

Interview with Richard Kearney, Charles Seelig Professor in Philosophy

Richard Kearney, Ph.D.

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As a part of this issue's theme of the public intellectual, Dianoia conducted an interview with Richard Kearney, the Charles Seelig Professor in Philosophy at Boston College. Hailing from Ireland, Kearney has been extremely influential both philosophically and politically in the public talks surrounding the Troubles of Northern Ireland and the Peace Talks that occurred between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the government of the Ireland. Since then, he has appeared publicly in numerous forums to discuss issues of terrorism, politics, and philosophy.

Dianoia: Could you describe your role in the Northern Ireland Peace Talks?

Kearney: In 1977, I cofounded a journal called the *Crane Bag*, which was an interdisciplinary intellectual review founded by the Arts Counsels of northern and southern Ireland. It was a way of bringing together politicians, philosophers, writers, teachers, and professional people to develop a dialogue on the future of northern and southern Ireland. It was open to all points of view. So we did an interview with the head of the IRA and with the Minister of Communications of Ireland at the time (you couldn't find two people more opposed). It led to a controversy with Margaret Thatcher and Ian Paisley, who openly denounced it in Westminster Parliament saying, "Here's British public funding going to a journal that shook hands with the IRA." While our point of view was: "You've got to shake hands with the devil."

So it was the idea that philosophy—or a philosophy journal—should be something that develops public debate. And also that all are admitted, because philosophy is a discipline which, as Husserl said, is really the "science of sciences." It is a foundational investigation for all disciplines. So it's a forum—an *agora*, as Socrates put it—where people can come together and share opinions. That was kind of the beginning.

Then, in 1984, we did a special issue of the journal—called "The Forum Issue"—and this was an issue that published the proceedings of the forum for a new Ireland that was set up by all the political parties in Ireland to imagine new solutions for the future. One of the solutions that I, as a representative of the south of Ireland—with a Catholic, Nationalist, Republican background—proposed (and I co-presented with another philosopher from the north) was a model of joint sovereignty for Northern Ireland. Now sovereignty *per se* has always been defined as "one and indivisible," going back to Rousseau and Bodin. So, if that's the case and you've got a claim for a united Ireland, as was the case with the Republican Nationalist cause, which a majority in southern Ireland and a minority in northern Ireland supported, and then you've got a contrary claim for a United Kingdom, supported by the Unionists who are the majority in northern Ireland, then you've

got a *conflict of sovereignty claims* that is absolutely incompatible and irresolvable. If sovereignty is going to be indivisible you can be British or Irish, but you can't be *both*. So we proposed that you *should* be able to be both; and even though joint sovereignty is legally and constitutionally a contradiction in terms—that was the only solution for a contrary society like Northern Ireland! Which in a sense is an oxymoron, strictly speaking, because you can't share sovereignty. But, by putting it in terms of a contradiction you can lead to new thinking. Constitutional impossibility calls for imaginative possibility! And poetry works like that—Yeats talks about "beautiful despair." You grow up between opposites and contradictions, and when you put the two together, you get poetic imagination. Or as Seamus Heaney put it, "Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between." And our big wager was, "If you put two contradictory positions together, you get political invention." So we proposed joint sovereignty. And that was eventually one of the three proposals that were brought by the government of Ireland to Margaret Thatcher: joint sovereignty, federal Ireland, and a united Ireland. And she famously responded, "Out, out, out!" to my proposal and to the two others.

So that was my first exposure to tough political debate as a public intellectual. My first foray into politics—British-Irish mainly. Although in my book *Postnationalist Ireland* I also explored pan-European-federal solutions, seeing Ireland as a region within Europe.

Then I did a number of television programs and public broadcasting. I used to have a weekly program on Irish national television on politics, philosophy, and literature. We interviewed the likes of Vaclav Havel, Noam Chomsky, Umberto Eco, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida ... they were all the published in a book called *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy*. And that was kind of a weekly attempt on British and Irish television to create debates between intellectuals—philosophers from Europe and North America.

There was in Ireland and Europe at the time the idea that philosophers—or academics generally—could be public intellectuals. It is less so here [in the U.S.]. For the most part, philosophy remains much more of a ... specialized professional activity I find. Regrettably so.

Dianoia: You mentioned the different roles that philosophers play in the U.S. versus in Europe. Did this shape your role in creating a public forum? What brought you to the place where you decided to start your journal and have those public conversations?

