

American radicalism

RP: Perhaps we could begin by asking you about the role of religion in your intellectual and political development. How important was the Church to you in becoming an intellectual, becoming a radical?

West: For me, the issues on which religious discourse has traditionally focused, such as death and dread and despair and disappointment and disease – the existential issues, the existential dimension of the human condition – have always been fundamental. So, for me, the role of religion, and not just religion, but also music – religion and music – is fundamental. It's a reflection of being a New World African and having to deal with the absurd: both the absurd in America and America as the absurd. There was a need to come up with ways of imposing some kind of sense on the chaos coming at one, the chaos of a certain kind of white supremacist ideology, with its assault on black beauty and black intelligence, black capability and so on.

It is part of the response to being perceived as sub human in a particular historical epoch, the age of Europe. Coming from a people who have had to make and remake themselves, a modern people beneath modernity, requires a very strong accent on existential issues. So when I first emerged out of the context of the black Church, in which the problem of evil and the confrontation with social misery is central – to moan, to groan, to wrench and cry, the struggle with madness, suicide and so forth – it was Kierkegaard, it was Chekov, it was the late-nineteenth-century Russian writers who were dealing with these kinds of issue, who I read.

RP: How did you come across those writers?
Given your background, that was quite unusual, wasn't it?

West: Oh, very much so. It was a pilgrimage. We lived in a segregated part of Sacramento, California, so we didn't have a library. But we did have a bookmobile and they had some Kierkegaard there. I first began to read Kierkegaard when I was about thirteen – thirteen or fourteen – I guess. It introduced me to a Hegelian tradition, because I saw all the references to Hegel. I didn't get a chance to read Hegel at the time, but I had a sense in which Kierkegaard was responding to a larger backdrop. But it was his struggle over what it means to be human, over how you come to terms with despair and dread, that was inescapable.

RP: In your essay 'The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual', you write about routes to becoming a black intellectual, and you say that it normally involves two things. One is that it's a conversion-like experience, the discovery of a world; the

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other is that there's often an individual figure, a teacher, who sparks it off. Was this true for yourself?

West: Yes, to some extent. For the most part I grew up like most young black boys. Willie Mays and James Brown were my heroes. I wanted to be either an athlete or an entertainer. I had the church background dealing with the problem of evil, issues of social misery, but I didn't think of the life of the mind or an intellectual vocation until I went to college, at Harvard.

There, the impact of Martin Kilson and Preston Williams was quite strong. They were black professors. In fact, there were a number of figures who made a difference. My first tutor, Bob Nozick, was wonderful, and there was Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, Roderick Firth, and Israel Sheffler. Later on, Stanley Cavell was very important to me. Terry Irwin had a great impact on me too!



1968 Olympics,
Mexico City

RP: So it was the Philosophy Department at Harvard in the early 1970s, that extraordinary array of figures?

West: Yes, but I had already been exposed to the Black Panther Party, so I considered myself as part of a Marxist tradition early on. The Black Panther Party was located right next door to our Black Baptist church in Sacramento, so the Black Panther newspaper was something I was reading all the time. I was going off and reading a little Fanon, a little Cabral, a little Nkrumah. The struggle against the absurd, in the form of the struggle against white supremacy, has its existential dimension, but at that particular moment, the late 1960s, it had an important political dimension as well, a communal one. By the time I got to Harvard I was hungry for some kind of sociological tradition that took freedom struggles seriously. Barrington Moore was there and he made a difference, in terms of his work. Michael Walzer introduced me to *Dissent* magazine, which opened up a whole new world. Peter Camejo was an old Trotskyite who used to lecture at Harvard at night. I attended every lecture of his that I could. He wasn't at Harvard, he was just using Harvard space as a leftist. So I was also part of a left subculture, because they seemed to be interested in struggles against white supremacy.

RP: This is the early seventies, so it's after the peak of the Civil Rights Movement?

West: 1970 to 1973. It's a black nationalist moment, the moment of black power and its legacy. But being influenced by the Panthers, who were internationalists and universalists, of course, or *revolutionary* nationalists, I was never willing to become part of the dominant black nationalist tendencies. They always struck me as too narrow, too parochial, provincial – later on, I would learn, patriarchal and homophobic too. I recognized what black nationalists were after – black self-love, black self-affirmation, black self-respect – but it struck me that analyses of the economic situation, capital accumulation and the rule of capital, the various class divisions, were either overlooked or downplayed by them. For me, that was always a starting point. The starting point for me was the way in which my existential concerns were shaped by the various modes of capital accumulation and the way in which the rule of capital imposes such constraints on

the life-chances of black people and their relations to working people more generally. The Marxist tradition was and remains for me the 'brook of fire' through which one must pass.

