

ADDRESSING THE PRESENT
AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE RUBENSTEIN

DIANE RUBENSTEIN is Professor of Government and American Studies at Cornell University, as well as the author of the books *What's Left? The Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Right* and *This is Not a President: Sense, Nonsense, and the American Political Imaginary*. Professor Rubenstein's research and teaching addresses the critical interaction between continental theory (primarily French, German, and Italian) and contemporary manifestations of ideology in Franco-American political culture. Her research focus is political rhetoric, and her dissertation research, which later formed the basis of *What's Left?* involved interviewing fascist collaborators at Ecole Normale Supérieure in the thirties and during the occupation. She is presently at work on two research projects; the first involves a collaboration with Marine Baudrillard, *From the Archives: Baudrillard's Women and Baudrillard Street One: Pseudo Acts*. The other

is a study of Derridean hospitality in the university, immigration law and the death penalty, *(In)hospitalities*. She recently sat down with *Barricade* editors Amy Obermeyer and Lauren Wolfe to discuss the future and rhetoric of the American far right, its relationship to the European fascist movements of the nineteen thirties and forties, and her experience as a Jewish woman interviewing former Nazi collaborators. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

AMY OBERMEYER: First of all, there's been a lot of debate regarding the comparability of the present political movement to the rise of fascisms in the 1930s. Can we draw comparisons between the Thirties and now? And what are the limits of that?

DIANE RUBENSTEIN: Well, this is something I think we've been trying to do in my ideology course for the whole semester, that there will be these moments of seeming analogy. I'll say broadly that I'm radically agnostic about whether or not one can make a comparison with the Thirties. If you want to talk about fascism, we basically have Italy and Germany—I mean, you have a lot of things in the Thirties that were proto-fascist movements that you'd think should have gone someplace, like in France there were all these different proto-fascist movements that were important in terms of legitimating certain concepts and for innovations, even in Spain, it really isn't Franco so much as it was Primo de Rivera, right? So when you're talking about what you'd think of as regimes that come to power as opposed to an intellectual movement or even a social movement—I'm going to bracket Perón and things like that, I'm just talking

about Europe in the Thirties—you've got Italy and Germany. And the thing that, in going over this material again, really strikes my students as well as myself is how the two examples that we have did not come through a revolution or through a coup d'état; they came through tinkering with the normal electoral process. And so I think that is a cautionary tale.

What's also kind of interesting in looking back at the readings that I did, say, when I started this stuff in the late Seventies through the early Eighties, is that there were always these readings that were kind of on the margins that had to do with fascism not belonging to a particular place or a particular era. A lot of the analysis of fascism, so much of it, is about how it's situation-specific and even between Italy and Germany, or these other countries that had experimentation in fascism, it's very difficult to draw broader generalizations. We have these readings about whether some nation was a kind of latecomer to ideology, whether it dealt with being both humiliated and occupied, after the first World War; they have a whole list of these kinds of features. These are the kinds of things that people focused on—social composition, whether or not it was the lower middle class or what role certain classes played or what was the role of syndicalism in different places. But what always seemed to be on the outside, that now I think seems more important, are these readings by people like Félix Guattari, "Everybody Wants to be a Fascist," and even Wilhelm Reich, who I'm teaching right now, about the mass psychology of fascism—when they get to this racial kernel of it, and how it's not excessive, that there is a kind of constitutive irrationality

to fascism, which is what gets people so excited. And in terms of lessons for now—a lot of people don't understand, for example, why Trump keeps doing these victory laps, but it really is about the mobilization of a base, and how that for everything he'll do that may seem like maybe he's making a compromise or maybe he's, you know, playing to the kind of Pence part of things, when he keeps going back to that scene in Charlottesville about "both sides," the thing about DACA—it is really the importance of white supremacy, which is not to say that all of his supporters are white supremacists, but it's saying that this is a kernel of his support—the racism and the race delirium, the way people act in crowds, the mass psychology of it—everyone wants to try to sound reasonable and say, well, most people aren't like that, or whatever. There is a very important element that can't really be discounted, so the whole, whatever you want to call it, the racial kernel, the misogyny, all of those things are really constitutive features. To that extent they do go beyond time and place, beyond Western Europe, and they go beyond the Thirties, those are the things that have been kind of surprising, coming back to teaching political ideology.

