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Symbolic politics and cultural history

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SYMBOLIC POLITICS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

ANTHONY ASHBOLT

*Transcript of an interview with Professor Michael Paul Rogin, Robson Professor of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, conducted in the Cafe Grace, Berkeley, November 1, 1995.**

AA: I want, first of all, to take you back to your book on McCarthy and to the co-authored book about political change in California. It seems to me that both these books have a direct relevance today. For instance, in the McCarthy study you argue that far from being a mass phenomenon in the populist tradition, McCarthyism was elite manipulated politics. Isn't that also true of the new right today? While pretending to be popularly based the new right is basically an elite (or ruling class) fraction acting in its own interests. So are we seeing history repeat itself?

MR: No, not really because you are dealing with two quite distinct historical moments. There are certain continuities – a lot of people who were McCarthyites are very happy about the new right, especially certain political intellectuals like Pat Buchanan. If you look at Irving Kristol being a kind of apologist for McCarthy and his son William Kristol as part of the cultural elite of the new right, you can see the continuities. There is a history of demonizing in American politics, yet the forms of demonizing linked to McCarthy, on the one hand, and the new right, on the other, are very different. The new right arose in the wake of significant social and cultural disturbance which did generate widespread anxiety – civil rights campaigns, the rise of feminism, youth rebellion, grave concern over religion. These sorts of issues weren't on the table with McCarthyism. And then, perhaps even more fundamentally, there is the economic stagnation in the 1970s (sometimes understood as a shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy) at the expense of the American working and middle classes. So there is now an anxiety throughout the American populace which simply wasn't the case with McCarthyism. McCarthyism, I argued and continue to argue, was an elite phenomenon that had to do with the Cold War, with anxiety over Communism. That remained fundamentally at the elite level and it really only mattered in wider American politics during the Korean War. Many of the analyses of McCarthyism which deal with it in terms of generalized cultural anxieties are quite wrong because the Fifties was not a period of the politicization of those anxieties.

It is certainly true that there is an elite component to the new right. Take the defense industry. If you look at the Contract On America, it includes massive increases in defense spending which are entirely delusional at this time. It also includes a business takeover of American politics, particularly through deregulation. Look at Newt Gingrich – his shift from a moderate to a conservative had to do with this wire company which bankrolled him and which didn't want regulations in his district. So there are clearly important economic elite interests behind the new right. Nevertheless, I don't think it would have its popularity without the support of real sections of the American electorate that are not elite sections, for example the fundamentalist Christian right and all the people who are anxious about race. Those people give a kind of popular base to this movement which McCarthyism didn't have.

AA: So is the new right a populist movement?

MR: No, because populism was something else entirely. There's always been a rhetoric in American politics of populism, broadly understood, because that's the only way American politics can work – everyone's calling on 'the people'. But late nineteenth century Populism was an economic movement against the ruling elites and the new right is precisely not that. The new right deflects people's economic anxieties onto targets – affirmative action is blamed, illegal immigrants are blamed but they are not the problem. Populism, which focused upon the economic troubles of the people, and on the corporations, is the opposite of the new right strategies.

AA: In the final chapter of *Political Change in California*, there's a very real sense in which you predicted what would happen in the 1980s. Orange County bigotry, prejudice and fundamentalism are analysed with great prescience. And you say quite explicitly that, having thrown up the governor of the nation's largest state, it's time to take 'the symbolic political universe of southern California seriously'.

MR: We stopped that book with Reagan's election to the governorship in 1966, and after that southern California took over American politics. That means a couple of things. It means Nixon and then Reagan as Presidents. It means the gun belt. It means Hollywood and the predominance of symbolic politics and images. It also means the particular politics of the Sixties in California – Reagan was elected targeting the student movement and the civil rights movement. That was the beginning of the counter-revolution that took over American politics. It was derailed with Watergate and the loss in Vietnam but

came back again with Reagan. We are still living in the counter-revolution from the Sixties and it's more intense than ever now.

