

A Conversation with Benjamin Barber

Q: Professor Barber, perhaps you can give us a bit of information about your background and your consequent engagement in politics. And how do you see your current role?

Barber: Well I started out as an academic political philosopher, but because my parents were both in the theater professionally, and because as a young man I often directed and wrote for the theater, I already had a sense of the world well beyond the academy. I actually went into political philosophy out of a deep concern for and commitment to politics. My work as a political philosopher focused, from my early days, on democracy. My dissertation was on the Swiss political system and the way it contrasted with the American political system. My focus was on citizen democracy and communal freedom in Switzerland and its differences even with western political regimes. So early on I learned a lesson, which has stayed with me ever since, which is that there is no such thing as democracy, only democracies in the plural. There are many roads to democracy and many forms of democracy and the Swiss system is certainly an example of that. So when in later years I became more politically active and politically engaged, it was not a departure from my academic work, but a natural expression of my ongoing interest in not just democratic theory, but also democratic practice.

Q: You know, you're one of the few political scientists, who has actually explored the connection between politics and culture. So perhaps I can ask for some reflections on the current state of political culture in the United States?

Barber: The sad thing is that, historically, while the arts don't need democracy, democracy needs the arts. I mean, ironically, sometimes the arts flourish better in oppressive cultures where they appear as radical, dissident elements and where artists find their voice in resistance. It has always been a problem for the arts to exist in the kind of marshmallow culture of a bourgeois, materialist, relatively open society, say like the United States. Even more to the point, there is a tendency in America to

avoid demanding funding for the arts and support for the arts by the government. The fear of censorship from above has led to subordinating the arts to the marketplace where a very different kind of narrowness from below occurs as a consequence of imposing the profit motive and a marketplace mentality on the arts. So, in the United States today, rather than being a centerpiece of a vital and robust civic culture, the arts exist as a diminutive piece of a capitalist market culture: artists being subordinated to profits, innovation being subordinated to what entertains and what sells in ways that have had a devastating effect not just on artists and the arts but also on democracy because the erosion of the arts, I think, has also damaged the civil culture at large and made for a less robust democracy. By the way my wife is a choreographer and dancer who runs a dance company so I know whereof I speak.

Q: It's interesting, isn't it, that this crucial issue which you raise is barely ever discussed in any campaign at all. How do you explain that?

Barber: I think that's the sign in our culture of marginalization; not oppression, but invisibility, and the fact that the arts don't exist, as you say, even as a topic, let alone as a subject of real controversy or debate of what their role should be suggests how completely marginalized they have become. We know that every time there is a cut in the school budget, the very first thing to go is the arts.

My daughter, when she went to public school in New Jersey, had Art in the form of what was euphemistically called, "Art in a cart" which meant there was no homeroom, no classroom for the arts, but rather a little cart came around with a set of paints or a flute or a recorder and that was "arts" for the school. That's a sad commentary on the peripheralization and the marginalization of the arts in our culture. You're right, when was the last time in any presidential debate, in any discussion of political leadership or legislative leadership we've had a serious discussion about the role of the arts?

By the way, unfortunately America is leading the way for the West in this respect, because until recently, of course, we would always contrast the American approach with the European approach, which involved serious governmental and civic support for the arts. But in the new European market economy, increasingly, we're seeing the arts also marginalized.

Berlin, which used to support the arts so well, has had budgetary crises that have put a lot of pressure on those arts budgets. In fact, rather than the United States learning from more enlightened civic cultures in Europe, Europe seems to be unlearning its own lessons by following the American example.

Q: You were a principal advisor to Howard Dean during his campaign. Now, when you look back on it, do you feel it had any affect on the American political culture? What did it accomplish and why do you think it failed?

Barber: Well two things: its achievements, its short-term achievements, can be seen in the irony of a campaign in which for the first six months, the Democratic Party was screaming “we need a centrist candidate,” “we need a compromiser, we need somebody who doesn’t scare America, we need somebody who looks like the Republicans.” And then, it was warning “look at this man, he is out there saying what he believes bluntly: he defends freedom of the press, he says he’s against the war—we can’t have a candidate like that!”

That was the first six months. Then, after Kerry got nominated, for the next six months Democrats were yelling “Oh my God! Why don’t we have a candidate who says what he believes? Why don’t we have somebody against the war? Why don’t we have somebody who speaks his mind?” Of course, they had that person and in effect, undid his campaign. In fact, Howard Dean certainly represented qualities that the Democratic Party needs, not radical qualities, (he was hardly on the far left) but a willingness to speak honestly to the differences, to speak bluntly, to tell it like it is, to speak honestly, as he did about the ways in which the media and news have been subordinated to entertainment and profit, the large international conglomerates that now control all of the media, he talked about those things. He spoke about such things bluntly, he spoke his mind and I think that that was an extraordinary thing.