RP: You have spoken of the importance of existential issues, but what about existentialism as a philosophical position. Were you attracted to it, or were you more of a pragmatist from the outset, once you discovered philosophy?

West: I came to pragmatism a little later. As an undergraduate, it was Sartre who had a strong influence on me. I read him voraciously, and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was my hero for a while. He struck me as a philosopher who was not simply highlighting the limits of analytical philosophy but, to use Cavell's language, was refusing philosophy philosophically. He was accepted by a philosophy department, but he struck me as someone who was pulling the rug from under so much of what they were doing. I was impressed by the contextualism that I detected in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It opens itself onto a broader historical reading, even though Wittgenstein himself didn't do it. I read Marcuse on Wittgenstein, and I thought, 'No, Herbert, you've got him wrong. He's much more continuous with you. He's talking about praxis. It's just that he doesn't have the sociological apparatus to flesh out the way in which the structures of practices are related to one another in economic, political and social spheres.'

RP: Later, when you discovered pragmatism, did you read Wittgenstein as a pragmatist?

West: Yes, very much so, under Rorty. Rorty had a tremendous impact on me once I went to Princeton. I didn't seriously encounter the pragmatic tradition until I went to Princeton. I took a course on pragmatism at Harvard, where I read Mead, some Dewey, some James, a little C. I. Lewis, actually, but I didn't take it seriously. I just read the texts, got my B+ and kept moving. Under Rorty it began to develop into a much broader view. Then I read Sidney Hook and I saw the ways in which it was continuous with certain of Marx's views, and I saw how Rorty connected the later Wittgenstein to Dewey, and things began to fall into place for me. But I never became a philosopher, professionally speaking. I've never taught in a philosophy department. I went straight from graduate school in philosophy to teaching at the Union Theological Seminary (for eight years) and then the Yale Divinity School (for another three).

RP: Why was that?

West: By choice. In part, it was because of the tremendous influence of Reinhold Niebuhr and of Paul Tillich, whose very deep commitment to democratic socialist politics as a Christian thinker was exemplary for me. I didn't enter the secular academy until I went back to Princeton, in the Departments of Religion and Afro-American Studies, eleven years later. Even now that I'm going to Harvard, it's to teach philosophy at the Divinity School and Afro-American Studies. There are still philosophical discourses within the academy that I find worth engaging, but I've chosen to avoid philosophy departments because I've wanted to do so many other things: study popular culture, write on music, architecture, painting ...

PRAGMATISM AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM

RP: Let's talk about pragmatism. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, your history of pragmatism, has contributed to a moment in which the history of philosophy in America is being rewritten as part of a search for a distinctively American philosophy. This looks to be connected to larger-scale, global changes in international relations. What are your views about the search for a distinctively American philosophy?

West: There is something distinctively American about pragmatism. There's no doubt about that. But there are a number of things going on in my book. One is that my motivations were thoroughly Gramscian. That is to say, I wanted to try and understand the historical specificity of the development of American civilization through a particular philosophical discourse. The question became: What are the intellectual resources upon which one can draw for a radical democratic project? To what degree does pragmatism, which is distinctively American, provide both strengths and weaknesses, both blindnesses and insights vis-à-vis the regeneration of a radical democratic, a democratic socialist, project? In going back, I discovered a lot of strengths and a lot of weaknesses. I discovered some real virtues and vices in this tradition. So even though I think you're absolutely right – there is a certain kind of Americanism in the life of the mind being promoted which falls into easy parochial traps – on the other hand, the American intelligentsia, and especially the American left, has still not seriously excavated and recuperated certain progressive resources within American history. We look toward Europe, toward Germany, toward France and so on. Remember, I was writing this text at a moment in which most of my fellow interlocutors, especially the Western ones, were looking to Paris or Frankfurt. That's fine, but I said: 'Let's see what's in the US tradition, and then work out some of the elective affinities with what's happening on the Left Bank, what's going on in the Frankfurt School, and so forth.'