AA: Let's look at symbolic politics more closely because that's an interesting aspect of your work that has been important to you for some time. There's the symbolic world of southern California revolving around, in part, privatized suburbia and a somewhat idealized family. Much later in your study of Reagan almost everything becomes symbolic – Baudrillard's simulacrum has triumphed, except you still believe there is a difference between image and reality. Isn't there a sense in which symbolic politics and image politics have taken over, first in California and then America as a whole, during the last twenty or thirty years?

MR: Image, yes but it is important to see what the central images are – family and race. First, the family – it's vital to see the central importance of the institution of the family which came under attack in the Sixties from the youth revolt before it came under attack from feminism. The whole race question was understood to be a threat to the family – fears of intermarriage and so on. So, even though the term wasn't used at the time, 'traditional family values' became a rallying cry of a whole set of forces opposed to what was going on in the Sixties. The kinds of issues which arise in the family – intimate, personal issues, issues of ways of life and personal relations – became political. The family became a locus of politics and that takes you into the terrain of symbolic politics. This began to happen in the Sixties when we were coming off from the New Deal period in which American politics was organized around socio-economic interests. This was, it turned out (in my opinion), atypical. I grew up with it, I assumed that's the way it always was, I started doing a type of interest group or class analysis originally and so on. But by the middle of the Sixties it became clear that we had a war in Vietnam which was inexplicable in terms of economic interests, except for the interests of the military industrial complex. You were really seeing anti-Communism as ideology plus an obsession with American weakness in symbolic more than material terms. You also had the race question which had been buried by the New Deal. Once you begin to look at American history, you find that American politics has been myth-dominated. So when I began this work on symbolic politics, I was actually re-connecting to the history of the United States, recognizing that the New Deal is the great exception. And we saw the end of the New Deal order probably with the election of 1968.

AA: You're talking in part about the idea of America, the ideal America that never really existed in the way it was propagated. Yet how is the New Deal a great exception?

MR: The New Deal is a class based phenomenon. For the first time in America you have a welfare state, you have mass organization of trade unions, you have wage and hour laws, you have public works, you have something which looks a little more like the ways western industrial democracies operate, particularly in terms of class politics and the welfare state. It's quite an exception. Historically, America is founded upon some vision of what you call an ideal America which people now are beginning to talk about as whiteness. Whiteness as this elevated, abstract, disembodied thing which is defining itself in relation to the major factors which have formed the United States historically and mythologically, namely the dispossession of Indians and the enslavement of blacks. This process forms the basis of our major national myths and forms of culture, the frontier myth and blackface minstrelsy, which have dominated American culture and politics from the beginning. These myths were in abeyance in a certain kind of way during the New Deal but they have come back powerfully now.

AA: These myths involve a forgetting of history, a reinvention of history, so was there anything during the New Deal which 'remembered'?

MR: There was a lot of New Deal attention to the 'real' America which had to do with ordinary people and their problems – in profound ways, like Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, or in superficial ways like the book and the movie *Grapes of Wrath*. There was a kind of populist moment to the New Deal which wanted to think of itself as rooted in an American past (take Woody Guthrie, WPA art) there was a celebration of a certain sort of American history which included quite a deal of sympathy for the Indians (look at the work of The Bureau of Indian Affairs). There was a lot of effort to get in touch with rather decent things in ordinary American life. Yet despite this, Roosevelt effectively buried the question of race. He wouldn't support an anti-lynching bill. Under white supremacist southern pressure he exempted agricultural and domestic workers from Social Security. There was a kind of burying of the issue of race in black-white and Indian-white relations and that was the condition for a shift from race to class. In the Sixties those things were remembered through the civil rights movement and because of the Vietnam war which led people to rethink the history of the United States as an imperial history. Once those things were remembered, it wasn't necessarily good for American politics because the counter-revolution was stronger than the revolution. There was too much unwillingness to repudiate that whole history and so there became a kind of nationalist identification with it, with white supremacy and American expansion. So you have the phenomenon now where ninety nine senators vote against the new standards for American history in

high school (standards set by a panel of perfectly reasonable, respectable historians) because what the panel thought high school students ought to know involved a demythologizing of the American past.