Ironically, in the first presidential debate, people breathed a sigh of relief because John Kerry sounded a little more like Howard Dean and perhaps regained a little edge in his faltering presidential campaign. As a consequence, we all hope it’s going to revive the campaign.

Q: You know, Governor Dean said himself that he failed in making the transition from being a candidate of resistance to being a front-runner. What do you think about that?

Barber: Well I think that's not quite fair because, of course, he was the front-runner and I would argue that he didn't lose from inside. His campaign was hit from three sides—all from the outside. The Republicans were certainly afraid of him. He was the candidate I think they most feared and they went after him. The Democrats, particularly the Democratic Leadership Council, the sort of centrist Democrats who think that the way to beat Bush is to look more like Bush than Bush looks like Bush, were against him and, most importantly, the media were offended by him. They didn't like what he represented and were particularly offended by his attacks on the [mainstream] media, that he told the truth about who controls them and what they do...and so the "Iowa Scream" as it's been called. It was completely manufactured by the media.

Q: What do you mean?

Barber: What actually happened—Peter Jennings finally exposed it about ten days afterwards—Howard Dean was in a room with about 3,000 disappointed, raucous young supporters and they were yelling and crying and singing. He was trying to get their attention and trying to make his speech. What Dean did has often been done by candidates during campaign rallies. The report from the room was that nobody could hear what he was saying, but television isolated him on camera and in voice. He was made to sound like he was speaking to a still room and you know, yelling at the top of his lungs like a maniac. Ten days later, Peter Jennings actually ran a tape in which the background noise of the room and the ambience of the room were present and at that point it was a completely different tape. You could hear a man trying to regain control of a room full of noise and yelling and out of control and it made for a completely different impression.

So you might say that, in fact, the media set up Howard Dean and manufactured what seemed like aberrant behavior that, in the actual context of what was happening, was entirely normal. Everyone who saw him at the event couldn't possibly have seen it as anything but a heroic effort by a candidate to rally the troops, which is what it was.

But let me just finish about Howard Dean because you started asking what was a really good question, which was: is there a long-term effect? The short term effect was that he made it clear that the party was capable of speaking bluntly and honestly, which Kerry is finally beginning to do, to his advantage. But the long term thing Howard Dean did, I think, was to show the larger public that there are a great many young people, disenfranchised voters, who are cynical, who can be energized and brought into the political process by a prudent combination of an honest, blunt candidate and a brilliant use of the new technologies. And of course, Howard Dean's use, following his advisor Joe Trippi, of the new technologies, the web and the internet, his use of virtual town meetings and get-togethers ("meet-ups") was a powerful lesson both in the importance of the new technologies to electoral politics, but also in the ability of a candidate willing to reach out beyond the normal bounds of electoral politics to people outside the political arena and actually draw them into the arena. In that sense, he's continuing: "Dean for America" has actually become "Democracy for America." Howard Dean is trying to take responsibility for trying to keep new and younger and alienated voters in the political system and for that, we both owe him a debt and ought to draw some useful lessons from his experience.

Q: Your classic work of political theory, Strong Democracy, argued that we shouldn't simply view democracy in institutional terms, but rather with an eye on the actual participation of people in the process. Now, I would imagine, you see Howard Dean as having made a positive move, a positive contribution to that kind of development.

Barber: I do. *Strong Democracy* was published in 1984 and just republished in a 20th Anniversary Edition. It has been continuously in print since 1984. The new introduction actually discusses exactly this question.

Q: Very interesting

Barber: And there's no question. The argument I try to make in *Strong Democracy* is that while it's true that we live in a large scale representative democracy where electoral institutions have to be, to some extent, representative, there are opportunities for participation and civic engagement both at the national, the state and the local level of many,

many different kinds. Voting is only one of the many things that citizens can do and civic participation and civic engagement must spread across the borders, spread across every sector of society. John Dewey said: "Democracy is not a form of government, it's a way of life." And that's a powerful way to describe what I mean when I speak about strong democracy.