LAUREN WOLFE: I wonder what you would think, then, when in light of these apologetic gestures, like the center-left is making right now toward this "non-identity identity" of the white working-class person who's been left behind—what about this gesture of a sympathetic understanding of their economic hardship, does that occlude this racist kernel that you're describing?

DR: Well no, what I think that's interesting in this, and this is I think where Wilhelm Reich's work has come in, although, you know of course he does kind of go off the deep end, he really does get you back to reading Bachofen— did you read Bachofen in one of the Feminist Reading Groups back then? He wants to bring back the matriarchy. But Reich goes through this thing where he aligns the patriarchy with authoritarianism and matriarchy with the nature of the non-repressed sexuality because mothers know who their child is, and so, in terms of property.

This thing about the white supremacy, the problem is that what someone like Reich does is he looks at what you normally think of as class interest, and that people are voting kind of against class interest, and he's saying, well why do certain people want to be swindled, or why does—I mean, there's two parts to your question. One is the sort of question that maybe someone like Thomas Frank used to address about why people would seem to vote against their economic circumstances and why are they taken in by con men. So there's that. But I think some of it is sort of drawing these lines without realizing that the white working class has a certain investment in a familial structure that goes across class lines. So that's one of the things that Reich looks at—that you can't really draw this line between, say, the industrial working class or other kinds of working class or the farmer, but just as society modernizes, as you go from the nineteenth century—farmers might have had a different life—but there's a similar way in which the family

kind of works, and that whole family ideology. The other part of it has to do with why this doctrine is appealing to people whose economic interest it should not be appealing to, we've overlooked these people and we've overlooked their anger. But the second part of it, and I think that this is really one of the sort of negative lessons—the reason that fascism was the only new ideology of the twentieth century. You needed to have a mass population and you needed the technology of the time for a mass population. Everything else we have in terms of ideologies—liberalism is an eighteenth-century invention—socialism is maybe, I don't know where you want to date it, but at least the early part of the nineteenth century—and communism is strictly nineteenth century. So fascism is the only thing that kind of gets you into the twentieth century. I really think all the appeals—even the appeals of someone like Bernie Sanders—are going back to earlier moments—there's nothing new about it that relates to now. And Trump is at least relating to now, on the level of Twitter, or on the level of the temporality of reality entertainment, but the fact is that there aren't these kind of compelling ideas on the left. And so I don't think it's so much that the Democrats failed to address this one particular class. I'm totally convinced that Hillary could have spent more time in swing states but that the nature of the appeal still would not have reached people; it wouldn't have mobilized that core because it wasn't speaking to the present. But that gesture, there is something deficient about it, of course, as if there isn't a raced working class, in the way in which you have

to use the term the white working class. I think Joan Williams wrote one of the best things after the election about that.

So, I think the problem is twofold. One is, why does someone like Trump appeal? And it's not really Trump. I think—and this is the other thing that's very helpful in looking back at the Thirties—that, and he does appear to be the elephant in the room, but it wasn't like Hitler and it wasn't like Mussolini per se, it was just something about their appeal, coming at a particular, specific moment, in a specific place, that was able to address the masses. They were able to see themselves in that appeal. So it really isn't about the person as such. And so, for people who thought they were being passed by, "Make America Great Again" resonated. But I really am not convinced that—of course, it was so close, and because of course we have the electoral college, it's quite possible that Clinton could have won if she had actually gone to Wisconsin, you know, or Michigan, but I think the nature of her appeal was so wrong for this particular kind of moment. At least people who voted for Trump felt very addressed by him—this is the other thing that I think the Democrats didn't get, that Reich is very good at expressing in a condensed way—that it's not about things that cohere as arguments. I mean, this is where some of the post-truth stuff comes in. It really is about images and myths and this other level that is affective and emotive and is not proceeding by arguments. And the Democrats really believe that if we just got these people in a room and really pointed out how the numbers don't match, or—their argument just doesn't work.