RP: Does this explain your changing attitude to Rorty? You began as his student, then, in your piece in *Post-Analytical Philosophy*, you produced a scathing political critique of his work. Yet when you came to reconstruct the history of pragmatism, placing him in a broader context, and placing yourself after him, you were much more sympathetic to him once again.

West: That's true, because in the *Post-Analytical Philosophy* text, I'm talking solely about the politics. It's a very short essay. Rorty and I have always had certain friendly disagreements about politics. He's very much an incrementalist, even though he tilts in a social-democratic direction, whereas I'm more Raymond Williams-like: the long revolution, the march through the institutions, which actually is still revolutionary. I'm aware of the limits and illusions of reformism, but I still think that it's worth talking about the fundamental transformation of society. Hence, I hit Rorty very hard on politics. In the larger narrative, he looks much better because he makes anti-foundationalist moves and he recognizes what I take to be so important for radical democratic politics. This is the *jazz-like character of American culture*, which is not just market-driven but is open to experimentation and improvisation, and a certain malleability of class structure. Race is more difficult, of course, and patriarchy's more difficult. But those themes are there. And for me, they are very important for any kind of radical democratic politics. Rorty himself was quite open to these themes and motifs.

RP: But is his kind of anti-foundationalism compatible with the kind of knowledge about society required by the politics you support? My impression of the radical theory which is influential in the American academy at the moment is that it is a very generic anti-foundationalist historicism. It could be neo-pragmatist, it could be deconstructive, it could be Foucauldian – they're all modes of anti-foundationalism, they're all historicist, but the space that they occupy is primarily defined negatively. Now, one of your criticisms of neo-pragmatism concerns its lack of social theory. It opens up a space for social analysis, but it doesn't have any sociological concepts. Yet the kind of social theory which you acknowledge that it needs is associated with a very different set of assumptions, epistemologically, from any of these tendencies. Isn't there a contradiction here?

West: I would hope not. A serious analysis of the rule of capital, or white supremacy, or male supremacy, can be done in an experimental spirit. One doesn't have to clash with anti-foundationalism or historicism. Now it's true that Rorty, for example, says: 'Cornel, you claim to be anti-foundational, but when it comes to social theory you fail. You become foundationalist. You invoke Marx and Weber and Lukács and Simmel and Du Bois. You've got foundationalist claims being made, causal explanatory claims being made.' And I say: 'No, not at all.' For me, the choice is never between foundationalism and some kind of empty anti-foundationalism. Mine is a historicism that is contextualist and revisionist, in the sense of recognizing that any causal explanatory claim is open to revision. But these claims are indispensable weapons in any serious struggle for radical democracy and freedom. They must be deployed to the best of our ability. Maybe there is a tension, but I don't see it as a contradiction.

One of the paradoxes of American civilization is that, on the one hand, you have the valorizing of the improvisational, experimental and jazz-like character of the culture; and on the other hand, you have a fixity and a solidity of the rule of capital – economic growth by means of corporate priorities, the sacred cow of the civilization, the business civilization as it is. You also have a deep entrenchment of white supremacy, which sits at the very centre of American civilization: a profound hatred of black folk, in subtle or not so subtle forms. Then there's the patriarchal core and the homophobic overlay. So, on the one hand, you have this valorization of improvisation; on the other, you have this fixity. Now there's not a lot of space here for radical democratic politics that has serious substance. What we've seen in the last twenty-five years is the ideology of professionalism and specialization playing itself out within the privileged space of the academy. This is a site where certain anti-foundationalist and historicist discourses take place which are far removed from any serious analysis of the rule of capital, the interlocking network of corporate and financial elites, and their ways of making political elites subordinate to them.

RP: Do you see any positive role for philosophical discourse here? The dominant movement in twentieth-century European philosophy has undoubtedly been a negative one. It's not scepticism as such, but it's an unpicking of the project: a particularistic kind of scepticism where philosophy is done in the mode of undoing itself. As you said, for some, like Cavell, that's all philosophy does. On the other hand, in the tradition of the forms of social theory to which you appeal, there's a sense of philosophy as a *reconstructive* discipline, continuing its historical role of totalization in a new form, in relation to the social sciences – not in a foundationalist way, but in a reconstructive way. Do you want to refuse it this role?