Kearney: Growing up, doing European philosophy—here sometimes called Continental Philosophy, although often more Continental *American* philosophy—

some of the main people I was studying were Camus, Sartre, De Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur. They all edited and wrote for journals. These different intellectuals were all involved in public broadcasting and public intellectual debates. Some of them taught at universities but the rest of the time they were out, engaged with the public. The first president of Czechoslovakia, Masaryk, was a Ph.D. in philosophy, a philosophy professor, who studied with Husserl and Freud. And his follower, Jan Patočka, a great philosopher in Prague, went on to found the famous peace rights movement, Charta 77, and was imprisoned and tortured for his trouble. But he left a huge legacy on Vaclav Havel and a whole generation of intellectual dissidents who brought about the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

In other words, the people I was studying were people who were involved with the public. The split between a professional academic specialization—called philosophy—and applied philosophy, practical philosophy, engaged philosophy, simply did not exist in that way. And this also appealed to me because I was doing philosophy *and* literature. Most of these publically committed philosophers were themselves writers—some of them, like Camus and Sartre, even being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. When teaching existentialism, I always start with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky—who are as much literary writers as they are philosophers. I actually found it quite strange to come to North America, where philosophy departments were often cordoned off.

In 2008 I set up a Guestbook seminar here at BC [Boston College] with fourteen different departments involved, faculty and students. The idea was to develop philosophy *in dialogue with* literature, art, physics, psychology, political science, romance languages, and so on. And it was great fun. I still very much believe in interdisciplinary teaching and publishing.

The third point I would make, which is relevant to all of you as undergraduate and graduate students, is that I resent the fact that everything revolves around the question: “Where are your philosophy students placed?” And if they are not placed in an academic institution—and usually a tenure track—it doesn’t count. You won’t get points for the ranking. Whereas, I would say that a good portion of my grad students since I came to BC ended up in public positions, *not* in academic institutions. One is running an NGO in Jerusalem, as co-director for the free movement of Palestinians. She wouldn’t have gotten that position without a philosophy degree. She’s also writing philosophy—she does both. But that doesn’t count as a placement. The last two presidents of Ireland had Ph.D.’s in philosophy—neither would be counted as placements here. If Obama had a Ph.D. from Boston College or any American university—his being president in the White House would not count as a placement. So it’s considered an academic “failure” to put someone in charge of an NGO or a government. Tell that to half the ministers in the French government—all Ph.D.’s. Doesn’t count. Havel—doesn’t count. Masaryk—doesn’t

count. So it’s kind of absurd, expressed in the narrow view that if you do philosophy at a graduate level, it has got to be to teach at a tenure-track university job. Whereas a lot of European and Continental philosophy, in any case, teaches in a very broad and interdisciplinary way. So it’s a huge plus to go into an interview and have a graduate degree in philosophy. It’s very sought-after. And not just in Europe—where it certainly is—but also, I believe, increasingly here in America. Or at least that is what some of my grad students out there in the market tell me. It’s kind of a prestigious thing to have—undergraduate or graduate, M.A. or Ph.D.—going into non-philosophical jobs.

Dianoia: Would you say that the philosophical environment in the United States precludes philosophy students from functioning as public intellectuals?

Kearney: It is hard to speak in general terms. With a graduate degree, you have the choice—1) to become a professional academic philosopher, teaching in a university or 2) do that *and* have a public role, or 3) *just* have a public role. But either way philosophy will form you—it’s a foundational humanistic formation. And this should be touted and promoted as a plus. I taught in Dublin for 21 years in our Ph.D. program, and I would say maybe 50% went on to teach in philosophy programs. Most of the rest went into public functions. That was always my interest—philosophy *and* something else—not just specialized logic-chopping. But that doesn’t mean one shouldn’t have a really rigorous academic training. Of course one should. But it should always be in dialogue with other disciplines. Or at least have the option of doing that. These should be equi-primordial options—to stay in academic philosophy or to apply your talents to public discourse and debate. Or both.

Dianoia: Do you think that is changing at all? Do you think people are becoming aware that the inter-disciplinarity is important?

Kearney: I think it’s growing. And for two reasons. First of all, people are opening their minds. They are realizing that specialization is going to disappear into a hole. And second, the Ignatian humanistic spirit of BC and other Catholic universities—and I talk about that in a broad sense—caused them to always have this broad education in the humanities. So BC is ripe for that. But I think there was a tendency for a while to ape the Ivy Leagues and say, “We should be doing what Harvard and Yale are doing.” When what the Jesuit intellectual tradition is doing is far more interesting and profound and life-changing than the kind analytic knit-picking and conceptual navel-gazing that passes for philosophy in certain esteemed quarters. It’s an intellectual inferiority complex which infuriates me.

"We'll drop in the rankings if we don't become like Harvard." Well, who makes the rankings?

So I think that is turning around, and BC, in its intellectual and spiritual culture, is very open to interdisciplinary, humanistic education. There's different ways of doing philosophy—as technical rationality or as humanistic reason. Analytic philosophy, which has predominated in so called "Anglo-Saxon" thinking, privileges the former; so called "continental" philosophy the latter. Every student should be trained in both, but I know where my preference lies.