At a certain point in time, the socialists—I mean, it is directly parallel to this extent—the people who were workers left the socialists and left liberal democratic regimes, even when they were first getting the vote. It was only after 1917 that Germans were able to popularly elect one of their leaders, and this is one of these strange things, too, like in 1848 in France, it's only after you get popular suffrage, male suffrage, that you're able to elect an authoritarian or a fascist leader, and that's one of the ironies or perversities of it.

AO: So, I think our next question actually goes right to this. Because we were really thinking about the early twentieth century avant-gardes having a strategy of fragmentation and iteration as a means of preserving aesthetic representation from exploitation by political regimes. But in this moment, we have this circulation of this kind of fake news and Facebook disinformation campaigns that I think speak to this idea of myth that you were just talking about. Do you see these old strategies of the avant-garde as having a contemporary relevance, when it comes to preserving the truth-telling function in art, in a context where the news itself is artificial? Or do you see other strategies at work now?

DR: When you're talking about the avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century, you're talking about techniques of de-familiarization, or what are you talking about exactly?

LW: So, for instance, Dada. I don't know, Hal Foster has a really brilliant essay on how aesthetic strategies of fragmentation, seriality, reconstitution, senselessness are meant to preserve these utterances from—and Benjamin fleshes this out in the artwork essay, where he's like, there is a way that, with these technologies of film, we can keep and use these for ourselves rather than have them taken and used against us. So, fragment, fracture, senselessness, these sorts of strategies seem that they don't—they seem somehow inappropriate in a context where representation of fact itself is senseless or baseless or groundless. And the way in which the news comes at you is in these tiny little Tweets or in these disassociated circumstances.

DR: Right. I think that one of the problems there is a question of how much emphasis one wants to place on form. I'll give the positive part of the story first. I'm not so sure that the problem is we can't judge or legislate or whatever we want to call it, in terms of making a call between what is true and what is false—I mean, that goes all the way back to Machiavelli, and another genealogy can go back to Plato's simulacrum . . . So, I think it's the question of people's literalism about things. I don't think the question is the form. But I think it's the idea that, do we have a time when metaphor can exist, when everything isn't totally literalized—that is one problem. The other problem that goes with the non-metaphoricity of the kind of time we live in is—which is not to say that there are no tropes, tropes abound, but—well, the question of the imagination or invention. Because you could see how fragmentation

and some of these things could lead to an inability to differentiate. But, I don't think the problem is in becoming a certain kind of police that is legislating what is truth and what is falsity. I was trying to think of some of the stuff that Derrida says about literature having the right to say everything, and therefore you can't have democracy without literature and in that way he talks about the right to literature. It is this right to say anything. And I do think that we kind of get sidetracked into this—a very American, kind of empiricist thing about how there's so much lying in this representation going on. I really don't think that that is, as such, the issue—I don't know . . .

Something that avant-gardes used to be in favor of, at least the Futurists—about speed, how sped up everything is—is the form of the fragment that is this kind of temporality where you don't have any space or time for reflection on it. I think part of the problem is that of course avant-garde strategies were designed in relationship to what came before—to the nineteenth century. So, they're still working out of an idea of either revolutionary socialism or communism or even a notion of revolution as such. Right now, I'm just not sure that those terms apply—we need a different way to come up with those terms. I mean, it's interesting that Tocqueville noticed the tendency toward fascism in America. At the end of *Democracy in America*, there's all this stuff that no one likes to look at because it can't preserve the myth of Tocqueville, this chapter on the three races in America. It's like, you can get to this part where it's all about the little town in Vermont and all these

