

DAVID BARBOZA

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An Interview with David Riesman

DB: One of the most significant of your many contributions, I think, has been your commentary on the antinomian character of the 1960s. You have suggested that the countercultural pressures of that era seem to be part of the reason why America is suffering now from an extended bout of cultural relativism. If I have read you correctly, you have recently argued that since the publication in 1950 of your book *The Lonely Crowd*, the pendulum has swung too far. Bland conformity has given way to an arrogant individualism, characterized by a victim mentality and by political correctness. You suggest that, in a sense, in American society the "lonely crowd" has given way to the "angry mob."

Of course, *The Lonely Crowd* is one of your most famous books. Let's begin with how you came to write it. Didn't Erich Fromm, who I believe also influenced you in your personal life, have something to do with it?

DR: Well, I hadn't had any previous contact with social psychology. And Fromm had an influence on my book because he presented a version of psychoanalytic social psychology that was not Freudian but was best illustrated in a book he wrote with Michael Maccoby, *Social Character in a Mexican Village*. Fromm had also written a book with Ernest Schachtel, who later taught at the New School. They had done a study in the twenties on the German working class in which they discovered among people who were nominally socialist a potential for an authoritarian, and therefore fascist, affiliation. Fromm was a dissident member of what's now called the Frankfurt School. I really gained the idea of social character from him.

The first year that I was at Yale working on what became *The Lonely Crowd*, the Yale anthropology department put on an interesting experiment. I attended a seminar at which two Yale anthropologists were presenting material about the island of Truk and trying to determine whether Fromm could say something about the social character of the Trukese. They were very skeptical about whether he could. Ralph Linton chaired

this seminar, and I remember one episode which illustrates Fromm's approach. Fromm asked, "Are the children ever teased?"

And George Murdoch's first response was, "Oh no. Oh no. The children are treated very nicely."

"Are you sure that they're never teased? Can you not think of any episode of teasing?" Fromm persisted.

"Oh yes," one of the anthropologists said. "A child would be given a piece of bread and an uncle would say, 'Just let me have a look at that.' He'd take a bite. Another relative would say, 'Let me have a look at it.' By the time they were all done taking a look at it, the piece of bread had disappeared."

That observation was central to Fromm's picture of the Trukese, which was radically different from what was presented at the seminar: all these terribly nice people in this Pacific paradise who were very good at tying knots and doing other nautical things. Fromm's indication of what he thought about Trukese social character was confirmed by historical evidence gathered from earlier missionary accounts, which the anthropologists in their snobbery had rejected. There was high dramatic tension. The Yale anthropologists had thought that they could deceive Fromm; that he would not get the right picture.

DB: What in Fromm's work did you find most attractive?

DR: I don't remember when Fromm's book *Man for Himself* came out, but I didn't think Fromm was a very good writer. His thought was better than his writing, and my "analysis" with him was really conversational — not that he didn't help me psychologically; he did. I must tell you of my first encounter with him, how it came about that I went to see him at all. My mother, a very avant-garde person, had been interested in psychoanalysis for a very long time. She went to New York to be analyzed by Karen Horney, and afterwards she wanted to discuss her interest with me. I met Karen Horney, who told my mother that I was a "very resigned young man," which was the case. And Horney, who then was very close to Fromm (they later split), suggested that I go to him. I went to his home and office on the Upper West Side near Columbia University. When I saw the *Gesammelte Werke* of Marx and Engels on his bookshelves, I said to Fromm, "I don't want any of that stuff."

Fromm said, "Don't worry. I'm not out to persuade you or convince you." I later became skeptical of Fromm's picture of the lower middle class, a kind of snobbish, European style picture, just as I later did with C. Wright Mills's picture of Americans in his book, *White Collar*. But I did accept Fromm's focus on social psychology.

Editor's Note: This interview took place in Winchester, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1993.

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DB: Is it true that one factor in leading you to write about the American social character was the research you had undertaken in the late 1940s, which led to your essay, "The Ethics of We Happy Few"?

