

«**Bush is turning the USA into a garrison state**»

Stefan Howald talks to US philosopher and public intellectual Richard Rorty.

Do you think at the moment that the USA is a divided country?

Well, I think the political polarisation is about as great as it has been during my lifetime. The Bush people view the Kerry people with sheer incredulity – and vice versa. The two camps tend to live in separate worlds. It is often said by people working in colleges and universities that they have never met anyone who voted for Bush. And that is quite plausible. There are also towns in the rural south where it is possible that people may never have met anyone willing to confess that they would vote for Kerry.

Is this division only on a political level, or does it go deeper, socially as well?

It has something to do with the line between the Christian believers and the non-believers. If you take Christianity very seriously you are much more likely to be a Bush-voter. Back in the days of the New Deal and the Great Society, a lot of the Christian clergy was on the left, but in the last thirty years we have had the rise of a new kind of evangelical Christianity. People take issues like abortion and homosexuality with enormous seriousness. And if you take sexual issues as central to morality, then you are very likely to be on Bush's side.

Is this a backlash against the 1960s?

Yes, it is, in various ways. One thing that happened during the 1950s and 1960s was that the Democrats lost the white belt in the South, because of the civil rights legislation that went through under Lyndon Johnson. Johnson predicted that the South would go Republican in reaction. And it can sometimes seem as if the rise of evangelical Christianity in the South and the Southwest is itself a symptom of the same reaction to the civil rights legislation. People in the South and the Southwest – particularly poorly educated people – think of the Democratic Party as too far to the left, too loose in their morals, intellectual snobs who look down on rednecks. Their picture of Democratic candidates is of people who just live in a different cultural world from themselves. They are atheists, they are sympathetic to homosexuals, feminists and all the rest of it. So it is quite possible that historians of American politics will trace the Republicans' increasing domination of Congress, and their seemingly continuous movement towards the right, to the backlash against the 1950s and 1960s – but not so much against the campus radicalism and anti-war-protests as against the idea that blacks, women, gays and lesbians should be treated differently from the conventional Southern picture of how they should be treated.

So what should the Democrats do? Should they succumb to this pressure?

I think it is very difficult. For example, from an electoral point of view I wouldn't know how far to go in denouncing the war in Iraq – because if you go a little bit too far, you lose millions of votes. Nor would I know what to say about same-sex marriages. It is an incredible tightrope act.

One difficulty for the left is the way Americans view the role of government in the economy. There was a recent poll taken with Americans and Europeans where the question was something like: do you think the poor are poor because they are lazy or because the system works against them. And – these figures are roughly right – 25 per cent of Europeans said they are poor because they are lazy, while 64 per cent of Americans said they are poor because they were lazy. And that figure includes, obviously, a great many people who don't make any money to speak of, but who refuse to think of themselves as poor, even when they and their spouses are working for ridiculously low wages. Because if you're employed that means you are not lazy, and anybody who can't get by on their level must be lazy. That's a very hard conviction to fight. The socialist parties in Europe did succeed in creating a general belief in the majority of Europeans that government had a responsibility to keep people out of poverty, somehow or other – and that was the consensus in America up until a few decades ago. And then under Reagan and the Bushes, that consensus has somehow disappeared. I don't really know why.

Would you stress the onslaught of the right or were there mistakes by the left as well?

I don't see any great mistakes that the left has made. I mean the left allowed itself to be split by giving Nader 3 million votes – that was a mistake. Clinton, if you like, stabbed his own party in the back by lying about his sex life. But I don't think there were any great big strategic errors. The only really big thing they did to change the political complexion of the country was something they ought to have done, namely passed the civil rights legislation.

I was thinking in a longer term. In one of your most recent books you berate the left for being too cultural.

But that is just the academic left, which is politically not very significant. The voters really don't know or care what the people in the literary departments of the universities are doing. The worst you can say about the cultural left is that it diverts some energies.

Is there still a traditional left, as there was in the 1930s?

It's hard to say what it consists of. There are the blacks and the labour unions. But the labour unions are under so much pressure that they are a diminishing force. So it is hard to know what the core of the left is, what the Democrats can rely on. They can rely on the black vote, they can rely on most members of the unions, but I am not sure what else exactly they can rely on. But compared with the votes of all those born-again Christians, it doesn't amount to much.

Some years ago there were reports of a rebirth of the US unions, because they were being successful in recruiting in low-wage sectors.

It doesn't seem to have happened. I thought it might happen ten years ago. The AFL-CIO announced a huge effort in this direction but it doesn't seem to have gotten anywhere. And union-busting activity is becoming standard in American corporations. Managers are told, if you allow a union to be formed, you will lose your job. And so they'll do anything to prevent a union from organising. Technically it is illegal to use all these anti-union measures, but they do it anyway. Two of my children told me that when they mentioned the word union, they were told they were in danger of losing their job.

You're painting a fairly depressing picture. What about your hopes?

I don't feel very optimistic. Even if Kerry is elected, with a Republican Congress he will be as inhibited as Clinton was, and nothing much will change.