AA: I want to talk a bit more about the symbolic politics of the family because it's become increasingly interesting in terms of American historiography and to some degree political science. The symbolic politics of the family was crucial to the right, old and new, yet the family has also found favor amongst leftist or left-liberal critics – Christopher Lasch, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Michael Lerner, Jackson Lears. Arguably, they speak good sense about the family (as against the bad sense of the new right) but, given that you are highly critical of pro-family rhetoric, what's your position?

MR: I think the invocation of the family in politics tends to be reactionary and mystifying. The reason for that is that the invocation is nostalgic and it's patriarchal. I think that's precisely when you start worrying about values and people having the right values – and you're also worrying about authority – you're forgetting crucial problems, particularly concerning political economy.

The Moynihan report on the Negro family is a classic example of this. Right in the middle of the civil rights movement, you have massive unemployment in the ghetto, you have severe racial segregation, so you might think that you want to focus on those matters of political economy if you want to do something about the ghetto. Instead Moynihan focuses on the Negro family and the problem with that family is seen to be matriarchy. Young black men, the report argues, need a patriarchal structure and that's the army. Moynihan himself is one of eleven Democratic senators to continue to support welfare as an entitlement for the children of unwed mothers. A whole part of the New Deal order is being repealed as we speak and Moynihan is one of those people against that repeal. He still thinks that if children are born out of wedlock they are entitled to be taken care of in some way. But his discourse is importantly responsible for why they are not being taken care of right now and that is because the problem of the inner-city is seen to be a family failure instead of a problem of political economy. So, usually the invocation of the family has to do with an anxiety about fathers not being in control (as with Moynihan). And that anxiety rarely has good political consequences. I make an *analysis* of the psychological and symbolic core of politics in order to try and shift the discourse in the direction of political economy.

AA: But there is a political economy of family life.

MR: Sure there is. There's a problem with the feminization of poverty – that's the problem we should be talking about, not family values.

AA: While in the world of the family, it seems appropriate to ask a question about fathers in general and your father in particular. The theme of fathers and sons recurs in your work since the early 1970s. Your book on Jackson was entitled *Fathers and Children* and you think it important in Freudian terms that Jackson's father died before Andrew was born. Later, you stress the fact that Ronald Reagan needed to be free of his father and in turn was not a real father himself. Filmmaker D.W. Griffith couldn't be free of his father to the point where he died of drink (just as his father had) and he thus 'entered his father's dead body'. The book on Melville was dedicated to your father, a textile workers' organizer (Melville's father was a cloth importer). The links or lack of links between fathers and sons seem to be highly significant in your work. What do you make of this observation of mine in both personal and political terms?

MR: My father was a textile workers' organizer, a labour leader and I was very much under his influence. My father, because his union failed, remained a lot more radical than many of his friends whose unions hadn't yet failed (the auto workers, steelworkers, and so on). The new left in its early years was basically a movement of people like me (although I was a little older than that generation), people whose fathers were liberal and there was a rebellion against a kind of liberal politics that didn't seem to be engaged in a radical way any more. So I think there is a perfectly legitimate student revolt which is also a family revolt and we did in the Sixties begin to focus upon generational questions. That partly explains my shift away from a social democratic way of interpreting things to a more symbolic cultural way of interpreting things – that was, to some degree, a generational rebellion. Yet I remained very close to my father. He wasn't crazy about the Jackson book because it was too psychoanalytic for him (and maybe because of the theme of patriarchal oppression) but he loved having my Melville book dedicated to him. He also became radicalized himself again in the Sixties. A lot of old left people became neoconservatives then but my father did not, so I was lucky in that respect. He remained connected to me and my work and we shared this world. That's the personal part. I became fascinated, partly for personal reasons, by the efforts of important American political and cultural figures to establish their own identity against some kind of either failed or too powerful paternal presence. So I began to analyze American politics that way, with Jackson, with Melville, with Griffith and with Reagan.