DR: There's so much chance and haphazard in the way *The Lonely Crowd* began. I had become interested in public opinion research through my other great mentor, Carl Joachim Friedrich, when I was a Harvard student. And he had brought to Harvard from the BBC a man named Charles Siepmann, who had initiated some public opinion surveys in the UK. Friedrich also alerted me to what's been my habit ever since: whenever I open a newspaper I look first at the letters column. With Nathan Glazer, whom I had not met but whose work I'd read, I started looking at interviews in New York City in the Eastern office of the National Opinion Research Center with, as I now realize, a kind of characterological slant. My curiosity was, "Why are there so few 'don't knows'?" Ten percent or less of the people being asked questions in a national survey respond, "Don't know." What does this say about Americans? (And now, as a footnote, if one listens to C-SPAN or National Public Radio call-in shows, again one has the sense of the arrogance of Americans, that they know – we know – how to fix everything. We know that all politicians are corrupt, and so on.)

Looking at those interviews, we then proceeded to do our own interviews with students at a boarding school near New Haven. We sat down and looked at them. And then we hit on what we first called "conscience-direction" versus "other-direction."

DB: Was "conscience-direction" the forerunner of the term "inner-direction"?

DR: Yes.

DB: Did this research evolve into your essay, "The Ethics of We Happy Few"?

DR: I think that question can be answered this way: I recently happened on David Halberstam's book, *The Best and the Brightest*. In it he quotes me on something I'd completely forgotten: my asking these Washington people who came from Harvard and were talking about counter-terrorist work they were planning in Vietnam, "Have you ever been to Utah?"

They said, "No. Have you?"

And I said, "No."

My point was that America was a very belligerent country – as the Civil War suggested – and it wasn't a very good idea to get Americans aroused in foreign combat because who knew what would happen then within the country. And then I talked about the Civil War. I think what drives me is, as this example illustrates, several things: one, a wide-angled curiosity about this country. And two, a certain skepticism. Not cynicism but skepticism.

When my wife Evey and I had a chance to go to Buffalo for my first teaching job, my friends at Harvard Law School tried to discourage me. They said, "Oh you'll be lost there. Maybe we can find something for you here."

But we were just delighted with the thought of Buffalo. It was a working-class city, unlike more middle-class Rochester. And we had lived our lives primarily on the Atlantic seaboard, from Washington to Mt. Desert Island in Maine. Buffalo was the "far west." So we tried there to meet all sorts of people. Buffalo didn't have much of an upper class, and we were immediately welcomed. It was in Buffalo that I met the future co-author of *The Lonely Crowd*, Reuel Denney, who was a high school teacher. But I can't emphasize enough that *The Lonely Crowd* was not about all of America, just a segment of it, primarily what I have now come to call "bi-coastal America," which is, by the way, the America that is represented in the supposed diversity of the Clinton Administration. Very few people from the Midwest and very few ethnic whites, other than Jews.

DB: In light of the fact that you were conducting your research for *The Lonely Crowd* shortly after the Second World War, were you concerned at all, perhaps in part because of the rise of European fascism and the Nazi propaganda machine, that there was a growing trend toward "mass culture" which might threaten to glue people together into a mindless conformity?

DR: I don't think so, but I think Fromm had that view, too strongly, too snobbishly. I resisted looking down on Americans. The Europeans had a view of the lower middle class which was entirely contemptuous. I was put off by that. I didn't like it.

DB: In *The Lonely Crowd* you wrote that the socialization process, or the molding process, had shifted, in large part, from parents to peers and the media, thereby creating the "other-directed" individual. What do you consider the dominant socializers of people coming of age in the nineties? Has it continued along that "other-directed" stream?



DR: Even more powerfully. Parents – or usually now “a parent,” since a large proportion of children are not growing up with both of their actual parents – and their children are much more vulnerable to the peer culture. But I really should say “peer cultures” because contrary to the vision of *The Lonely Crowd*, I see now something which is, in some respects, less attractive than the “other-directed.” The “other-directed” person was receptive to a large constituency of others. What I see now is a group of people connected, not always by physical presence, but by network, who despise the “others,” and who see themselves not as massified but as something else. The example I sometimes use is the movies today, where we have not one movie being shown in a huge theater for everybody, but instead different movies in small theaters for half a dozen different, segmented groups. A certain clannishness or zip code or area code America. People who think of themselves as independent thinkers because they’re not those “others.”

