that what you give up in money you make up in breath, depth, and excellence. Further, he said that if I would come to The New School there is a big chance that he could introduce me to Habermas. I decided to attend The New School, probably one of the most important decisions of my life. There, I took more seminars with Dick: a year-long seminar on Wittgenstein, where the first semester was devoted to the *Tractatus* and the second to the *Philosophical Investigations*. I also took a seminar with him on neo-pragmatism. The paper I wrote for this seminar became one of my earliest publications. I also took seminars with Andrew Arato, Rainer Schürmann, Benhabib, and Heller. In fact, I became Schürmann's last TA, for his seminar on Heidegger, before he passed away. The early 90's were an extremely exciting time to be at The New School. We had these amazing teachers, and the colloquia were invariably visited by some of the most important thinkers of the time, and still are. For instance, for our neo-pragmatism seminar, Dick had invited Derrida as a guest speaker. We also had as a guest professor Reinhart Koselleck, with whom I took a very important seminar on Husserl and Derrida. At the time, I did not know how important he was, but since then, I have immersed myself in his work.

Dick's seminars were exercises in what I would call hermeneutical finesse. We often began with a student's presentation, but then Dick would proceed to focus on key passages, which we would read carefully, with him sometimes intervening to underscore the importance, ambiguity, even non sequitur and aporetic character of some claim, passage, or sentence. However, Dick would often underscore that we had to begin with an appreciation of what the author and philosopher was trying to accomplish; i.e., why this project was important and what new roads in philosophy it opened. Then, after we had a sense of the novelty of the project, we had to appreciate the rhetorical and argumentative virtues of what we were studying. We had to learn to be grateful for this work, and not simply focus on what it aimed to accomplish. And only after we had appreciated and learned to be grateful, had we earned the right to criticize. Dick was a great teacher: non-authoritarian, encouraging, but also truthful. It was from him that I learned the three guideposts or north stars of my own pedagogy

and philosophizing. First comes hermeneutical gratitude, i.e. philosophizing is hard work and writing essays and books is a major task; second comes hermeneutical generosity, i.e. don't begin from a polemical position, but one of trying to think from the premises of the work and the author; third, and only third, you can engage in hermeneutical criticism; now you can criticize from a standpoint of having shown the relevance and accomplishment of what we are studying. There is a fourth principle that I learned from Dick: philosophical non-ostentatiousness, whether in style or scholarly fireworks. I remember that I wrote a paper for him in which I used, now in retrospect, an excessive bibliographical apparatus, in which I referred to three different translations of a text I was quoting (Spanish, German, Italian, etc.). Dick said to me: "This is unnecessary. You are showing off, and this is not relevant to the key points you are making." I was chastened, but I understood what he meant. From Dick I learned to write in a philosophical style that I would call the "democratic style of doing philosophy," i.e., one which any citizen can pick up and make sense of what I am trying to argue, and neither be intimidated nor excluded by the academic glitz and bling of some of the academic writing that reigns today.

My three years at the New School were extremely rich, and not just because of the teachers I had and the stream of stellar thinkers that came through almost on a weekly basis. I met some great graduate students then, some of whom remain my friends. We also had a vibrant Latin American/Latino group, and we had monthly meetings in which we would read our work. It was in this context that I presented some of my early work on the theology of liberation and the philosophy of liberation.

I had asked Benhabib to be my *Doktormutter*, and she agreed before she left for Yale. I wanted to write a dissertation on Apel and Dussel, who since 1989 had been engaged in a debate on the merits or demerits of discourse ethics, which Apel championed, over the ethics of liberation, which Dussel advocated for. I had been attending the engagements in which Apel and Dussel confronted each other, and I presented papers at some of these encounters. I applied for a Fulbright to go to Germany to finish writing my dissertation with Apel. I was awarded, instead, a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), which was surely to my benefit. Shortly before I found out about my DAAD fellowship, I attended in April of 1993 a major conference that Benhabib had organized at Yale to which she had invited some of the most important political philosophers of our days.² Eventually, the conference proceedings were published as *Democracy and Difference*, edited by Benhabib

² The Conference was called "Democracy and Difference," and it took place at Yale University, New Haven, April 15-28th, 1993.

(Princeton University Press, 1996). The table of contents shows the incredible set of papers presented then. Among the stellar presenters were Habermas and Rorty, and although Dick did not present, he was there. In fact, this is when he fulfilled one of his promises, namely to introduce me to Habermas. He told Habermas I was working on Apel, and Habermas said: "if you come to Frankfurt visit me." I also met Rorty. Both meetings would be fateful. Through Dick, I had met Benhabib, Derrida, Habermas, and Rorty, and many other thinkers that still play key roles in my thinking. Dick was not only a great teacher and mentor, but also an indefatigable promoter of his students. When I would visit him, he would say: "You have to meet so and so, who is working on this, and they just returned from Germany." This is how I got to meet some of the most vibrant and innovative alumni of the New School.