AA: What about Clinton?

MR: Well you could do something like that with Clinton but Clinton to me is a rather pathetic and not very interesting figure who is responsible for a lot of the politics under which we're now living by his own unwillingness to be confrontational. Everyone says 'he's the son of an alcoholic' and he shares that with Reagan. But Reagan had a very clear delusional political vision which he managed to impose on the country, while Clinton has none and thus creates the space for all the energy to come from the right, even if that ends up benefiting him politically as the moderate voice against the demons he's helped unleash. I guess I'm disgusted with Clinton but also not very interested in him. I have tended to try to work on people who had a powerful impact, either political or literary, in their own right which is certainly true of Jackson in relation to Indian removal, certainly true of Melville the great American novelist, and certainly of Griffith who made the most important early films. I'm criticized by some people for focusing upon great historic moments, transformative moments and the people who made them. If you don't come of age in a transformative period, say if you come of age in the Seventies or Eighties, you might want to feel there's a lot more room for maneuver and you don't have to focus on the great heroic failures. But my generation did come of age during a transformative period, so that's what I do.

AA: There's something almost refreshingly 'politically incorrect' about the Freudian analysis in the Jackson book. I gather a new introduction almost apologizes for this patriarchal discourse.

MR: No, not really. What I say in that new introduction is that I published my book in almost exactly the same year as Dorothy Dinnerstein published *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* and Nancy Chodorow published *The Reproduction of Mothering*. I was interested not only in the topic of fathers and sons but also in the anxieties that are recreated later in life but originally come from early childhood relations with the mother and a kind of misogyny that comes out of a fear of dependence on women. That was a big part of my Jackson book, even though it also tended to reflect a psychoanalytic orthodoxy which was being undermined. There was a psychoanalytic discourse taking hold which is really about the early mother, male anxieties in relation to women and I think of myself in that tradition which goes back to Melanie Klein more than Freud. I see myself as a critic of Freudian patriarchalism because Freud was interested in resurrecting the patriarchal father and I'm interested in criticizing that from what I'd like to think of as a more feminist position. Not as a 'male feminist', which is a bad faith position to occupy, but as a

supporter of feminism. I think my later work is much less dogmatically or mechanically Freudian and Kleinian than the Jackson book, but I've hardly abandoned a psychoanalytic orientation. The Jackson book has many virtues but its unreconstructed psychological liberationism is a product of the late 1960s and early 1970s, what Lenin would call the 'infantile disorder' of the times.

AA: But at the very least you seem to be saying that a world without fathers is no utopia.

MR: I see, that's interesting. Some people have said that in taking the position that there's a problem in male dependence upon the early mother, I must believe that the solution to that problem ought to be strong fathers, so I sound exactly like Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I don't want to sound like him but there are some things in the Jackson book which have been interpreted that way. I'm very critical of the position that patriarchal claims – in slavery, in Indian relations, in traditional family values – invoke a flawed, punitive father to get the fantasized all-powerful mother under control. Patriarchal ideology is a defence against anxieties about women that should be dealt with in a different way, namely by creating sexual equality. Let's not, however, equate sexual equality with getting rid of fathers.

AA: Some socialist feminist historians have rejected the term patriarchy as being too fixed, immutable, ahistorical. You still use the term.

MR: You have to specify what you mean. Within American culture there has been a recurrent anxiety about the weakness of paternal authority and there have been constant efforts to cement its role. You can see this in Indian relations, slave relations, family relations. There are, of course, changes over time and within different arenas, and they have to be specified.

AA: You have been one of the more important supporters of the American exceptionalism thesis. I'm thinking particularly about your stress on American liberalism (a very American liberalism), the centrality of race over class for most of American history. Yours isn't a celebratory variety of American exceptionalism (unlike Daniel Boorstin), nonetheless all such exceptionalist doctrines have come in for a battering in recent times. What would you say about the American exceptionalism thesis now?