DB: When *The Lonely Crowd* was published you were ambivalent about the value of the social character you identified as “other-directed.” However, in other articles you published, you made a clearly negative judgment, seeing “other-direction” as a barrier or threat to free expression and independent thought. Is that correct?

DR: Yes, I think that’s right.

DB: Was the trend toward “other-direction,” in part, the result of a renewed egalitarian spirit and the breakdown of traditional authority, both of which were perhaps transformed by the technological sophistication of the modern world?

DR: Well, that’s a very good question. The Second World War uprooted people. It sent millions to the university; moved women out of the home to work, and then, of course, sent them back when the men returned. But the war, for those who took part in it of course, dramatically reshaped their milieu. It shook up America like a salt cellar and then deposited its contents variously about the country. It renewed the egalitarian spirit. One of the astonishing things about the war was the near unanimity of support it had. Before the war, I had been very alert to the isolationists and had actually written an article, “What’s Wrong with the Interventionists?” for *Common Sense*, a journal edited by Selden Rodman, who was one of the isolationists more characteristic of Yale than of Harvard. Some isolationists feared that if America went to war it would

become fascist. And my attitude was that America was too unruly for *that* to happen. I resisted theories about the authoritarian personality and thought it was a misreading of the antinomian American even before the war, but my attitude was strengthened by the war.

DB: Does America’s peculiar brand of anti-elitist, anti-intellectual and anti-authoritarian character – or tendency – bear any relation to the development of cultural conformity in this country?

DR: In the book, *Education and Politics at Harvard*, I described two kinds of meritocracy. One I called “aristocratic meritocracy,” and I attributed that to Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, who looked forward to training the leaders of America but did not expect them all to come from the patrician class. Yet he and his sort of people would judge who was fit to be trained. And I compared that with what then (at the time of the book’s publication) prevailed, which was “democratic meritocracy,” in which any number could play and there were formal tests of merit. “Democratic meritocracy” came after the war.

DB: Is there a trade-off between egalitarianism and freedom – or liberty? You write a little about that in your work. Often, it seems, the movement toward egalitarianism makes for a desire among people to want fewer distinctions.

DR: Yes. I illustrate that in the book about Harvard by describing a proposal in connection with the first freshman dormitory that had been built there in decades. The dormitory was to have its own program for the student residents, which would be very demanding, intellectually outward bound. And students would have to know that it was very tough and serious. But some objected on the ground that it was elitist. I noted in my discussion that these objections, among people who actually were *all* part of an elite by virtue of the fact that they were Harvard students, were preposterous. I got nowhere. This anti-elitist bent was powerful. And of course, if anything, it is even more powerful today in terms of victim groups and excluded groups.

DB: Do you contend that you can have both egalitarianism and liberty?

DR: Yes, but there is a trade-off. If egalitarianism is pushed too far you lose liberty. You lose everything in the things you can’t do. I have had an interest for some time in boarding schools for black boys. Some in the women’s movements resist giving advantages of any sort to certain groups



of boys, regardless of the needs such boys might have. Their response is, "You can't do such a thing because it would privilege boys." If I were to argue, as I have, that boys who attend such single-sex schools might be more inclined to do literary things, to do aesthetic things that they wouldn't do in a co-ed setting, the response of some women's groups would be, "Boys are already too privileged. Too bad for them."

DB: One of the conflicts that comes up in some of these discussions is diversity. How does one maintain cultural integrity and yet remain open to diversity? How does one balance the two? How does one determine what brands of diversity contribute to a community, and what kinds detract from it? As we know, in the 1960s all sorts of things were done in the name of diversity. How does an individual, or a culture or a nation, determine which brands of diversity are legitimate and which are threats to our cultural integrity?

DR: Much that was valuable was destroyed in the 1960s – or largely destroyed. I think my pre-sixties work would have to be qualified by post-sixties caveats about extravagant individualism and its hazards – the triumph of "You're not the boss of me." And so, the answer I've come to is that what we have to preserve is diversity among institutions and pay less attention to diversity within them. We have developed what might be called the "diversity industry," which is the homogeneity of insisting on diversity, a standardized diversity which has been homogenized because everyone must have it. Institutions ought to be free to be non-heterogeneous. I was aware of the diversity industry with respect to blacks very early. When I was at the University of Chicago, I suspected that there were "slave traders" who were coming from Southern black colleges to the North and saying, "Do you want a few Negroes?" as they would then have said. "I'll find a few for you." I imagined a finder's fee. And now this is in full flower in the name of diversity programs in industry, and we have affirmative action officers in universities.