The first time I went up to Burlington to visit with Dean and Joe Trippi, *Strong Democracy* was sitting on Trippi's desk and they said that a number of people in the campaign had been aware of that book. I don't mean to say that this was anything more than one among many, many sources, but I'm happy to say that it is a book that I think has had an impact beyond the academy on people who do participatory politics. What I first said in 1984 is that despite the fact that we live in a rather alienated, electorally representative society, there are ample opportunities for those who are thoughtful and use their ingenuity to extend participation in many different ways. Howard Dean has certainly shown that even the electoral process and the nomination process in the primaries can become a site for what he calls meet-ups and people coming together and citizens coming into touch with one another. One of the arguments I make in *Strong Democracy* is that vertical integration and vertical communication, which is the strength of representative democracy, disallows to a large extent the forms of horizontal and lateral communication that are essential to participatory or strong democracy. One of the brilliant things that the Dean Campaign did was to afford citizens new opportunities through these meet-ups and these virtual meetings and the get-togethers to forge new forms of lateral communication with one another -- citizen to citizen communication, not just citizen to candidate communication. This supplemented representative democracy in ways that really did strengthen at the base the possibilities for participation. In that sense I think that the Howard Dean campaign is a powerful instance of the possibilities of participation in strong democracy, even in the larger setting of representative democracy.

Q: I just heard Howard Dean call President Clinton, the greatest politician of our age and I know that in your book, The Truth of Power, you reflected upon your experience as an advisor to Clinton. How do you see Clinton's legacy for this election?

Barber: This goes to the heart of one of the great American tragedies because there's no question that Bill Clinton had the capacity to be one of the great American presidents. He was a natural politician, a natural leader, he electrified people, he had personal contact with people and could speak to a wide variety of people across America. People always felt he was somebody who embodied who they were. I mean, people said (not altogether just as a metaphor) that he was the first Black president, the first gay president; even women, even feminists—despite his shenanigans—would say in some ways he was the first woman president, the first feminist president. He seemed able to capture and embody the spirit of people who had been on the margins of American politics and in recent decades had come to the center of American politics.

As we know, not just because of his legacy, his alcoholic father and the inner psychological tumult that he had constantly to deal with, but for other reasons too, he seemed finally unable to put his political personality and his political leadership to the purposes of a great political vision. My conclusion in *The Truth of Power*, my memoir about that time with Clinton, was that the real tragedy was not just how he squandered his leadership in the sexual scandals and so forth, but his inability really to develop a great vision. So that he was a would be great vision politician who conducted a mundane, detail-oriented presidency. That was the Dick Morris influence too. You know, Clinton would have these extraordinary weekends with Skip Gates and with Bob Putnam, Harry Boyte and Jenny Mansbridge, with me and Sam Beer, with a remarkable group of advisors and friends and intellectuals, who saw him really as an equal in debate and discussion. We would talk for the weekend and we'd all come away saying "Oh my God, here is a truly visionary president"! But later on we found out, on Monday mornings he'd go back to the White House and call his triangulating Rasputin (today a right-wing zealot) Dick Morris and ask what he should do next. So there was this kind of extraordinary gap between his capacity and potential as a visionary leader and what he actually envisioned as a politician sitting in the White House.

As a consequence, I think, Clinton was always a radical underachiever in terms of what I think people expected of him and expected of what his political skills could have made possible. You know also, these extraordinary political skills he had to lead, he never used them. He didn't set his sights very far out on the horizon. I mean everybody from Newt

Gingrich to the most conservative Republicans said “My God, you gotta watch out for this guy, he can charm the bark off of a tree;” Newt Gingrich would say. “You know, he can get anything he wants.” He was a president who could get anything he wanted from the American people and he never asked very much.

Q: Let me cut to the chase: if it's true as you suggest, and I think that what you say is very much on target, the specter of President Clinton still looms over our era. Do you think that the Democratic Party really can act as anything more than a brake on the neo-conservative project?

Barber: There's some chance that Kerry will be able to do that. I think really curtailing and undermining and as you put it, putting the brakes on the neo-conservatives and not just the neo-conservatives, but perhaps just as important, also the neo-liberals. Because the neo-conservative project has spoken with a forked tongue: On the one hand it's culturally conservative, Christian conservative, it wants government to intervene and ban gay marriage and abortion and tell people how to live virtuous lives. But on the other hand, it's deeply neo-liberal. It wants to dismantle government, it sees government as the oppressor, it wants to leave the marketplace free of any democratic constraints, which puts the profit incentive at the very center of human affairs in a way that deeply distorts those affairs. The Christian conservative agenda and the neo-liberal, anti-government agenda are, I think, corrosive of democracy. Putting the brakes on that joint project is a vital and important thing to do.

