

Mark Michael Lewis interviews Stephen Hicks

Excerpt from 26:55 to 36:05. Transcription by Walter Evans-Wenz.

Hicks: Right now we are with respect to that phenomenon—that's third generation postmodernism. What you have in first-generation postmodernism is some high theory. You have a large number of people who are very well educated—one of the striking things for example about the leading postmodernists—Richard Rorty, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and so on—all of them are philosophy PhDs. And all of them in their graduate schools are getting, at very good schools in Europe and the United States, a first-rate education in epistemology. And it's really the rigor and the depth of their understanding of where epistemology is—at a very skeptical moment—that gives them the power and stature they have.

So what you then have is a movement that says, "Okay, we can't know the truth. Right. In fact we really should stop talking about *truth*. There maybe are 'truths.'" So we relativize the concept of *truth* or we take the notion that truth really is a subjective projection on possible reality that is out there.

That is integrated then with the politics, because all of the leading postmodern thinkers in the 50s and 60s when they're coming of age—they are young men and young women, and all of them are Marxists or very close to being Marxist. What Marxism then adds is this strong adversarial stance toward the world, an adversarial stance toward what is taken to be the dominant culture, a breaking down of culture into subcultures, each of which has its own narrative that's in competition and contradiction to the narratives of the other elements of culture.

But since we're skeptical, we don't think that rationally we can sit down and have a good discussion and work out what the truth is. So instead all we have is people strongly committed to contradictory value systems, and then no possible way of rationally reconciling them.

Lewis: Right.

Hicks: Okay. So that's first-generation postmodernism. And then as that then gains more adherents among young people who then are university educated, they then some of them become professors themselves in the next generation. Or they go on their careers in intellectual life or in the arts community and become influential there.

But one way that comes out is in saying that, "Well, if we are skeptical, nobody really knows the truth, but there are dominant narratives and then there are weaker narratives that are marginalized, then what we should do is—and this would be a second-generation thing—is push for a kind of equality." That there's no narrative that is truer or better than any other narrative. That's

what first generation teaches us. So the second generation concludes that all narratives are equal, and so what we need to do is make equal space in the curriculum for all narratives.

And so that then means, if you say we're going to have the students read—I'm just making up a number here—one hundred books over the course of their university career. Right now, eighty of those books are written by dead white European males, for example, and only a minority of the books are being written by women, members of racial or ethnical minorities and so on. So in the name of a kind of diversity, equality, fairness, and so on, what we should do is have a more equal representation of all voices across the curriculum. And the way that plays out is a form of affirmative action for books, so then you say "If 40% of the population is white males, then maybe 40% of the books should be written by white males." And "If 17% of the population is Hispanic, then we should have 17% representation," and so on. So we're going to go for some kind of equality or proportional representation. You see that manifesting itself starting in the late 80s, all through the 90s, early 2000s, and so on.

By the time we get to the third generation—the last ten years or so—that then starts to shift for a couple of reasons. One is you then get demographically a higher percentage of people who are now professors whose careers are based on teaching the previously under-represented books in the curriculum. That's what they know, that's what they're interested in, that's what they think is "true" and/or important. So they're interested in further advancing the course of those books and those ideas in the curriculum. And they're not that interested in teaching the other traditions, the other perspectives. Some of them are of course just ideological teachers and not really professors in the best sense of the word.

But also—and this is perhaps an Ayn Rand insight, and behind her a Nietzschean insight—that one of the things that those who are on the weaker side, those who think they've been alienated and oppressed learn to do, because of a certain kind of altruism (we can talk more about *altruism* and its varied uses)—what we need to do is not push for a kind of equality between strong and weak, rich and poor, powerful and powerless but rather give *special preference* to those who are on the losing end of various social forces, so to speak. That we should actively sacrifice the stronger for the sake of the weaker, sacrifice the richer for the sake of the poorer, sacrifice the oppressors on behalf of the oppressed.

What this means is that we get away from *equality* as the standard to a kind of *compensatory justice* as the standard. Where if you think that the rich and the powerful and the smart and the strong have been using their advantaged

position to damage, harm the interests of the weaker, then it's perfectly fine to sacrifice the stronger for the sake of the weaker. And once those who are in the weaker alienated position realize they have this tool or weapon at their disposal—that they are *owed*, and that people who are in the advantaged groups feel *guilty* because they've been talked to feel guilty about all of the advantages that they have.

This becomes a very powerful tool for leveraging your position within the institution. So then you can start saying, “No! It's not just the case that we can't that say conservative voices and liberal voices are equal, they're all just narratives and so you should have equal space.” We say “No, no, the conservative voices have been dominating in our culture and so it's time for them to shut up for a while and we're going to hear voices from our side of the equation.”

It's not just as a matter of “Hey, let's do this in fairness and make up for past sins,” but you see it coming out in a particularly aggressive and ugly form that it does: “You owe us, and anything that you say because of your group membership is just evil, depraved, and we can just shut you up by any means fair or foul.”

Lewis: It's an expression of your privilege.

Hicks: Yes, that's right.

Lewis: And you must check your privilege. You must question, use the guilt that you're talking about to question your own thinking and your own right to speak it.

Hicks: Right. And so those who have privilege they don't have equal rights anymore. In fact they just should shut up and go away and be silenced. And that of course is a power play, but to the extent that it works it means your side then has more control over the institution, whatever the institution we're talking about.

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