great things that we still like to think about, that on the local level we could still pull off this kind of real democratic thing, but then you get to this chapter on the three races in America, where we find out that basically it's all built on top of the physical extermination of the Native Americans and chattel slavery. And then, if that's not bad enough, there's stuff at the end, that he projects. He doesn't know what to call this thing—where you could imagine it sort of like Fox News all the time. And he decides he doesn't have a term for this thing that happens in democracies, that comes out of them, and so he calls it democratic despotism. So it's not like people haven't seen that these sort of tendencies were there, therefore you can imagine avant-gardes trying to address it.

I think part of the problem right now is that we really don't have this vocabulary. I mean, the same thing occurred after 9/11. I couldn't get over this. After 9/11 everybody said that everything was changed, everything's changed. As theorists, we have to rethink everything, right? Everybody still got their book out on 9/11 within nine months, though, right? Whether it was Žižek, whether it was Baudrillard, whether it was Derrida. Nobody just went into some period of either aphasia or what Lauren Berlant calls the theory flail. Everyone still sort of churned something out. I think that perhaps—I'm not sure what one would look at now if one tried to update. Benjamin has these nice things about the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art, and I do think that there is this aestheticization.

In trying to imagine what kind of avant-garde practice is right for now, it still seems that you're dealing with a concept of the intellectual and a concept of certain distinctions between perhaps high art and more popular forms of art in the avant-garde. And I don't really know that those things apply right now. In a useful way, I mean. My whole idea is that we're trying to think ourselves out of this, right? And I'm not sure that going back to kind of recuperate some sort of avant-garde thing is going to do it in that way. If the question is, how do you come up with some sort of appeal that is based on jouissance—Dada had two different things going on, right? It had these things that you could see as a kind of surrealism, too—an intellectual response that was very cognitive: you could elaborate on it, you could teach courses on it. Then there was also the whole part of Dada that was just excremental and hyperbolic—and some people would excuse that: they're dealing with shit and so on, and it's very juvenile and whatever, *but yet* it's making an important contribution. I don't think there's a real *but yet*, I think it is the kind of both/and, and who's to say right now if it isn't this other kind of excremental and hyperbolic stuff? So I think the avant-garde is still too bogged down in critique, and I don't think critique is the moment we're in. Now we're in the moment of out-bidding and doubling-down and a kind of hyperbolization of things, unless you see in Dada hyperbolization as a kind of critique, but now we have to figure out what the appropriate one is for right now.

AO: I have a question about that. And in fact your answer leads me to so many questions—but the question, when we’re talking about the now, is that when we think about classical fascism and fascist-adjacent movements in the Thirties and Forties, in Europe and around the world, in Japan, we think about it as undergirded by a kind of conversation with philosophy, with art; we think of politicians as having a philosophical bent, a drive to control art. But I think neo-fascism today, broadly around the world, it doesn’t seem to have this same kind of engagement, at least in the popular imagination—the Trumpists and the Brexiteers and in France and all over the world, we don’t have this idea of the intellectual neo-fascists, it seems like a contradiction in terms. So, is this a fair assessment? And if so, what do we make of this difference?

DR: Well, I think that is one of the strange things, and that really is one of the key things. I was teaching last week Sartre’s “Childhood of a Leader” and “What is a Collaborator?,” and I think that what drew me to this was that this whole alternative cultural history of French collaborationist intellectuals for a long time was occluded. If you studied French literature, you never studied all these people. I took many courses as an undergraduate and independent studies on the twentieth century. Until Robert Paxton’s book on Vichy France came out and I learned all these names, they were never taught. None of the textbooks were arranged to include them—you went immediately in terms of periodization from the avant-gardes and surrealism to resistance poetry and existentialism. It was like this