DB: So you support a diversity of institutions but within those institutions, you believe, there should be less diversity?

DR: There should be idiosyncrasy – the privilege of idiosyncrasy.

DB: That raises another question: is there a point where diversity begins to violate – maybe not violate but undermine – the traditional culture? Do too many pressures for value neutrality invite social and ethical relativism?

DR: Yes. I share the fear very much.

DB: So with institutions you're a proponent of diversity, as with regions, but what about ways of life? In much of your writing I understand you to be saying that it is preferable to have as much diversity as possible, that uniformity or the homogenization of a culture may threaten free expression, creativity or independent thought.

DR: Right, but we are now at a point where one has to reconsider, because of what's resulting from "diversity." There has to be some sort of balance – some sort of limit on the anarchic temptations that are always present here in America. There are people opting out. We shouldn't allow people to opt out on responsibilities.

DB: Does the mass culture, as Ortega y Gasset once said, crush "everything that is different, everything that is excellent?"

DR: Yes. That's happening. We see it in the decline of American test scores. We see it in the recruitment of non-Americans for the more difficult engineering and science tasks.

DB: So much of your early work was centered on mass conformity and the need to encourage people to be more autonomous. But the need to assert one's self has apparently backfired. In the 1960s, perhaps, some came away with the wrong message.

DR: Yes indeed.

DB: Some believed one way to break out of this mass society was to undermine all reservoirs of authority.

DR: Well, as you can see, I'm not totally happy with the continuing influence of *The Lonely Crowd* in this respect.

DB: Much of your work has been underlined by the themes of individualism and cultural conformity, and the theory that students ought to be challenged to "lean against the wind." In your autobiographical essay, "Becoming an Academic Man," I found stirrings of this individualistic bent. Can you recall anything from your childhood that relates to these themes?

DR: Thinking about nonconformity, it was hard to be a nonconformist



vis-à-vis my mother. She looked down on people who did the ordinary work of the world. Since her standards were so high and I couldn't come close to meeting them, it took Carl Friedrich and later Erich Fromm to help me overcome my sense of inadequacy. And both of them had this ability because they both came from Heidelberg. So if these people of cultivation, greater even than that of my parents, respected me, that made an enormous difference to me.

DB: In your autobiographical essay you wrote about your mother's conception of being "first-rate."

DR: That's right. The term "first-rate" was constantly raised by my mother in our home. I became very allergic to it, yet I was very obedient to the judgments of my parents. I majored in biochemistry at Harvard because my parents said, "What's the point of studying a subject depending on books? You can always read books but you won't always have laboratories." Yet there were certain episodes in which, though I didn't recognize it at the time, I was departing from the parental script.

DB: So there was in your family life, in a way, an orthodoxy – a pressure to conform and to achieve?

DR: My parents took it for granted and did not consider it an achievement for me to graduate at the top of my class, because there was nothing original about that. My mother was unorthodox; anti-orthodox; it meant nothing to her that she had graduated at the top of her own Bryn Mawr class, and it did not matter to her that my father was known beyond the borders of this country for his work in medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. None of us were by her definition and in her frequent term "first-rate." I would have had to compose a sonata, paint like a latter-day Picasso, or write like either George Eliot or T. S. Eliot to win approbation from my mother. This is not "pressure to conform and to achieve." Mere worldly success was not something my ascetic parents cared about. My mother was interested only in "first-raters," truly creative people, mostly artists, but Einstein would fall within the galaxy. She saw people like ourselves as merely doing the work of the world. During the First World War she joined, in a small way, a group of mothers who were sewing or doing other war-assisting things, but that wasn't characteristic of her. She was feminist before there were many feminists. Her closest identification was with her alma mater, Bryn Mawr College.

DB: You once told me that you had a secret stash of detective books you

kept from your parents.