Another factor, of course, is that there just aren't enough academic jobs today for Ph.D.'s. There are not enough university posts for Ph.D.'s, so people *have* to think out of the box. But that is not a reason not to study philosophy. We have all these unemployed Ph.D.'s in philosophy so what can they do? How about running the country? Running NPR? Running the diplomatic corps? Running a publishing company, setting up journals, running theatres, running NGO's?

Dianoia: Do you think there is a cultural reason for this? Something in American culture that is the reason why the role of philosophy is perceived so differently here as compared to Europe?

Kearney: I think exactly the same reason that the government took away public funding from NPR. Same thing. Thinking is dangerous. Keep it cloistered. Of course, that's putting it too bluntly. But when I pay taxes I want some of those taxes to go for public education, public broadcasting, and public debate. Yet there seems to be a prejudice in certain quarters that if funding for public broadcasting comes from taxpayers instead of from private individuals, it is somehow suspect. It's an extraordinary indictment of what one means by "public." And that division between public and private is, in my view, ruinous.

Some people would say: well what about Greece? And I would say well that went to the other extreme, where you had 80% of the people working in public or state positions, and that has got to be countered. But America has gone to the other. I throw up my arms in despair at the way certain people use the term Obamacare as a *slur*. Rick Santorum, for example, described it as "apartheid." Saying, "How can Obama be celebrating Nelson Mandela's memory when he is introducing apartheid here?" So what can you do? There can't be a sense of ownership of the public domain, either of health, education, or broadcasting, when the term 'care' is treated as a term of insult.

Also, there tends to be a sense that the disciplines should be quantifiable. It's very hard to quantify theology or philosophy. If you want to do so you need to adopt a quasi-scientific form of reasoning that can get grants and work with

strict criteria of verification and falsification. Now that is a certain side of philosophy—Aristotle wrote the *Physics*, as well as the *Metaphysics*. He did both. So I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a scientific philosophy or a philosophy of science—there are wonderful people here at BC who teach that. I'm all for it. But the tendency since the 50's and 60's has been to focus on a certain brand of philosophy that is "measurable" in terms of proofs. And then certain philosophy departments (Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and so on) tried to ape the sciences in narrow ways—though things are beginning to open up again now and the whole analytic-versus-continental divide is happily beginning to erode. Some scientists replied: don't try to do *our* job, do *your* job, and then we will talk to you ... because you can teach us things about foundational human questions that we're not doing here in our laboratory. But don't try and compete with the rats in our laboratory—we're doing very well, thank you very much. And of course that gave pseudo-scientific philosophy an inferiority complex. They couldn't measure up to the sciences! But as I say things are beginning to open up again. I'm delighted, for instance, that Shawn Kelly is the chair at Harvard—he comes from Merleau-Ponty and he can do cognitive sciences *and* phenomenology of perception. The important thing is to get the two traditions to talk to each other.

Dianoia: You've alluded to the fact that, in Europe, there has been a more active role played by public intellectuals than in the United States. Do you think that the media also plays a role? Should public intellectuals function to filter what is presented to the public? The media is there to correct factual errors, but there is no discussion about ideological errors.

Kearney: That's a very good point. And it's a lack of a middle ground—a mediating ground. You've got the ideologies of government, as it were, and the statements and proposals come out, and then you've got the big public. But no one is really mediating. So more and more the media has taken up the role of mediation—as they should. But they should be a *forum* for public intellectuals and commentators also. And there still are some out there, but increasingly it's becoming pundits in an entertainment game. It's like sports commentary except it's political commentary. Tick-tack, tick-tack, but it's not a deep, informed, philosophical debate. It's all sound bites. (I'm talking mainly about Fox News and even CNN, more than NPR which has some excellent cultural programming of course—but they are always under such huge financial pressure.) It has become increasingly about entertainment rather than education. BBC, when it was set up, was founded with a few principles, one of which was definitely *education*. In the media, it's important that you get the fact-checkers—that's essential, the media should be there to invigilate the facts. But the second role is commentary and interpretation, and that's

become *incredibly* impoverished. You go into an airport or a hotel, and you've got split screens and it's just to-and-fro news clips and "opiniators." It's a spectator's sport—gladiatorial, adversarial chit-chat—but rarely real in-depth interviews apart from NPR/PBS, which has a minority audience. Now, I repeat, the latter is often excellent but it absolutely reduces me to tears to hear them have to *beg* five days in a row during fundraisers. In the meantime, they can't have a debate because they have to get the money to support it. And to me that is just not a democracy—when people have to scrape, borrow, and beg to get enough to talk intelligently about things! I mean on one level it goes back to the American spirit and that's fine—we all pay for what we get. I'm all for things from the ground up rather than the top down. That can be extremely important. People get together, and there's a groundswell of opinion from beneath. Yes. But NPR has to appeal for money to individuals in their cars, in their homes, on their way to work. It's almost always an appeal to *private individuals*. Not a community or province or state thing. And public radio is *communal*. So it should be paid for communally.