whole period of collaborationist intellectuals and artists never existed, and these were really important intellectuals, and you didn't realize that they were writing about some similar things. Drieu la Rochelle not only wrote about techno-war in a way like Coppola did in *Apocalypse Now* in his war novels about Spain, but they were so much more to the point about what we get with the appeal of war cults than something like Malraux's existentialist *Man's Fate* or *Man's Hope*. I mean, there was a way in which the humanism of those existentialists kind of kept them back from understanding the real challenge of what happened, what was happening in the Thirties. So you didn't really hear about them until sometime afterwards. I don't know if we'll look at now and find out that there were rightist intellectuals and creators—I mean, I'd hate to think of Dinesh D'Souza, although I do think there's a kind of over-the-top nature to some of his documentaries, like the one on Hillary was absolutely hysterical in a mode analogous to Trump. There's a kind of way in which D'Souza keeps doubling-down on the stuff he did from the Eighties.

Definitely you could trace things back to think-tanks, though you would have to look at a different kind of thing, right? Because in America we don't have the same sort of literary intellectuals, anyway. Hopefully later on people will look back—could we trace it back to an Emersonian, anti-Europe kind of tradition that had Camille Paglia at one moment, right? And then you have Ann Coulter but you couldn't say that now, only in retrospect. I think that there is a way in which there is definitely that kind of “We don't need non-Ameri-

cans.” Even Sontag who was supposed to be resistant to this kind of stuff—even Chomsky has those moments, “We don’t need France, they’re idiots.” So there is a kind of protectionism that’s built into American thought. Whether or not there are these neo-fascist intellectuals—it would be very fascinating to see the Foucault of the future—I mean, I’m interested in the Foucault of the future and the Barthes of the future, what they are going to do with the tiki torches, and Foucault of the future would be looking at whatever economic doctrines are coming out of places.

So, in terms of the art, you could decide that art is the wrong place to look. I think about Baudrillard’s essay about *The Conspiracy of Art*. When you get to a phase where you really can’t distinguish between big capital and art, right? So then, is art really the place to look? You know, when Basquiats are going for how many gazillions or some of these other art pieces, then you start wondering to yourself about what are the places to look? Is the place to look in documentary film, is the place to look in very small presses that are somehow managing to publish things. We wouldn’t have an avant-garde, because the avant-garde actually is very much tied—and this is where the Marxist on my hard drive comes back—avant-gardes are in relationship to bourgeois modes of art and bourgeois modes of expression, right? So right now what we’d have is—art, even the more avant-garde types of art, that would be tied to speculative or even finance capital, so I don’t know if that’s the place to look. Nor do I really think that the place is the kind of throw-back, the sort of curated Brooklyn Etsy kind of niche. I don’t

know, it really puts pressure to invent something. Because I don't see either of those as particular modes, it's really hard to imagine. There are people who talk about various forms of spoken word poetry, and they're talking about this new opera that's taking place, *We Shall Not Be Moved*, first in Philadelphia of course, then at the Apollo theater, about MOVE, about bombing your own citizens and the people who power wants to get rid of—and that it's using spoken word and it's using different kinds of choreography. But avant-gardes were usually composed ethnically of the people that were in the bourgeoisie. So we're talking about white people, predominantly men. And now you'd think it would be people who are not white men. So I'd be interested in some of the people who'd come over who had been refugees and who had staged their artwork and which isn't really dependent upon capital and its venues; it happens someplace in a small theater for a couple of nights, then it's gone.

LW: We're curious about your dissertation, since this was the point around which we initially were coming together.