DR: Yes, I had to put them under the bed.

DB: I suppose your mother expected you to be reading Dante.

DR: Yes, exactly. In the original.

DB: What were you reading?

DR: Well, detective magazines, not even detective books; magazines which I couldn't wait for the drugstore to have. I would go out to the drugstore and buy the detective magazines and have an ice cream soda or a banana split. None of that fit with the Francophile cuisine at home.

DB: You rebelled in a very small way.

DR: I wasn't as aware as I am telling you now how rebellious I quietly was – occasionally was. I was the older son. My brother was much more disobedient. My mother would sometimes tell me, "Go see what your brother John's doing and tell him to stop."

DB: Did your father also have these ideas of being "first-rate"?

DR: My father had much more conventional ideas. He was very obedient to the dictates of his own world in not accepting my mother's verdict on his professional work. He was a distinguished professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and he had a private medical practice as well. He was much older: he was forty-two when my mother was twenty-six. My mother had won the European fellowship from Bryn Mawr, which was intended to create an academic career for her – to begin one. But she shied away from that. She spent some time meeting the people around *The New Republic* in New York.

DB: Did things change after you went to Harvard? Wasn't your mother proud of the fact that you had graduated from Harvard with honors and then received a degree from Harvard Law School – that you were a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis?

DR: No. No, to her, I was doing the ordinary work of the world. I was not one of those "creative" people.



DB: About Fromm. You said earlier that your mother introduced you to him.

DR: My mother did. What she said was, "I want to be able to talk to you about psychoanalysis. So I'd like you to be in the same analytic frame as I am. And my analyst, Karen Horney, recommended Erich Fromm." That's how I went to him. I was in Buffalo at that time. I'd go into New York City on a weekend and have two hours on a Saturday and two hours on a Sunday. Here you might find some of the seeds of individualism. My law school colleagues at Buffalo, such as Mark DeWolfe Howe (a distinguished scholar of legal history and author of a major work on Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.), were very scornful of psychoanalysis. Fromm pointed out how childish it was of me to take so seriously the views of someone as provincial as Mark DeWolf Howe.

DB: In the end, the analytic experience served you well. Did you eventually talk with your mother about it?

DR: Oh I'm tremendously thankful for the experience. But I didn't talk to my mother about it as much as she would have liked. I wasn't inclined to share confidences with my mother or to identify with her as much as she would have expected me to. The picture that emerges here is not a happy one. It should be added, though, that in the last years of her life, for many many years, she suffered from Parkinson's disease, and she bore up bravely and stoically, going in a wheelchair to concerts and continuing her intellectual life. Her analysis with Karen Horney continued. So this should help create a picture of sadness. The harsh comments that I've made about her should be qualified by my recognition of the bravery with which she endured a totally incurable disease.

DB: Did you grow closer to her in her latter years?

DR: I regret that I did not. I was away. I was not as good a caretaker as I wish I had been.

DB: Does your German-Jewish heritage have anything to do with your interest in cultural conformity, which is a question that is at the heart of Jewish culture?

DR: That is the contemporary struggle for identity. Of course, I'm completely a blank because I wasn't brought up a Jew. My mother's closest friend was Mary Frazier, after whom my sister was named. My parents were in the Social Register. The principal way in which being Jewish was

brought home to me was my mother saying, "We German-Jews have lost whatever creativity we had at an earlier time." The Eastern European Jews were the successful ones who were taking over the businesses that had once been founded by the German-Jews.

On my mother's side, I remember my great-grandmother living on Spring Garden Street until 1929 with a horse and carriage. She had ten children; survived her husband by sixty-five years, and lived to be one hundred and four. Her family had had silk mills. But my mother still said, "The Russian-Jews," as she called the great majority of Jews, "have the energy we've lost. We're pallid. We're run out." Her models – foci – were Christian. She brought Shirley Watkins, a young novelist, to give Bible lessons to my brother and sister and me. We sang Christmas carols; we celebrated Christmas. We had Easter eggs.