West: That is a fast-hitting question, the metaphilosophical question. Like Cavell, I see philosophy as a quest for wisdom, as a desire to see how things hang together such that we can exercise critical judgements for the purpose of expanding possibility, democratic possibility, the creation of conditions such that individuals can flourish to the best of their abilities and capacities. But philosophy doesn't have a cognitive content for me, as a discipline. It is the name for a particular *desire*: the desire for wise deployment of various kinds of arguments, insights, visions, perspectives, and so forth. Now, it's true that there's a totalizing impulse behind this conception and this goes back to my Christian heritage, the Hegelian tradition, and to the Marxist tradition. I believe that the visionary aspect of philosophical discourse provides a synecdochic characterization of what the relations and connections are, but that doesn't mean that philosophy itself becomes some privileged discourse. It simply means that it tries to show how things are related, connected to one another, without itself having any kind of cognitive content.

RP: So, to take the project you describe as prophetic pragmatism or prophetic criticism: it is defined by the values of individuality and democracy. What would be the form of your intellectual defence of those values?

West: It would be an attempt to show the ways in which those particular traditions, among peoples that highlighted individuality and democracy, tend to be those that contribute most to the desirable forms of life. Now, that doesn't mean that arguments would not play a role. Argumentation is very important. One of the reasons why one reads philosophers is because they have tended to put a certain premium on argument. But I don't think argument exhausts the philosophical tradition. There are other forms of promoting understanding and broadening insight, although arguments do play an important role. One would still have to make arguments as to why individuality and democracy are better as opposed to authoritarianism and – I don't want to say fascism, that's too easy – truncated forms of democracy, I'll put it that way, limited forms of democracy. The defence of individuality and the defence of democracy still have to be put forward. There's no doubt about that. But I view these as values that are *already embedded* in particular traditions of struggle, traditions of political and social engagement, and I quite unabashedly view myself as part of those traditions, not just in the West, but in the world.

That's not a direct answer to your question, because in order to actually defend these values I'd have to engage in a much more detailed account of how one goes about showing these values to be desirable ones. But the main point is that for me it's never a matter of viewing the values abstracted from their enactment and embodiment within an ongoing tradition over time and space. That's my historicist mode and mood, which you would expect.

INTELLECTUALS AND THEIR PUBLICS

RP: Let's move from philosophers to intellectuals, or the philosopher as intellectual .

West: That's my fundamental allegiance, as an intellectual.

RP: You've written a lot about intellectuals, about the specificity of the black intellectual, but also about intellectuals more generally. There's been quite a debate about this in the US over the last few years, a highly politicized debate. Yet there is considerable common ground between the positions of people like Alan Bloom, on the right, and Russell Jacoby, on the left. They share a certain nostalgia. In your own work, you write of a 'crisis of vocation', but you don't seem to mourn the passing of the so-called public intellectual of the past. How do you view the prospects for effective intellectual activity outside the academy?

West: Part of the problem here is that in the United States you have a racially bifurcated society, not simply due to the legacy of segregation, going back to slavery, but also due to the fact that different publics are often unacknowledged or uninterrogated by different intellectuals. So, for example, when I relate myself, as I often do, to a black intellectual tradition and highlight the role of the life of the mind within the public life of that community, it's something very different from what you find about the role of ideas in the public life of the dominant society. The kind of nostalgia that Russell Jacoby has for the 'New York intellectuals', concerns only a really miniscule sector of our society. *Partisan Review* was read by 3,500 people. It was fascinating, it was engaging – I get excited about it too – but once you historicize it and contextualize it, you see this nostalgia as very very limited. Du Bois' *The Crisis* had 100,000 subscribers, more readers, but Russell Jacoby has no nostalgia for Du Bois' public intellectual activity, because it's not

part of his world, unfortunately. That's part of the segregated life of the mind in our society. The same was true with James Baldwin. Baldwin sold millions of copies of *The Fire Next Time*, but these people have no nostalgia for James Baldwin's attempt to construct a public to talk about the most fundamental issue facing the country: namely, race. It may not be the most fundamental issue analytically – I think class and capital are, actually – but in terms of salient explosive issues, race certainly is.

I don't want to downplay the New York tradition. It's worth examining. I'm deeply influenced by New York intellectuals, especially the Jewish ones, who were concerned with the transition from a certain kind of parochialism of the ghetto and Brooklyn and Brownsville and other impoverished places to a more cosmopolitan space. This is what you get in Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe and others. It's a very important move, but it's still a particular tradition, and there are other traditions from which to learn. Feminist intellectuals are teaching us this every day, and it's not only them. There are also issues of region. Southern intellectuals have different kinds of public.