The question is whether the Democratic Party can do it without some vision of its own, without an alternative vision of its own. If I were to describe my current sense of what our project needs to be as public intellectuals, what the project of *Logos*, and those who are trying to provide an alternative, it is to try to help construct an alternative vision of the world that will match the neo-conservative, neo-liberal vision of it. The fact is that people like Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb—about whom Steve Bronner wrote a very interesting and useful piece about their use of the Enlightenment in pursuing the neo-conservative project¹— did

¹ Stephen Eric Bronner, “Neo-Cons and Philosophes” in *The Washington Post* (September 12, 2004).

the hard work of constructing a vision. They earned, as it were, the political success they had with Ronald Reagan and with the two Bush's.

The Democratic Party has not done similar political work. It's kind of running on empty. On the one hand it's got the New Deal and on the other side, it's got the New Democrats, and you know, the New Deal is part of a 19th Century class-war model of politics that clearly doesn't work anymore, but the New Democrats seem to think that all we have to do is be kind Republicans and do business with business and we're in business. Neither of those two visions really gets the hard conceptual work done. Another way to put it is that the neo-conservatives and the neo-liberals have all come to terms with globalization. They're very comfortable with market globalization while, for the most part, progressives are still afraid of and hostile to globalization.

Q: That was exactly what I was going to ask next. Especially given the impact of what I guess is your most popular book, Jihad vs. McWorld, how do you see the connection between shall we say "the war on terror" and globalization?

Barber: Globalization is about anarchy; globalization is about the erosion of sovereign states, the erosion of sovereignty, the erosion of national frontiers and the emergence of an anarchic, international world without governance, without civic structure, without regulation—and there are two powerful manifestations of such anarchy of the world. One is global markets, predatory capital, capital jobs and whole industries hemorrhaging abroad which no sovereign state can stop, which is a violent ideology in an anarchic global world unregulated by global law, global police, or global cooperation. So in a sense you might say that predatory capital on the one hand and terrorism on the other are two very different sides—I don't want to in any other way analogize them any other way—of the same coin. As I said, the neo-liberals have come to terms with globalization by embracing the anarchy of markets although they are struck and damaged and frightened by the anarchy of terrorism. Some people are beginning to see that there is some connection between the anarchy that allows markets to spread and capital to spread where they will, and the anarchy that allows drugs and weapons of mass destruction and terrorism to spread where it will.

Q: Taking your analysis here a step further: so many Americans still believe that Saddam Hussein was behind the attacks of September 11th that there seems to me some kind of, I don't know how to put it, anarchy of judgment. Do you see what I mean?

Barber: That's there, of course, though it's interesting because, over and over again, even the Bush administration has admitted there is no connection between Saddam and the attacks of 9/11. Yet again, in the debate on September 30th, Bush had to be corrected by Kerry because, while talking about the war in Iraq, Bush said "well they attacked us and we need a president who when they attack us, retaliates" and Kerry said, "Excuse me, but they didn't attack us. Iraq didn't attack us, Al Qaeda attacked us." So that kind of mythology goes on. I really want to come back to the essential issue here, which I think is the inability of the Democrats to develop a vision that accepts the reality of globalization and deals with it. We'll say the Republicans have done it by embracing anarchy on the market side and trying to challenge anarchy through the war on terrorism, but the Democrats and progressives generally appear to think that anti-globalization, arresting and stopping globalization, is the only way to go which is why they're soft protectionists, that is to say, they want to kind of curtail free-trade and weaken NAFTA without eliminating them.

The unions have not really got a position on globalization other than to say it's a bad thing. Yet that's simplistic, ahistorical, anachronistic, and politically useless. What's really needed is a way for progressives to embrace and understand the inevitable realities of globalization and interdependence without simply accepting the anarchy that goes with them. My formula for that, of course, highlights the need to democratize globalization. What we're faced with is a malevolent form of interdependence and what we need to find is an architecture of benevolent, civic interdependence. We are never going to put the genie of those global forces that today anarchically control the world back into the nationalist bottle. What we need to do, in other words, is globalize democratization or democratize globalization, not try to arrest globalization. The democratic vision long-term -- one that Clinton never developed and the DLC certainly hasn't developed and I think we need to work on -- asks the Democratic Party and other progressives to take responsibility for finding new ways to democratize globalization. We've got doctors without

frontiers, we've got criminals without frontiers, we have capitalists without frontiers, and we have terrorists without frontiers. The one thing we're missing is: citizens without frontiers. The Democratic project, I believe, should rest on finding ways to create citizens without frontiers.

Q: This kind of vision, this cosmopolitan vision is something that Logos has certainly stood for since its inception. And yet it's clear that this type of vision challenges the provincial values that so many of us have grown up with. In your last work, Fear's Empire, you center on this pervasive anxiety and its connection with empire. Do you want to talk a bit about that? How do you see its impact on present policy and culture?