DR: Oh, well, basically what it was—part of it was just a pragmatic thing. I was going to write my dissertation on Althusser. And that would have been a theory dissertation and I would have gone to the library and what have you, and I was quite happy to do a dissertation on Althusser. Library dissertations take a lot less time than going out to the field, so it would have been defended around the time that Althusser strangled his

wife. I worked with this sociologist in political science whose name was Juan Linz, and he gave me tremendous latitude because, he said that no one had actually studied the French intellectuals. He had these different ideas for what you had to do to study French intellectuals. The first one was that you could not be French. Because you had to have a certain kind of distance, and there was a way that you had to pose questions. You couldn't be French because things that everyone had normalized in their vision you wouldn't be able to see. The second one was that you had to have a literary background. He was a social scientist but he thought that in order to interview intellectuals, you had to have a literary background. And so here to Yale I'd come from doing my bachelor's degree in French, and so he in a sense "chose" me. And so I thought, I'll apply for money, and if I got money, instead of writing on Althusser, I would be the Yale-Normalien exchange and I would go to Paris and I could work with Althusser, except that he was hospitalized for most of the time, so I worked with Derrida there instead. And then I also thought that there was something compelling about, at a certain time in your life to do what you have never done. I thought if I don't do this thing now where I work with archives, which terrified me, and also with interviews—because with texts, you can get things wrong, but they're bounded. You really don't feel like you can lie—there's the way in which there's always another box in the archive, you know, when do you stop? I asked all sorts of people, when do you stop? And you know, you basically stop when the money runs out, that's

when you stop. And also, whatever it is about the irruption of the real that comes back again at you in interview situations.

I thought, if I don't do this now I'll probably never do it. And I was lucky enough to get funding, so I went over. And I don't know if you're interested just in the mechanics of doing it, but what happened to me, since I was the Normalien exchange, I first got access to important contacts. Some of the people who were shot after the war were Normaliens—such as Robert Brasillach, he had the same lawyer as Pétain. So, his brother-in-law was still alive, and like many of the former students—I mean, it's even worse than the Harvard thing, they never get over it—they still go to the library, they have all these associations of *anciens élèves*, of alums. And so if you basically get in with the librarian, you would meet all of these collaborationist intellectuals. No one wanted to talk to them, really. Maybe Alice Kaplan was talking to them, and maybe a few other people, but people weren't really talking to these people. So I was able to find out certain things. But I think, coming from political science, there was a lot of work that had to be done just to show that other things didn't work—like, people have theories about why certain people collaborate and why other people didn't, or how to make sense out of the trial sentencing after the war. And so, in terms of these variables that are usually demographic—you know, what part of France do you come from, did it have a monarchist tradition, what social class you were from, or whatever. I actually did do quantitative regressions and these other kinds of things, but none of that stuff worked. And then I decided to be bold and try to quanti-

fy things other people hadn't, like what was their second language, you know, their modern language; they all had Greek and Latin, but what was their other one. Did the people that tended to visit Germany on school trips, were they more open to Nazism—and none of those things worked. The only place where I did actually find statistical variance—right-wing people without fathers look very good in terms of the Führer principle, until you look at left-wing people, and they're without fathers, and you realize it's after World War I and no one had fathers. So, you know, it's very humbling. And the only thing I did notice was that there were these very brilliant students who totally unexpectedly somewhere along the line flunked an important exam. But that's silly and you don't want to bring that up, you bury it in a footnote, because you don't want to give anyone ideas. *Laughs*. Nothing really accounts for it, so you have to look for it on the level of writing.

What I tried to understand was why. I restricted my scope, I started out by looking at one kind of hegemonic cultural formation, which was people who wrote for the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, people who wrote when Jean Paulhan was editor, prior to the occupation and also under the occupation with Drieu, to see how the roster changes. It's not quite like seeing the *New York Review of Books* or something like that, that could go in a totally different way, but to see these different shifts. Because some people publish before the war, who hated Britain, and hating Britain was a really good thing under the occupation, but they always hated Britain. So you really didn't think it was fair that they were giving comfort to the enemy af-

ter the war and tried for that. These were people who you could go back to in the first World War, and they just hated Britain.