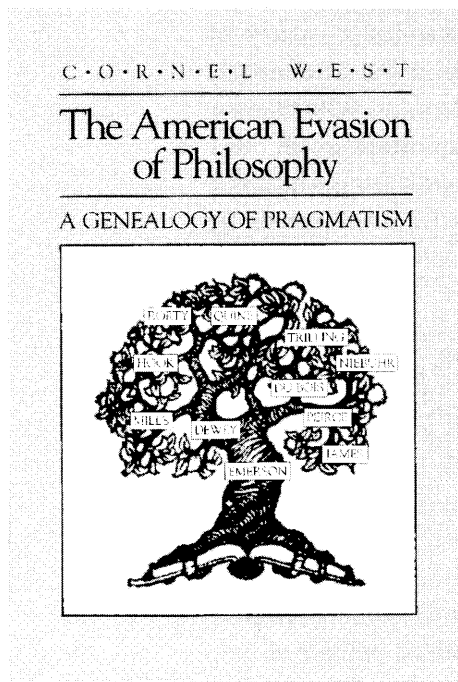
For me, the issue of the intellectual has to do with the relation between those who have a deep commitment to the life of the mind and its impact on public life, of all sorts.

Dewey's great text, *The Public and its Problems*, was very important to me here, in its treatment of different kinds of publics, and the relation of different intellectuals to those publics. These days, the larger public is much more shot through with the influence of the information and entertainment industries, mediated by electronic and printed media. New publics need to be constituted. One of the things that I've tried to do in the last few years is to play a role within these apparatuses, because one can shape very vague publics. They are going to be different kinds of publics than they were before. But those publics of the past will never come back, in the same way that the old public of the Greek city state is gone. We can be nostalgic about it all we want – there's nostalgia in Marx in that regard – but it's still gone. How do we reconstruct publics? Right now it's very difficult, not only because the private is cast as sacred, but because the public is something to be shunned across the board, with the exception of the spectatorial public: the virtual public

that's produced and constructed by the network of information and entertainment medias. That's the challenge for public intellectuals. It's a challenge that earlier public intellectuals had little sense of.

RP: Your own category here – the intellectual carrier of prophetic pragmatism – is what you call the 'critical organic catalyst'. It obviously has a Gramscian dimension, a reference to some communality of interest between the intellectual catalyst and the social group on whose behalf he or she acts. Isn't there a contradiction between this idea and something which you stress very strongly in 'The New Cultural Politics of Difference': namely, the constructedness of all representation and the danger of the appeal to preconstituted notions of community. This takes us back to foundationalism in social theory, in a way. There's a point at which you say: 'We need to become more organic.' That seems to me a strange phrase, because surely the organic is that which is already so.

West: Always already so, yes, that's why we need to examine it. By 'organic' I don't mean to appeal to some pre-Derridean notion of representation that somehow leads toward a oneness or coincidence between the intellectual and the community. What I actually mean by organic is a much more fluid and constructed notion of participating in



the organizations of people. So when I think of my own organic link with the black community, it's not that I am somehow thoroughly immersed in the black community, in some pantheistic way. Rather, I'm simply working in a particular organization or institution in which we are contesting among ourselves how we can best generate visions, analysis, and forms of political action. I want to say 'be organized', rather than 'be organic'.

Organic has a sense of being rooted, but this metaphor can be quite slippery. I want to preserve a certain notion of constructed rootedness, or constructed organic, in the sense that we are attempting to get beyond our own privileged sites, to get beyond our own professional sites, to be part of movements, even as we are critical of their leaders – in my own case, black organizations and institutions, from united fronts to churches. In terms of my own identity, I want to be viewed as someone who puts a premium on being part of those groups, even as I am a critic of those groups. That's what I have in mind with the critical organic catalyst. It may be problematic, but that's what I have in mind.

There's a tremendous need for multicontextualism, even more than multiculturalism, I think. Multicontextualism means moving between a variety of different contexts, from that of working people to very poor people, to the academy, as well as to other professions. I don't want to talk about being organic solely with masses, you see. I want to talk about being organized, or being part of organizations, with other professions as well. Tomorrow, I'm off to the Black Congressional Caucus, which is a group of political elites who are liberal, neo-liberal, a few progressive, two democratic socialists. But I have to organize with them. They have their organization. I am part of that organization. My voice is heard. If an intellectual is to be characterized as someone who tries to preserve a sense of the whole, who has a synoptic and synthetic vision and perspective, then being multicontextual will allow one to have a much more sophisticated and refined sense of the whole, and a much more convincing synthetic and synactic view of things. In this, movements themselves contribute to the role of intellectuals, as I understand it.