You know, Friedrich, who was from Germany, did something very important for me. He pointed out to me that I was anti-Semitic. And he was right. A non-Jewish German who had thrown his full weight against the Nazis would of course be alert to that. He noticed that in my senior year, which is when I met him at Harvard, I had no Jewish associates. The "girls," like my future wife Evelyn, who went to the dances I attended, the debutante parties and so on, weren't Jewish. Friedrich could see I wasn't associating with any of the Jewish students. There were Jews in my class; they were pre-meds; they were studious. And I didn't know any of them. In a way, here again I was sharing the parental attitude I described so dramatically as an adult.

DB: So eventually with the help of Friedrich and Fromm you became more aware of what was going on, and also stood your ground: "I'm not going to hang onto any orthodoxy." Even coming out against the ROTC at Harvard, I suppose, was another example.

DR: Well, not that – after all I went to a Friends school and I'd gone to Friends Meetings weekly for six years. So if you ask about my religion, I'd say, I accepted the pacifist outlook; I was a pacifist. Not only did I protest the ROTC, but I protested the decorations at Widener Library of only the Americans in the First World War. Very early I had become critical of the First World War and our entry into it. One of the themes that runs through my thinking – I've illustrated it about the Civil War already – is sometimes called counter-cyclical, counter-factual. I was thinking of how if Woodrow Wilson had not been prepared to enter the First World War, he could have brokered a peace between Germany and France in 1917. The French were worn out, they were having mutinies; the German Social Democrats were voting against war credits. And we would've had neither Nazism nor Stalinism. . . .



FROMM:Online

DB: What do you mean by the counter-cyclical or counter-factual?

DR: Counter-factual: imagining what the world would have been like had the United States not entered the First World War, but sought to broker a peace between Germany and France. And what Wilson was like – a Southerner and therefore pro-British, a polished Southerner, with the country vulnerable to anti-German propaganda, which is astonishing for you to think about today. It was much stronger against the “Huns” in the First World War than against the Nazis in the Second. Some states forbade the teaching of German. In general, I did not go for conformity, but I also disliked attitudes of contempt.

DB: Some would suggest that this nation is moving rapidly toward a kind of “mass conformity.” Do you see that?

DR: My own attitude really has been critical of that view. It was Erich Fromm's view. “*Kleinbürger* to the lower middle class.” Deprecating. It was until recently Christopher Lasch's view – the common view. But it was never my view. I shouldn't say “never.” It was not, in the years we're talking about, my outlook. And I've indicated it to the extent that the people who read *The Lonely Crowd* said, “I'm other-directed and therefore benighted.” For example, C. Wright Mills had this contempt to a high degree. In his book, *White Collar*, there's a picture of conformist white collar people and their occupations. I read the interviews on which the book is based. One of these interviews was with an Italian life insurance salesman. And from it, Mills gives a picture of the “bleached white-collar worker.” My sense was a totally different reading of that interview. The salesman was doing something valuable for his clients, providing them with life insurance. He loved his company. He was full of gregarious energy. And to see him and others simply disparaged as “white collar” was wrong. I was alert to that quite early.

DB: Do you think the idea of mass conformity – it doesn't have to necessarily mean the lower class – the idea of the other-directed, applies to, say, the Clinton administration?

DR: Yes.

DB: The Clinton administration seems very aware of not wanting to alienate either side – or any side for that matter. And I see it that way and not as contempt for anything that's lower.

DR: That puts it well. Yes. And at the same time there is something not wholly negative in that wish to please and to relate.

DB: Does cultural conformity carry over into our consumer culture?

DR: I'm glad you brought this up because on that score I'm quizzical. I don't have this panic about consumerism in that respect. I still see vast differences within our culture, and I think it would be very interesting to study differing attitudes in different countries, in different regions, and in different social strata. And I very much dislike the snobbery by which we look down on these consumer goods that we affluent and educated people have already worked our way beyond.

DB: So you don't see the mass consumer culture as threatening the nation's diversity of offerings?

DR: No, I don't see it as a threat. I see snobbery in the attitude that sees it as a threat, although I may be wrong. I see it is dismaying to people who miss the idiosyncrasies.

DB: Related to our discussions of diversity and tolerance is the question of “multiculturalism.” How do you see this debate?