Barber: Well yes, because the reality is that we live in a world today, specifically in the United States, which has been dominated by fear. It's a fear that was originally inspired by terrorism—but it's also a fear that, in a sense, we ourselves have spread. If you think about terrorists for a minute, you realize that terrorists are men and women without power. They're not CEO's, they're not authors, they don't have armies and navies, and they don't control economies. They're men and women without power. Their powerlessness is what makes them terrorists. If they had a stock portfolio or a presidency or an army under their command, they wouldn't be terrorists. The only power they have is the power to instill fear in others (hence the term terrorists). They terrify. They terrorize. But the interesting thing about fear is that other people can't actually make you afraid. You can only make yourself afraid. *We* are in control of the fear factor.

If you think of 9/11, it was a horrendous and tragic event, but it was like a cataclysmic earthquake or the Titanic going down. It was a terrible tragedy, but with respect to the actual power of the United States, it was as a fleabite on a grizzly bear. Hijackers used box cutters to hijack four planes, but we closed down the air transport system. The hijackers hit the World Trade Center, the symbol of capitalism, but we closed the stock market for a week and anxious investors have kept it in difficulty for three years. Osama bin Laden wanted to strike at American democracy, but he couldn't begin to do that. But in response to Osama bin Laden, we ourselves have damaged our democracy through the Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay and by constricting our liberties and closing down our open borders. We have done damage to ourselves through the politics of fear that Osama himself never could have done.

Q: So let me ask you then, what do you see as the most important impact on democracy if Bush and his agenda win in November?

Barber: To have chosen the wrong turf to fight terrorism. Bush has chosen the turf of fear and that is the terrorists own turf. Even if we beat the terrorists and Al Qaeda, they win if our democracy succumbs to a politics of fear. I am not one of those who cynically thinks the president is just using fear to accomplish the agendas of Haliburton and big oil and so on. I think Bush is a genuine religious zealot in his pursuit of American safety, and I think he's good-willed in thinking that he can shock and awe the terrorists and win their own game against them. The problem is he doesn't seem to understand that he is actually doing the terrorists' work for them inadvertently.

The terrorist alert code is a perfect example. Those codes go from yellow to orange and red and orange, they've gone up and down six or seven times already and they are accompanied by anonymous threats to some bridge, some school, or some mall in some city, this week or maybe next week. The changing of codes does nothing to help us prepare to ward off terrorist attacks, but it does a lot to create permanent anxiety and fear among the American people. Al Qaeda needn't ever attack America again if we constantly transmit their anonymous threats and frighten ourselves into a kind of civic paralysis. Part of what this electoral campaign should be about is a choice between not just unilateralism and multilateralism, which is certainly what John Kerry has made it, but a choice between the *politics of fear*, which is being purveyed by this administration, and a *politics of the open society*.

The real response to fear is civic engagement and participation. People who are engaged in the work of democracy are not frightened. After 9/11, the least fearful Americans were the rescue workers at Ground Zero. They were actually exposed to the most risks, but because they were engaged in the work of rescue, the work of finding survivors and of finding bodies and consecrating the ground, they were spared the fear that the rest of us as spectators felt. Spectatorship is a recipe for fear. Engagement is a recipe for dispelling fear. And yet this president since 9/11 has insisted that we should go shopping and let him and his administration and the professional army take care of the problems. Bush has been handing out

tax rebates to rich spectators while leaving it to a poorer class of America, the volunteer army, to pay the real price of fighting terrorism. He should instead be engaging the whole population in a civic reconstruction of America that reaffirms the open society, our multiculturalism and our open boundaries and says to the terrorists nothing you can do will frighten us out of our liberties. Nothing you can do will frighten us out of our democracy. You can't win by making us frighten ourselves.

Q: Now I have one last question for you. You've been so prolific over the years, so let me ask: which of your books do you consider the most salient for people in the current context and why?

Barber: I have a friend who is a prolific composer who told me he's actually written only one work over and over and over again. A symphony one time, a chamber quartet another, a solo for violin a third. Artists and writers tend to have a single theme, one book, one symphony, which they compose in many different forms. I wrote one book about democracy; "the democracy book"—but in many forms; the Swiss democracy book, the "strong" democracy book; the "Jihad and McWorld" vs. democracy book; the "fear" eats democracy book. So while *Strong Democracy* is a classic, and *Jihad vs. McWorld* is a perennial best-seller, my favorite book is simply "the democracy book"—the one I never quite wrote but published in two dozen different versions over the last thirty five years.