ALLIANCES, CONFLICTS AND DISPUTES

RP: Presumably, one goal of this kind of multicontextualism is the construction of alliances. How do you respond to the criticism that a generalized politics of alliances is too wishful about the compatibility of the social interests of those with an enemy in common?

West: That's a very fair warning for persons like myself. But I'd come right back and say: 'Yes, perhaps, but don't we otherwise end up privileging a certain social interest (traditionally, class) which itself requires questioning?' But it isn't only class. One of the problems of a narrow black nationalism is that it downplays the class issues, and it downplays the gender issues. I think the major countervailing forces in the future, in addition to a weakening trade-union movement, are going to be the forces against white supremacy, the feminist and womanist movements, the anti-homophobic movements, and the ecological movements. Ecological movements are much more international than any of the others, at this point, and we will need to speak globally if we're talking about effective countervailing forces.

RP: Presumably, we will also have to talk about their relations to nation-states. What gave the labour movement its countervailing force in Europe during the period of its ascendancy was its particular relation to the state. Are these other forces likely to acquire such a weight within the state?

West: Oh, in the United States they have already.

RP: At one point in your recent book you identify Jesse Jackson's attempt to gain power at a national level as a *weakness* of the movement.

West: That's right – because of the thinness of American electoral politics. There was a lack of the serious grassroots organizing necessary to mushroom into an effective and substantial candidacy. Jackson just leapfrogged over all of that and became a figure with very little social base, except through television. It was a sign of weakness. In stark contrast to Jesse Jackson, the right had forces that were mobilizing deeply, organizing on grassroots levels, in ordinary people's everyday lives. They could generate a hegemonic presence.

RP: Let's go back to the issue of the interests at stake in alliances and take last week's Cairo summit on population control as an example of the kind of conflicts which can arise. There, we seem to have articulated in a global way and in an exemplary manner a contradiction between a particular conception of individual rights – with historically specific consequences for questions of sexuality and abortion – and the beliefs of certain religious traditions, Roman Catholicism and Islam in particular. This looks like a rather familiar kind of ideological conflict which is resistant to contextual mediation; in fact, it is contextually produced. Isn't there a point, which comes quite quickly, at which contextualism isn't going to help you anymore?

West: That's true. And I must say, it's not just a danger for the vague contextualism that is wishful about coalitions and alliances. It is inherent in the dominant tendency in pragmatism itself, which believes that conflicting views can somehow be adjudicated by appeals to conversation, or civil communication. I'm all for conversation and civil communication, but the traditions from which I come teach me that power and privilege are going to go far beyond that, and dialogue is not always going to be the means for resolving conflicts. In the chapter on Dewey in *The American Evasion*, I hit him very hard precisely because, as C. Wright Mills pointed out, the issue of power goes deep. It's the same problem with Du Bois and white supremacy. He's talking about dialogue, and acquiring more knowledge of the issue and so forth; and there's Sam Hoopes, around the beginning of the century, who was cut in 32 parts and 5000 folk in Atlanta go to buy different parts, with his penis getting the highest price. And Du Bois says, 'Oh my God, I've been involved in a scientific investigation concerned with knowledge, this enlightenment project that highlights ignorance as a major impediment to freedom, but something else is going on here.' Yes, Du Bois, you're right! There is a concern or desire for power that flows far over and beyond the bounds of rational dialogue, even as we argue that rational dialogue must be a central court of appeal. What we see in Cairo is fundamental cleavages and conflicts which are not so much incommensurable; they just clash.

RP: They clashed there at the global level, but of course they're also internal to the societies in which we live.

West: That's true even within the left, with issues of race and gender, vis-à-vis class or ecology, and so on. Someone like myself, who wants to put forth some holistic vision that would allow for a coming together, can't be naive about the ways in which these clashes are rooted in traditions which are deeply distrustful and suspicious of one another. Dialogue in and of itself is not ultimately going to create the bridges; but dialogue is a crucial element in creating a bridge. Dialogue is for me a form of struggle. There are other forms of struggle as well, and different historical conjunctures that throw people together; just as there are different historical conjunctures that create these different conflicts. They're very real.