You have also spoken of your wider fears for Western democracy, that it is being hollowed out by anti-terrorism-measures.

Yes. Nobody knows whether or not there will be more terrorist attacks, and if they do occur they tend to increase the role of the military and decrease the role of elected officials. And the so-called war on terrorism is having the same effect. This is a key difference between Bush and the Democrats. Bush and Cheney can't see anything wrong with turning the country into a garrison state or a national security state, whereas the Democrats are frightened by the prospect, and would resist this transformation.

Some of the fears you have spoken about, that democracy could be undermined to a point where it would return to a sort of feudal state, go back to an earlier period. You have spoken of a sort of security state.

Yes. The role of the so-called military-industrial complex is unlike anything else that has existed in America. After the Second World War we pretty much dismantled the military apparatus until the Korean War. There were five years there when not only were we not borrowing money for the military, but the military-industrial complex just hadn't taken shape. But for the last forty years it has been increasingly powerful. Government classification of documents has reached the point where whole research parks in Silicon Valley work only with classified material and you can't get a job unless you have a security clearance. It is a matter of everybody taking for granted the need for secrecy, so that at a certain point whatever the government says ought to be secret the public agrees.

And other simple things, like the budgets of the intelligence agencies, are wrapped in a kind of mystique. Only the members of the Congressional Intelligence Committee know any details about what they do and how they function. This kind of thing creates a self-perpetuating culture, and the insiders don't really want the outsiders to know what is going on because then they wouldn't be insiders any more. It seems to me that this has just quietly snowballed over decades since the Second World War.

Looking for more hopeful signs, what about the anti-globalisation movement?

I don't really think there is such a movement. The students who went to Seattle to protest didn't have any idea of what they wanted the international economy to look like, they didn't have any proposals. It is very hard to imagine what it would be to be anti-globalisation. You can be against the rich in the first world getting all the profits of the labour of the poor people in Southeast Asia, that's easy. But if you ask how is the standard of living in Southeast Asia going to be raised: I have no idea how you do this without building factories and stuff like that, and I don't think the protesters did. They just had a list of things the IMF and the World Bank had done wrong – and they probably have – but they didn't suggest how you could get along without the IMF and the World Bank.

Another proposal you have made is for an international criminal law. There are certain steps in this direction, for instance the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Bush has no interest whatsoever in doing this, and I don't know if Kerry could persuade the country to accept the jurisdiction of an international criminal court. But it would be a great step forward. There are all kinds of internationalising tools that a Democrat president could use, but they would all be really ferociously opposed. And it is not clear to me with how much we would get away with.

What role is there to play for Europe?

It depends whether the European elites can shove through an EU constitution, and a European foreign minister and a European policy – actually persuade the voters of the European countries to entrust international affairs to this cosmopolitan elite. I don't know whether or not they can. I believe that if Spain and Britain had refused to support the war in Iraq, and had joined France and Germany in refusing to go along with it, there wouldn't have been a war. They have that much potential. But they can only exercise their power if they're united. They may never unite.

What would your advice be: should Europe become a sort of United Federation of Europe, along the lines of the USA?

I hope so. If Europe can do it, the question would become more obvious: why can't the world as a whole do it? The idea that any nation state can protect itself against terrorism is absurd. The need for collective, multilateral action is more and more obvious. And it is just possible that if Europe federated and then started saying, hey, our federation wants to be a member of a larger global federation, somebody might actually listen. The elites of Russia and China after all have no responsibility towards their voters and they might see it as being in the interest of their countries to join in such an effort. It might actually be more difficult for the democracies to join in a world federation than it is for authoritarian regimes!

What about more co-operation between European and American intellectuals?

I think that would be nice. I wish European intellectuals wouldn't let themselves be distracted by sort of residual anti-Americanism – the feeling that, Kerry or Bush, it doesn't matter, America will be America, pretty awful. It would be nice if they would see that, weirdly enough, the future of our relationship might depend on 20,000 votes in Florida – just as the fate of the Middle East may have depended on Blair having been persuaded to go along with Bush.

Do you really think European anti-Americanism is a problem?

It is not a huge problem, but it is enough of a problem so that getting rid of it might do something. One could try to persuade European intellectuals that, sure, America has turned into a militaristic empire, but you can understand why and it doesn't always have to be that way: it isn't deeply wired into the national character; there is a series of contingencies which produced the military-industrial complex and produced the Republican reaction, and produced the Christian right. But there is a tendency for intellectuals, even in America, to talk about the essential character of the American

empire –or something like that – as opposed to the contingent creation of this or that event.

You speak in your book of the necessity for a new patriotism.

I was speaking of that merely in regard to the academic left. It isn't that I want the country as a whole to get more patriotic. I want the left to use patriotic language instead of turning out a home-grown version of anti-Americanism. The radical students of the 1960s who became professors continue to describe us as a racist, sexist, Fascist, imperialist power. You can see what they mean, but it is not the whole story.

The last thing this country needs is a radical left. Nobody called the social ideals of Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson radical; they were just bringing America up to the standard set by the European social democratic parties. The problem for the American left today is to move the country back to the kind of consensus we had under Johnson, not to discover a great new radical critique.