MR: My intellectual father was Louis Hartz. I am just about the only radical who counts Louis Hartz as an important authority. If you understand

Hartz's development you will be able to understand my position. Hartz started as a Marxist but when he abandoned that position he retained one crucial feature of it which was the notion that America, as he put it later, was a fragment society coming out of the liberal fragment. So the absence of a hereditary aristocracy and monarchy and the absence of socialism, the sweep of a certain kind of propertied liberal individualism was peculiar to the United States among western industrial societies, and among other fragments which spun out of Europe in the period of settlement. Another word for fragment societies is settler societies. Hartz began to think about settler societies and as the Sixties started he began to think about race. That's exactly the same evolution that I went through. I started out with a focus upon the peculiar sway of a propertied liberal individualism in the United States. Then I began to realize that this intersects with race, and it intersects with race because the United States was a settler society, formed at the origins of the capitalist world system – formed out of the triangular trade, out of the meeting point of Africa, the New World and Europe.

There are differences with other settler societies and differences with Europe. What is distinctive about the United States is that it was a bourgeois society built upon Indian land, with slave labour, which then takes this history and turns it into myth. That is to say it makes the dispossession of Indians and the process of that dispossession one of its central myths – the frontier myth, Daniel Boone, Leatherstocking, the western movie (everybody knows that's been America's contribution to world culture). Then there was slavery, and blackface minstrelsy, which was associated with Jacksonian democracy, was the first and most popular form of mass culture in the world – miming the expropriation of blacks by putting on blackface and black voice. So the other major myth has to do with white and black and I argue in my new book that white over black in the form of black over white dominates the crucial moments in American motion picture history – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer* (the first talking picture which is also the immigrant blackface Americanization story), and then *Gone With the Wind* (the first blockbuster movie). In other words, making culture out of the subjugation of peoples of colour is what is distinctive about American culture and it's also what characterizes American politics. I see that as exceptionalist.

AA: One thing you have written about extensively which brings American exceptionalism to the surface is the year 1848. Within America you have racial domination, murder, exploitation, the thrust towards the frontier, manifest destiny, imperialism. Is it possible that this American 1848 was more significant than the European 1848?

MR: I think that's true because the European 1848 was a failure. Of course, if you follow Lukacs then there were very important consequences including the creation of cultural modernism and of mass working class parties in the latter part of the century but it is still the case that the 1848 liberal nationalist revolutions failed. Whereas the American 1848 succeeded. What I argue is that exactly parallel to the 1848 revolutions in Europe is the liberal expansionist moment in America (involving racial expansionism rather than a struggle against aristocracy, although Tocqueville does call the Indians the lords of the forest). The American 1848, the Mexican War, does founder on the conflict over slavery between the slave states and the free states just as the European 1848 foundered due to class conflict. But out of the American 1848 you get a civil war – this is really the engine of American history in the mid 19th century in a way that the consequences of 1848 are not in Europe. My main point is that in America it's expansion and it's race (Indians and blacks), in Europe it's much more about class.

AA: It seems like a bit of a jump from 1848 to 1968, but ...

MR: It's the same thing, exactly the same. '68 is an international phenomenon like 1848, another failed utopian moment, but in the United States it's again tied up with these two fundamental issues – race (civil rights, black power, the urban uprising) and expansionism (the war in Vietnam, which was an extension of the conquest of Indians. Vietnam was 'Indian country'). So the specificity of '68 in America was, once again, Indians and blacks.

AA: Here in Berkeley, by 1968 the radicals dreamed of revolution (even if just in one town or one street. Berkeley was seen as an island of socialism, there was a Telegraph Avenue Liberation Front). The dreams came unstuck soon after People's Park but I sense you don't think, as so many now do, that the left was wrong to dream. And you've been in Berkeley since 1963 and Berkeley has always been seen as different from America, itself exceptional. Perhaps you would like to reflect upon that because it again brings up personal and political dimensions.