RP: Isn't this a point at which the libertarian and religious dimensions of your own thought come into conflict? An old question arises here, the question of secularism. Wasn't that what was at stake for the European states at Cairo? Of course, famously, Edward Said's conception of the intellectual is as a secular figure.

West: I disagree with brother Edward here. I would just say the 'critical intellectual' – that cuts across religious traditions as well as non-religious ones. But I agree with what he's getting at. When I say 'prophetic', I think I get at it: that is, someone who is critical of *all* forms of authority and highlights critical consciousness across the board. Religious authorities are included alongside economic ones, political ones, and so forth.



RP: But isn't that itself a form of secularism? Isn't there something fundamentally secular about the universalization of critical judgement? For example, there are liberal theological traditions which, for this reason, don't really seem to be religious any more.

West: That's right. There are elements of this in MacIntyre, the notion that somehow the processes of modernization, rationalization, commodification and nationalization have so thoroughly dissolved the kind of ties and communities requisite for genuine religious practices that the only things left are either these quasi-secular practices, under the name of liberal religion, or fundamentalist ones that are authentically religious. Now, MacIntyre's own view is deeply secular in content – there's no doubt about it – so he finds himself in great tension here. His Aristotle and his Aquinas are, in part, extensions of his own deeply historicist imagination. But what MacIntyre embodies is true for myself: this profound sense of living life on the boundaries, being religious and modern at the same time. He wants both and I want both. But you can't have both without this tremendous tension. The question is whether it's going to be creative or destructive. I can understand persons who would argue that the tension will always be destructive, because the religion that you're talking about is just so thin that it doesn't cut deep anymore; that your only options are the thicker forms, which are dogmatic and fundamentalist. You don't want that, because your fundamental allegiance is to modern sensibilities, democratic ones. That's a real tension, but it's something that I try to deal with in my definition of the prophet.

When I talk about the prophet I'm not talking about some kind of revelation from on high, but rather of keeping a certain tradition of resistance and critique alive, in which the issues of the existential and the spiritual, as well as the political, the social and the economic, are in movement together. The question about secularism is a crucial one. But when I see the secular used as a marker, I juxtapose it with the prophetic as my marker, because for me the prophetic is a suspicion of *all* idols, including the secular ones. What Nietzsche and Wittgenstein tell me is distinctive about this particular slice of human history, the age of Europe, is that new kinds of idols are projected. For me, the secular falls too easily into the idol of science and scientific method, the idol of professionalism, the idol of the expert. I want to be anti-idolatrous across the board. That is why I criticize Said, who still wants to view the secular versus the religious in secular terms. I simply attempt to broaden it out.

RP: I'd like to ask you about a certain conservatism in Afro-American culture which is related to the role of the church as a site of resistance. It seems connected

to the necessarily defensive character of so many of the struggles in which the black community has been engaged, given the extreme inequalities of power in US society. Once again, it concerns questions of individual rights. I'm thinking about the role of the family in relation to issues of sexuality and abortion. Even a film-maker like Spike Lee, about whom you've written, tends to show what I think of as a conservative conception of the family in a very positive light.

THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY, THE DEMOCRATS

West: That's true. But the family has played a fundamental role as a countervailing force against white supremacy and other forms of degradation and devaluation. I like to talk about it in terms of the *preservative* versus the *conservative*. You can preserve certain aspects of institutions that have played crucial roles in sustaining people, while subjecting them to democratic ideals and accountability. Yet it's true that the dominant role the black church has played vis-à-vis families has been a conservative one, because the family has been that 'haven in a heartless world' which Christopher Lasch talks about. It's ideally cast: families shot through with brokenness as well as connectedness, disfunctionality as well as functionality.

It's a difficult issue because you don't want a progressive conception of the family that is not functional on the ground, in terms of how people are actually going to cope as they get about from day to day. On the other hand, you can't use how it functions on the ground as an excuse for accepting uncritically a conservative conception of the family. The black poor are very poor and they're living in a state of siege. A real war is going on, but under war conditions you must still preserve democratic values. This means that women, and gay brothers, and lesbian sisters must have the same status and the same rights that the other men have. Yet, given the history of patriarchy and homophobia, the struggle against black patriarchy and black homophobia needs to be cast in the form of an argument for the survival of the black community *as a whole*, in terms of a practical and prudential strategy.