How can this be done?

I don't know. But if the economic situation of the poor and working class continues to get worse and worse, this is a great opportunity for both the left and the right. It is a great opportunity for a charismatic leftist Democratic politician to call for the kinds of measures Roosevelt called for. But in the 1930s there was also a genuine danger of America going fascist. The right-wing populists could have succeeded, and they now have the same opportunity. They can say that all the problems are the fault of perfidious homosexual professors, eggheads – and that might work

In the last twenty years there have always been right-wing populist movements, Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan.

The main problem has been the religious Right; they have dragged the Republican Party to the right by saying that they will withhold millions of votes unless certain measures are adopted. The intensity of right-wing populism has been such as to move the Republican party way to the right. On the other hand, the leftover of the 1960s has produced a liberal public opinion: for instance, almost half of the population thinks if marriage is not to be allowed for homosexuals, then at least there should be civil union for homosexuals. I would never have predicted 50 per cent of the population would say that. That is a real success of the 1960s. It trickled down in the course of the generations. But at the same time, on the other side, there is this other rising tide of Christian fundamental movements.

What role does the media have to play in bringing more liberal ideas to a wider public?

Thirty years ago, the 'media establishment' was a code word for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, spreading liberal ideas from the universities to the population. Then the Fox network, Rush Limbaugh and so on came along and they won. The media have switched, so that now the liberal media pride themselves on being balanced, while the right-wing media get away with anything. One view is that the big shift in American politics came about because a bunch of Republican multimillionaires got together and put huge sums of money into organising think tanks, leadership training sessions for rising Republican politicians, and getting control of the media – and succeeded. There is now a

movement of Democratic multimillionaires, led by George Soros, who want to stop giving money to the Democratic Party and instead do what the Republican multimillionaires did. Instead of giving money to the party, they want use the same instruments to move the Democratic Party to the left – from outside the party – that the Republican millionaires used to move the Republicans to the right. Soros and the other millionaires have been quoted as saying things like, I have no idea what the Democratic Party would do with the money, but I know what I can do with this 5 million over here and this 10 million over there. So I am not giving it to the party.

What about philosophical resources? In your descriptions of American philosophy, you describe a situation where analytical philosophy is completely dominant.

It is a peculiar Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. It is now spreading. A lot of Germans are picking it up, even some French, even some Italians. I mean all that it offers is professionalisation. If you do analytical philosophy, as a graduate student, you can leap into controversies and write critical examinations of the latest article in the latest journal and get it published. It is a sort of fast track into professional academic activity, whereas in most countries you've got to learn, you've got to read so many old books, you've got to develop so much background, you can't start doing philosophy just like that. In America you can, and in Britain you can. It is an attraction.

I can understand using an analytical approach as a base for thinking.

There isn't such a thing as an analytical approach. There are just various authors with various problematics that are stars of analytic philosophy. When I was young they were Russell and Carnap, then it was Austin and Wittgenstein, and so on. But they don't all have the same method or an approach. It is just that they read each other and they formed an intellectual tradition. By now the analytical philosophers in the US and Britain just assume that's what philosophy is. And the idea that you pursue it in the context of intellectual history doesn't strike them as real.

And can you strike a counterbalance?

Not exactly a counterbalance. But I like to go back and forth between my favourite analytic philosophers, my favourite French philosophers, veering between Heidegger and Dewey, Wittgenstein and Derrida, Davidson and Gadamer.

Why do you think Dewey is completely unknown outside America?

He was writing at a time when philosophers in all countries were talking about language, but he never talked about language, he talked about experience. And the so-called linguistic turn left Dewey behind. And also, his politics became part of social democratic common sense – without Dewey we wouldn't have much of the common sense of the left we have today. So Dewey sort of served his purpose, politically speaking. I think he still has some useful philosophical stuff you could pick up.

Your esteem for Derrida is somewhat baffling.

He seems to me a brilliant, original mind. It just never occurred to me to read Heidegger, and Plato or Nietzsche the way in which he reads them. I am not sure his work leads

anywhere. I never understood what deconstruction was or why you would deconstruct texts, but I still think Derrida is about the most interesting philosopher around.

In Germany he is still subcategorised under postmodernism.

I don't think anybody knows what postmodernism means. I am sorry the term caught on. I think so-called postmodernism was attractive because both in France and the US, even in Britain, it looked like a substitute for Marx – Marx is out but Foucault is in, and Foucault is just as radical as Marx. The trouble is, there is no overlap between Derrida and Foucault; they are not interested in the same things. There is no way they can be part of the same movement. They just happened to be contemporaries whose books became bestsellers in the same years.

I read Derrida with more pleasure than I read Foucault. I taught Foucault for a year because everybody was reading him and the students wanted to hear about him, and the more I taught him the less interesting he seemed to me. No utopian political vision, just sort of endless suspicion of anything and everything. So eventually I gave up teaching about him because I couldn't find anything good to say about him. Whereas I can still teach Derrida in connection with Heidegger as two authors in sort of the same line of business. No political interest in either of them but that is okay.

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