Dianoia: Do you find the literature in Europe—in philosophy, for example—more accessible to a general reading audience than it is here? Conversely, is the general reading audience more informed, so that a higher-level journal is more accessible to them?

Kearney: I think it works both ways. Remember, in France, Germany, Italy, and several other European countries, philosophy is part of the high school education—it's taught to all students prior to graduation. You don't have to wait till you go to university to study philosophy—you are already formed and informed by it. And that makes a big difference.

But I don't wish to be too down about American education. I came here for a reason. I came here to work, so it's not like I don't see the wonderful opportunities and advantages of the great universities, libraries, research institutes. They are really wonderful, among the best in the world. My argument is not about resources. It is elsewhere.

Let me put it in the form of a question: "What happened between the intellectual heyday of Jefferson and Franklin, for example, and our own day to explain how, for some reason, the intellectual-philosophical work isn't as central to the culture?" Why did it get cloistered and confined to academic campuses (often in remote settings like Dartmouth, Wellesley, Princeton, even Boston College) in a kind of cultural apartheid? Why this quarantine of philosophy? One learns great things, but far from the madding crowd. One thinks great thoughts but apart from the world.

Dianoia: You teach philosophy of imagination, and you've written several books on imagination. Could you flesh out what you see the role of imagination is for the public intellectual?

Kearney: Well, it enables one to enter the kingdom of "as if." And that opens up the space of possibility, a laboratory of possibilities, so that you can think otherwise. And if you can *think* otherwise, things can *be* otherwise. It reminds me of Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and poet, who said, "The most radical poem I ever wrote was of an apple growing silently in a Berlin orchard during the height of Hitler's power." This was radical because to imagine something beautiful growing in the middle of evil was a categorical imperative that things *can* be otherwise, that things *must* change. So imagination opens up the future, it opens up the realm of possibility. And I think that's why, say in Northern Ireland, the road to the peace process was paved not just by politicians and jurists but by poets and writers, able to imagine what it was like to be the enemy, to empathy with the adversary, to image the possibility of the impossible. To imagine what came about with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

I'm currently directing an international project called "Guestbook," which started here at BC, where we bring together young people, students, from different divided communities—Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Jerusalem, Dokto—and we get them to exchange narratives. First of all, we get them to share their own story. And then, in the second part, they imagine a new story. They create something together from the components of their respective histories. The wager is that if they can come up with an aesthetic solution in images—it can be poetry, video, drama, graffiti, comic-strip animation—something new may be created in reality afterward. There's a prize at the end of each year. A prestigious committee decides on the winners and they come to Boston College to screen their work and receive their prize.

That's all based on the idea of narrative imagination. You tell your own story, and then you listen empathically through your imagination to the story of your enemy. And then you co-create a third story. So that's the philosophy of imagination applied to the public pedagogical domain. I'm working with young people because, in these split countries/cities, the thing is so trans-generational. The hope is in the young people making new images and stories with their iPhones, computers, and flip-cameras. That technology has changed the world. They are coming up with some remarkable work which they post on our website—guestbook-project.com—and then engage in exchanges with other international students on our interactive website and blogs.

Dianoia: Do you think that your designation as a public intellectual has shaped how you view yourself and your work? How do you see that designation shape you as you continue?

Kearney: Well, it means that I'm always wondering, "How does this relate to what's happening in the world now?" So you could say that that is Socratic existentialism. Of course, I'm not comparing myself to Socrates—I'm talking about the method. You go into an *agora*, and you see what the debates are. What is justice? What is war? Let us not forget that Greek philosophy and drama first arose in response to war—the Peloponnesian War, the Trojan War, the Persian War, and so on.

So being involved with the public means trying to be answerable to, and attentive to, suffering and pain. As well as then imagining, through hope and utopia, alternatives of that. Now, I'm not saying *all* philosophy needs to do that. There is always that moment, absolutely indispensable, when one needs to take a step back and retreat, and contemplate, before going out into the world again. Philosophy has two lives—the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. You need both.

There are so many distractions, so many things to plug into, and so on. My own personal retreat is the south of Ireland—we still have a little house there. I go there every summer for three months, and that's where I get all of my writing done. If I didn't have that, I couldn't do the more public stuff. One needs to step back to step forward.

This interview was conducted by Karel-Bart Celie, Editor-in-Chief, and Andrew Skaras, Managing Editor, with Richard Kearney in December of 2013.