DR: One of the thoughts I repeatedly have is that this debate exists in a stratosphere which bears very little relation to the actual dreadful state of pre-collegiate and collegiate education. What I see is that at the bottom – and not only the bottom of the educational ladder – we have young people who are peer-oriented, uninvolved in school, a situation in which the things that are best learned early are often not learned at all. And instead of concentrating on these learning tasks, debate revolves around “Afrocentrism,” “Eurocentrism,” “multiculturalism,” assuming that members of groups, including gender, are primarily group members rather than primarily individuals.

I have all sorts of notions that I think might help American blacks in predominantly white colleges and universities. One of them is that if they were to spend a term or a year abroad, they would discover how deeply American they are. Blacks are some of the most American of all Americans, particularly in religious beliefs.

DB: Is there a relationship between the decline in standards and the effort to be inclusive and educate for self-esteem, or is it simply that broad access leads inevitably to a lowering of standards?



DR: You know, self-esteem is really based on accomplishment. The teachers are convinced of the importance of self-esteem, yet its primacy in the classroom weakens teachers' authority to the point that they can't say anything wounding to self-esteem. This paralyzes them. For example, there is the prevalent assertion, "Tracking is bad." What I see happening now, as a result of the almost overwhelming belief that you mustn't have tracking, is that you bore the gifted students and humiliate the slower students.

DB: Multiculturalism, it seems to me, comes in several forms. One favors the study of various cultures for the sake of new knowledge. And another, which is more controversial, is the belief that the study of non-Western cultures promotes self-esteem in minorities. The debate over multiculturalism has become terribly political.

DR: It's a visible debate, but it's a small part of the mammoth structure of higher education. It operates in the humanities, in history, sociology, anthropology, and social psychology, but not in economics; very little in government; not at all in the sciences. And it isn't something one is going to find to a high degree among the community colleges.

DB: Doesn't the support of a multicultural curriculum have something to do with findings that when black students are asked to read Shakespeare they don't find it interesting? On the other hand, the poetry of Langston Hughes resonates with them; it reflects their dialect. How can educators persuade their students to transcend their particular backgrounds? How do you overcome that?

DR: I'm reminded of a totally contrary story by the founding dean of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Paul Gagnon, an historian who has been writing on these topics. He has also written about French higher education, so he's multicultural in that larger sense. When UMass/Boston was founded in the sixties it became tilted toward the vulnerable fields of faculty radicalism. The University wanted to adapt to its urban setting along the lines we were just mentioning, including being attractive to black undergraduates. Gagnon ironically recalled that a black student had come to him and asked, "Why can't we have Shakespeare? They have him at the Amherst campus." And I thought that was an interesting comment on this very theme. Surely I have no objections to having Langston Hughes in the curriculum. What I'm concerned about on the college level is that students read the same books at the same time and

that there be a chance for conversation about them. I'm quite open to which books they happen to be.

DB: On the other side of the multiculturalism debate, though, are people who strongly believe that there are universal standards which ought to cross the boundaries of race and culture.

DR: I agree. I very much want books – even though I am not committed to any one group of books – but nevertheless the books should be serious; they should be hard going. They should be, at best, involving – engaging. And they should be shared among a cohort. Certainly not by race or gender. I think of how important it is for the teacher to be able to reach and engage students outside the boundaries of ethnicity or race or gender or class, but I have no objection in principle to moving within the boundaries if that is a way to connect with a particular student. However, one should not make assumptions about what will connect to particular students in advance. My sense of the matter is that much that is dished out to students in public schools under the name of multiculturalism – or even Afrocentrism – will engage only a very few activists among them, if they are black, perhaps in order to be rebellious rather than by virtue of actual engagement with the material. I don't imagine, for example, that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* will necessarily engage black boys and girls in particular, but I was deeply engaged by it.

DB: With regard to current social pressures, the flip side of the multiculturalism debate is the political correctness one. And it is also linked up with issues of free speech.

DR: Yes. Very much so. The more selective the institution the more likely that there will be these preoccupations with political correctness.

DB: Over the past thirty years, American education has become increasingly targeted by political pressure groups. More and more we are finding that our schools are seen as a mechanism to reform our culture, to either restore traditional values or inculcate new values. It appears that the problem is not so much a lack of vision, but the burden of too many conflicting visions; the notion that the schools must be able to solve all of our problems right away, at the snap of a finger.