RP: Not on the ground of individual rights?

West: Exactly, on prudential and practical grounds. Morally, it can be made on libertarian grounds, but politically, prudentially and practically, it's got to be cast in terms of survival, or the real argument will never get off the ground in the black community. This is a struggle that we have daily, weekly, and I encounter it everywhere I go in black contexts.

RP: Do you think this struggle has been constructive or destructive for the black community as a whole?

West: In the end it must be constructive, because otherwise the black community will self-destruct, owing to the suffocating effects of black patriarchy and black homophobia. But it could also self-destruct if libertarian arguments become the sole grounds for strategic intervention, thereby highlighting cleavages and conflicts, given the prevalence of black patriarchy and homophobia.

RP: Broadening the political perspective a little, how do you view the Clinton experience?

West: Poor Clinton, he emerged at a deeply conservative moment. He tried to play both sides of the street and for the most part it doesn't work. At the same time, there's hardly any left to put pressure on him. Most of the pressure has come from Ross Perot, or the conservative populace, or the old tradition's right-wingers – Dole, for example. So whatever progressive tilt he may have wanted, he's been unable to follow through on it: no minimum wage whatsoever, even though Robert Reich had been pushing for it; no

serious talk about workers' right to organize, even though they know it's crucial. And the left has been unable to put pressure on him to help him move in that direction.

RP: Is the Democratic Party capable of functioning in that way any more?

West: The Democratic Party is a schizophrenic party right now. It is in the process of disintegration. In another fifteen or twenty years it will probably no longer exist as a Democratic party, with a capital 'D' – it's never been democratic with a small 'd'. It's in the process of disintegration, slowly, but it's happening. We'll have to see what's left. It might be that, given the power of the right, we'll need a Democratic Party just in order to keep some neo-liberals around who at least believe in some kind of accountability of the rule of capital. As the right-wing forces become even more powerful, some of the liberals end up being friends, neo-liberals can even become friends, just by preserving civil liberties and some liberal rule of law; even though we know the limitations of such liberalism. Things get that desperate. My hunch is that we're going in that direction.

In the elections in November, they're projecting that the Republicans will take over the Senate, that the Republicans will take over the House. Sad business. Clinton couldn't even get through a truncated liberal health care deal. Crime bills, as conservative as they can be, are touted as something liberals ought to be excited about. Clinton's bragging about it. We really are talking about some bleak times for progressive possibilities in the United States. Europe knows this better than we do, because we've never experienced the kind of wholesale right-wing takeover, when the fascist right push everything farther to the right. We're in for a real ugly ride. There's no doubt about it.

It's a struggle on the left just to keep a certain vision alive, an alternative vision, and to make it available to people. We need to link that vision to some concrete issues; then in the long run we need to create some institutional vehicles for it. Right now we're at the first stage. We don't have too many progressive vehicles beyond single-issue organizations. We don't have too many intellectuals who are trying to find an alternative vision that could gain some exposure to large numbers of persons. And the link between that vision and the concrete issues is a tough one. Single-payer health care was one example. It was crushed, but it was one example that we tried to push through. In Democratic Socialists in America, we tried to make health care a major public issue for nine years and we were unable to do it for the first six or so. Then boom, it just took off and we thought we had a real chance. The country missed the moment. Forget it.

We can work on a state level, because it's going to be federalized. States can enact it, Hawaii and Oregon maybe. But it's going to be difficult and that's just in relation to health, which is now at least an issue people are talking about. We're saying nothing about the right of workers to organize, or workers' power in the workplace, or any serious talk about redistribution of wealth, taxation on wealth, or restructuring of the wage system – all of those crucial strategies that are requisite for the maintenance and sustenance of American society in the next fifty years. Decomposition continues.

RP: Is this how you see the medium-term future of American society?

West: Well, it doesn't look good, does it? I think there's a good chance that we're in the early moments of a dying civilization, in the process of decomposition and disarticulation and disaggregation. On the other hand, it's never looked good for most working people and poor people. And it certainly has never looked good in America for most black people. So these larger questions of doom and gloom are not really part of my worldview, even though the issues of decline and decay are undeniable. One feels, though, as one gets older, this sense that American civilization as we know it is simply running out of gas.

**Interviewed by Peter Osborne
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