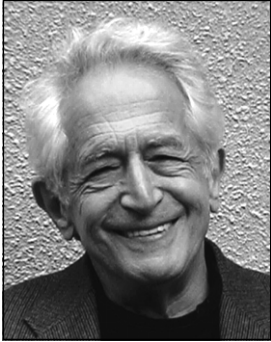


Richard J. Bernstein

## *Böse. Berlin and Bats*



Born on May 14, 1932. 1955 M.A., 1958 Ph.D., both at Yale University. 1954–57 Instructor in Philosophy, Yale University. 1957–58 Fulbright Lecturer, Hebrew University. 1958–63 Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Yale University. 1963–65 Associate Professor of Philosophy, Yale University. 1965–66 Visiting Professor of Philosophy, Hebrew University. 1966–78 Professor of Philosophy, Haverford College. 1966–78 Chair, Department of Philosophy, Haverford College. Spring 1974 Visiting Professor, Catholic University of America. Spring 1975 Visiting Professor, University of Pennsylvania. 1979–89 T. Wistar Brown Professor of Philosophy, Haverford College. 1981–83 Visiting Adjunct Professor, Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research. Spring 1988 Visiting Professor, Frankfurt University. 1989–02 Vera List Professor, Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research; Chair, Department of Philosophy. 1998–99 Coordinator, New School Psychoanalytic Studies Program. Major Publications: *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1983), *The New Constellation: The Ethical Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), and *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). – Address: 1614 Monk Rd., Gladwyne, PA 19035, USA.

*Böse.* I was frequently asked: “What is your project?” I answered with the single word, “Evil” – and this would always provoke a lively conversation. There is a paradox concerning our discourse about evil. Never before has the visibility of evil been so dominant and pervasive images of horror widely disseminated – organized death camps, genocides, terrorist attacks, and children dying of starvation

from famines that might have been avoided. Yet there is a gulf between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources for responding to evil. What do we really mean when we label an event, person, or act *evil*? In my book, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, I dedicated two chapters to Arendt's insights on evil – both radical evil and the banality of evil. I felt that Arendt opened a variety of questions concerning evil in the twentieth century that she did not answer. I was intrigued about a remark that she makes about radical evil and Kant in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. "It is inherent in our philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil', and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded to the Devil himself celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil, even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a 'perverted ill will' that could be explained by comprehensible motives." This started my intellectual journey, a journey that took me back to Kant and explored the thinking of Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas, Jonas, and Arendt. What can we learn about evil from this modern tradition? The study is conducted as a series of *critical* interrogations, in which I seek to establish what is insightful in each of these thinkers and what must be criticized, what must be rejected. I do not think we can ever come to the end of probing the meaning and varieties of evil but I do think that we can deepen our understanding of evil and our responses to it. The book concludes with a series of theses about the meaning of evil today and about our response and responsibility in the face of these evils.

I am happy to report that I completed a draft of this book during my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The rhythms of the Wissenschaftskolleg suited my own working habits. My most creative time for thinking and writing is in the mornings. After four hours of writing each morning, I looked forward to the lively conversation with colleagues.

*Berlin.* Berlin, with its own troubled history, was an "ideal" site to write a study of *das Böse*. Berlin, and more generally Germany, is perhaps the most self-conscious and self-reflective place for thinking about the horrendous twentieth century. Scarcely a day passes without a newspaper article, television program, or new book dealing with some aspect of the dark times of the past century. But this is not what most impressed my wife Carol and me about Berlin. Berlin is a people-oriented city. Throughout the year, we kept meeting fascinating people with whom one could have the most intense and inform-

ative conversations. By the end of our stay, we could scarcely attend a concert, theater performance, or lecture without meeting some of the friends we made during the year.

And of course there are the many and varied delights of the Wissenschaftskolleg. I can best convey this by retelling some of the incidents that stand out vividly as I think back over the year. There was the day when I casually mentioned to Gesine Bottomley that I doubted whether one would find copies of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in Berlin – the nineteenth-century American philosophical journal – only to receive a note from her the next day that there were six complete sets of this journal in Berlin! Or the time when I wanted to celebrate Carol's birthday at one of Berlin's finest restaurants. Barbara Sanders not only knew the restaurant, but also ordered the best table in the restaurant. She had the uncanny ability to get us the perfect tickets for opera, theater, and dance. She never failed to answer our "daily" question – always with her cheerful smile. There was the joy of a sunny afternoon sitting in the garden discussing fine points of Kant and Hegel with Dieter Henrich. Or the exchange of e-mail messages with Andreas Wimmer, in which I tried to convince him that there was something important and worthwhile to be learned from Derrida and deconstruction. Or the wonderful multi-language poetry readings with Velcheru Narayana Rao, Don Berger, and Kirsti Simonsuuri. Or the ongoing conversation with György Ligeti thrashing out fine points of philosophy. Or the time when Carol and I were invited to the superb Indian kitchen at the top of the Weiße Villa. (Surely, Sanjay Subrahmanyam – in addition to his intellectual talents – stands out as the best Indian chef and American blues singer of the year of 2000/01.) These are just fragments of many, many other happy memories.

*Bats.* This was the year of *Die Fledermaus!* What started out almost as a communal joke turned out to be an exciting scientific adventure. We had three distinguished scientists working on different aspects of the echo systems of bats. After listening to Hans-Ulrich Schnitzler's passionate and enthusiastic seminar, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", I was ready to sign on as a junior bat researcher. The bat experience – which lasted for the entire year – is an exemplar of what is so distinctive about the Wissenschaftskolleg. Here was an opportunity to pick the brains of some of the most creative scientists about their discoveries and sophisticated experiments. From bats, it was only a small step to social spiders and the intricacies of evolutionary biology. The diversity of our Indian scholars opened the history and art of this intriguing subcontinent. We all

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learned from David Shulman's sensitivity about the poetic beauty of Indian languages. Navid Kermani taught us all by his own example to appreciate the beauty of the Islamic tradition. I found myself reading texts that I never would have read otherwise – and in engaging in informative dialogues about their work with Peter Bernholz, Philippe Burrin, Partha Chatterjee, Dorothea Frede, Mohammad Kamali, Deborah Kilburg-Salter, Stephen Krasner, Suzanne Marchand, Patricia Springborg, Francis Synder, Robert Wade, Hui Wang, and many others. These exchanges were an education in itself. It is difficult to assess how these diverse encounters will affect my own future work, but I know that it will certainly influence my thinking on a great variety of topics.

I cannot conclude without mentioning two Fellows who would surely win the prize for the most beloved Fellows of 2000/01: György Ligeti and Zwi Yavetz. Both of them, whose own lives spanned the vicissitudes of the twentieth century, exhibited a wit, humor, warmth, freshness, friendliness, and wisdom that testify to their gentle humanity. I always felt more alive and stimulated in their presence. At the beginning of our year, Wolf Lepenies expressed the hope that our encounters at the Wissenschaftskolleg might lead to new research projects. Frankly, I have a secret desire to write a book, "The Wit and Wisdom of György Ligeti and Zwi Yavetz". Whenever I think of the year 2000/01 at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I will surely think of them. They epitomize what makes the Kolleg such an exciting, stimulating, and joyful place to spend a year.