MR: What's different about Berkeley? The Free Speech Movement was produced by people who come back from Mississippi Freedom Summer (so there's the race or civil rights connection) and it culminated in People's Park which was explicitly understood as a protest against the taking of communal land (in a way which may seem a little quaint today but at the time seemed in the tradition of the Indians). Personally, if I'd stayed in the east I would have been much more under the sway of the established eastern institutions and intellectuals, and the Cold War

discourse which never penetrated northern California to the same degree. So there was more freedom here which enabled things to happen and I identified closely with what was happening. I was very influenced by students I worked with in that period (one of whom was leading Berkeley radical Frank Bardacke), and also by a group of political theorists here (Sheldon Wolin, John Schaar and Norman Jacobson) who were emancipated from Cold War ways of thinking. So it was a tremendous liberation to get out of Harvard and Chicago (although Chicago was very stimulating) and to be here as the student movement took off. I went from a quiescent and stultifying Harvard in the Fifties, to a more intellectually and also politically exciting Chicago in the late Fifties and early Sixties but it was really a break to come to Berkeley.

AA: Finally, as Clinton's 'liberalism' succumbs to new right ideology, as the welfare state is eroded on a daily basis, as locally the Regents of the University of California have abolished affirmative action and there's been talk of big rises in fees, as Eugene Genovese has become Dinesh D'Souza's ad man, is there anything left to dream about?

MR: The Genovese thing is very interesting because he is so authoritarian. He used to be a Stalinist defender of the slave ruling class and now he's an anti-Stalinist defender of the slave ruling class. He is an important scholar and a lot of his work is very impressive. But the core driving motivation of Genovese is patriarchal authoritarianism. Genovese is one of a number of people – some are more strident, some are more liberal – who, because they can't let go of this idea of an authoritarian centre which is made up of white men, are extremely anxious about women and people of color speaking for themselves and think that if only they stopped speaking for themselves we could have ... well, the dream varies ... the good family, the welfare state, class politics, and so on. The position which wishes that the fractures in a white male-dominated coalition would go away, that white men would once again be the universal class, is very reactionary.

So, what to dream of now? Some people think that we should dream of the new immigration plus feminism because the patriarchal centre can't withstand the pressure from those social forces. Out of this ferment, it is hoped, something could come, comparable historically to the labor and civil rights movements. At the moment we have a severe black-white divide and these people want to transcend that by embracing something more 'multicultural'. But the problem, as I argue in my latest book, is that it is precisely at times of mass immigration that you get an increasing focus on black and white, a racializing of politics (the campaign against affirmative action is a battle to racialize politics not to

remove race as a category) in order to incorporate the immigrants into the dominant society, which is done by using blackface as a transitional mode toward becoming white. So, historically, the immigrants enter the American racial divide, they play with it and they cross over to the white side. There's this diabolical link between mass immigration which ought to pluralize America and a racial divide which binarizes it and I think we're having that reproduced again. The black-white divide is becoming fundamental as a way of moving some new immigrants onto the white side, demonizing others as inferior (racially inferior or culturally inferior). Somehow we have to break out of it but I don't have a program. I do think we need to go back to class politics or, if you want to do it in less Marxist terms, to a public opposed to the plutocrats who are capitalizing on the racial divide. Privatization, in which economic and familial meanings are linked, is the thing to oppose. But at the same time it does seem to me that you aren't going to have a class or public politics as long as people are so obsessed with the danger of those dark peoples, and those women, and those queers. As long as you have that kind of fear it's always going to be mobilized against some kind of class alliance. Race and sex are the trump card in this country until somehow they are dealt with. You can't just wish that they would go away.

NOTES

Books by Michael Rogin referred to in this interview are: *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: the Radical Specter*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1967; *Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements, 1890-1966*, Greenwood Publishing Corporation, Westport, 1970 (with John L. Shover); *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1975; *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1938; *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Essays in Political Demonology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987; *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.