DR: I think I like what you say very much. You can't overstate the vulnerability of the schools. And that is new. The schools have much less authority. They've become malleable – they've become utterly malleable,



partly as a result, as you suggest, of the wildly optimistic notion that the schools are the remedy for all the social ailments, that you can turn to them to fix whatever needs fixing and “right away.” Immediately. The notion of the schools as a sort of cultural ballast, some kind of continuity, some kind of slow generativity, is lost in this sense of immediacy. A kind of pragmatism has arisen which in fact is wildly impractical because it overstates so profoundly the role of the schools and fails to recognize all the rest of the influences on young people.

Because of this terrible logic we’re talking about, the schools get weaker. They get weaker still because they become vulnerable to really rather slight pressures over which an issue can be made, over which a mobilization can occur. Now, for example, such efforts are just beginning to establish, so to speak, quotas for gay and lesbians. Special campus living arrangements even have been discussed at Cornell University, modeled on the “Afro-American” house or other theme houses. There is much to be said for a theme house based on an intellectual interest; a theme house based on a group interest is something else again, whether it’s black or Hispanic or Jewish or whatever. But if this is happening at the highest university levels, schools are even more vulnerable, teachers more at risk.

DB: If the loss of authority was the immediate cause of the malleability of the schools, what brought about the loss of authority? And is this a recent occurrence?

DR: I think it was the counterculture. I say this hesitantly because I’m not sure of my ground here. For a long time I’ve seen the counterculture, with its antinomian aspects, as having a tremendous influence in delegitimizing authority. The counterculture was made up of predominantly educated, affluent whites. They hooked up with people – now to be called not “Negro” but “black” – such as the Black Panthers, who exploited them and sold them the little red books of Mao Tse Tung, which even the Panthers didn’t take seriously. I see the whites as gullible. “Black” became the victor over “Negro.” The counterculture had its most disastrous impact on the blacks – the name change being one element. It delegitimized the Negro bourgeoisie. Whites have in some measure recovered. The blacks have not recovered. The counterculture is now “a black thing,” much of the time. Rap music. The assumption that one has to be “authentically black.”

Now one has to ask why authority was so vulnerable in the first place. One would have to then ask the more profound questions of why all institutions in our society have lost authority, not only universities. Certainly the government has. The media which has brought the news

also has. The part of *The Lonely Crowd* that I think holds up best is the political section. The world of the “inside-dopester” and the “curdled indignants” is with us more than before. It was almost pathetic in the last election when we had the Perot phenomenon – the indignants who knew what needed to be done.

DB: In other words, instead of us saying, “We need to raise our standards,” we’re blaming.

DR: Yes that’s right. And there are also the catastrophic consequences of contemporary economics. I’m old enough to remember the Hoover era, and I can see a very nasty economic future.

DB: Are you optimistic about the future, in light of what we’ve talked about?

DR: The counterculture had less hegemony in the South and Midwest than in “bi-coastal America.” There’s so much energy in this country. There’s so much intelligence. There’s so much decency that I think we’re entitled to hope the future can be less grave than it now appears to be. But I see many obstacles. One of them is our litigiousness. That’s again an example of the anarchic individualism that we keep coming back to as a hazardous characteristic of America. An anarchic individual can operate also, as we’ve talked about, at the group level; mobilizers in a group can act as if they speak for every individual in the group. Individualistic individualism is less onerous to this country than so-called group individualism, which threatens us with divisiveness.

In terms of our schools, I think it is possible that we can reverse course. However, I do know for instance that the Clinton administration, although it appointed an excellent Secretary of Education in the former Governor Riley of South Carolina, is not going to pursue national standardized educational tests because of the bad news they will bring. Paradoxically, when the modern university, and primary education too, “serves” the culture, by simply reflecting it, it actually does harm, for it gives legitimacy, just as you note, to the relativism, anti-authoritarianism, and irresponsibility and lack of discipline in the general society; it even provides a cynical, educated veneer over these dangerous qualities. At the very simplest level, there should at least be some sort of common conversation about important topics and books, at the undergraduate level and in graduate departments as well. Otherwise, we will move from “other-direction” to no direction at all.