Since Benhabib had left for Yale, I had to reconfigure my dissertation committee. This is how Dick became my *Doktorvater*. The other members were Heller and Dimitri Nikulin, who had recently been hired. Although this was accidental, it was most propitious. Dick knew Apel's work well, although he had only recently met Dussel. Heller, of course, knew Habermas and Apel well, as did Nikulin. When I arrived in Germany in the later summer of 1993 with my wife, we settled to work. Once the semester began, the first thing I did was to visit Habermas in his office. As it happened, Apel had just retired and he was neither teaching nor commuting to campus to meet with students. Further, as a WWII veteran of the German *Wehrmacht*, who had fought in the Eastern Front, he returned mangled and with all kinds of ailments.³ I had met Apel at the meetings he had been holding with Dussel. I had many, many intense conversations with him. In any event, Habermas, whose probably most important philosophical friend was Apel, was very enthusiastic about my work. He invited me to join his graduate seminar and the post seminar dinners and drink sessions. I would visit Apel once a month in his home, in the outskirts of Frankfurt.

While in Frankfurt, I would go work in the library of the philosophy department, which at that time was located at a corner of Dante Straße, next to the

³ The Eastern Front was horrible for all sides, although more terrifying for the Russians. Karl-Otto Apel had problems with his hearing and eyes. He was captured and then, my understanding was, that he walked back from Russia back to Germany with some of his comrades. I personally never asked him about his war experiences. I read this in some of his autobiographical texts, and learned about it from some of his other students. And, yet, his mind was as lucid as a summer blue sky, and he could launch into a philosophical conversation in which he would formulate the pros and cons. He also had a photographic memory and the argumentative stamina of a camel. I know Apel and Habermas co-taught seminars, which I imagine would have been intense and full of fireworks. I saw him argue with Dussel, so I know how tenacious he was.

building of the new building of the Institute for Social Research. The library was on the second floor, and the large seminar room was on the ground floor. Habermas's office was on the third floor, if I remember correctly. Once the fall and winter came, all I could do was work at the philosophy library. I did most of my research and writing while at this library. Then, in the evening, when I was at our apartment, after dinner and catching up with my wife, I would work until past midnight translating what would become Dussel's *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation* (Humanities Press, 1996), which I edited and introduced, and which included my translations of Dussel's texts as well as the responses by Apel and Ricoeur to Dussel's texts on them.

This text thus far has been perhaps too autobiographical. However, there are three principal reasons for this indulgence. First, Dick was a key player in each step in my education and professional development. Second, and perhaps most relevantly, Dick encouraged me to explore my own "constellation." Third, Dick was extremely wise in urging me not to write the overly long chapters I kept sending him and Agnes from Germany and eventually from San Francisco, where I would land my first teaching job. Dick's philosophical style and virtue was that of philosophical equanimity. He encouraged and appreciated that I wanted to "discover" and/or "rescue" a key philosopher of the German linguistic turn: Apel, whose work on "transcendental pragmatics," "transcendental pragmatics/semiotics," and the "transformation of philosophy" opened the way for Habermas's development of his theory of communicative action. I learned so much from Dick, especially from his early books. I think that two of my favorite books are *Philosophical Profiles* (1986), *The New Constellation* (1992), and *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010), although his later books on Arendt and evil are also very important to me.⁴ When I think about Dick's work, I think of a spectrum: on one side, there is good, solid, honest pragmatism (Dewey, Mead, Peirce), then next to it is postmodern pragmatism (Rorty), perhaps next to that are postmodern versions of pragmatism (which arrive at pragmatist conclusions departing from different premises), such as we may find in deconstruction (Derrida) and "weak thought" (Vattimo), then next to that would be pragmatism as universal pragmatics (Habermas), and then at what one could call an extreme, is transcendental

⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), *The New Constellation: The Ethical/Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, the MIT Press, 1992); *The Pragmatic Turn* (New York: Polity, 2010); *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?* (New York: Polity, 2008); *Radical Evil: a philosophical interrogation* (New York: Polity, 2002).

pragmatics/semiotics (Apel). I got to study all of those versions of pragmatism because of Dick. Yet, Dick held his ground on good, solid, honest pragmatism, while also being appreciative, generous, and critical of those other shades in the spectrum that I just traced. He held his ground against his best philosophical friends, Rorty, as well as Habermas, while also appreciating and being grateful for Derrida's work. Above all, I think that the greatest impact that Dick Bernstein's work had on me, at the very least, is that one must be philosophically ecumenical, while also championing the irreducible and uncircumventable ethical and political vocation of philosophy. For Dick, philosophy is and should be at the service of a democratic and decent people. This is why I am proud he was my *Doktorvater*.