Then I started to look at right-wing students which really intrigued me—because I bought into the myth that the *École Normale* was a left-wing institution. I realized that the reason it was considered a left-wing institution—as opposed to when it had all these figures who collaborated and were on the right—was because they had a very restricted notion of politics, that politics was being a parliamentarian or becoming a president or prime minister, so Léon Blum and all these other people who were presidents and prime ministers, they went into politics. But actually, in terms of trial sentencing, literary networks are much more important. And so, the right went into writing, they didn't have these careers in politics. And they also had a kind of lag. You know, the Normalien who was on the left went into politics and parliamentary things. The rightist guy, he wrote for a while, he wrote for different journals and then maybe he got out several books. And so, if you decide that politics is also about writing, then you see that the whole template of the institution, its rites of institution are all around written subjectivities and so therefore there's a whole sort of grammatology to the place.

You begin to wonder, why did they ever think the ENS was on the left, since the rhetoric of its establishment—what Pierre Bourdieu calls the rhetoric of establishment—puts it squarely on the right, in terms of all these aristocratic values, in terms of all these other norms. So then the issue gets flipped: how is it that they produced these left-wing people?

But the thing that surprised me while doing the dissertation was that I really thought, I'm working on the right, I'm working on the Thirties, my second language was German at the time—I mean French was first, and then German—I thought I was going to write a Frankfurt dissertation. So I read all these things. You know, I read *Male Fantasies*—in German, because it wasn't translated—and I read *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and I read Ernst Bloch, and I really thought I was going to write a Frankfurt dissertation. But then it turned out—I kept going back to Derrida's *Grammatology* and not understanding why. What I was trying to do was to tease out what this trace writing of the institution was, and what that relation was to the right. And how even its little coded vernacular and slang, how it recuperated these kinds of distinctions that were operative in right-wing ideology. So, basically, if you were a Normalien, you could not be called a slacker; you were engaging what they called "aristocratic leisure," *loisir aristocratique*. Because these things got transvalued in a certain kind of way that would lead itself much more to a different kind of inflection, what is noble. So, for all its republican features, in terms of being a meritocracy and what have you, it was really what Bourdieu came to see as a "state nobility" (*noblesse d'état*), just like Ivy League schools perpetuate in who they recruit. But that what it values, the language of articulation of its values were either monarchist or otherwise rightist—I mean, that's one of the things that's very interesting, is trying to figure out why, when there were so many monarchist nationalisms and different authori-

tarian nationalisms, the fascist one prevailed. That's really become the question.

In terms of the dissertation, it was just looking at that time period, which kind of ended with the Liberation. It's funny, because I worked with a sociologist, so I did have interviews, but I didn't have a questionnaire, because these were intellectuals and I told him, you can't. You have to have an unstructured interview. But you have an idea of how to get at the same things with each particular person. So, he said, I want to find out, Diane, about their adolescent religious crisis, and you can't ask: "Question 27, tell me about your adolescent religious crisis." But I found that I would read these things, either in the family's archives that they kept, or the national archives, that they had written when they were about twenty years old for their *licence*. I guess that would be like our undergraduate thesis—and they often wrote about something that had nothing to do with the rest of the stuff they wrote. I would ask them a question. I would read the thing and I would say, did you write about this because of a particular teacher at the Sorbonne or something, and he said, you know, "that was during my adolescent religious crisis" or "I had just stopped being a monarchist and I got interested in trains or trade unions" or whatever it was. And it was very funny. So after I did that a couple of times, I figured that that was the way to get people to remember what it felt like when they were about nineteen. Just like Annie Lamott has this trick, if you want to get people to do their autobiography, you ask them what their school lunch was. And people remember their school lunch, but you

can't just remember your school lunch; you remember who was at your lunch table, and you might remember their school lunches, because they were always better than your school lunch, right? And then from the school lunch and the people at the table, then you're able to really get back to that moment. And so that was for me kind of a madeleine moment; it would unlock something.

And so they'd tell you all those things, but because my adviser was a political sociologist, he said, Diane, at the beginning of your thesis you need to just tell us some stuff about the school. So I looked up in the *Petit Larousse* that the École Normale was founded in 1794, they were still giving the years in *brumaire*, by this guy called Joseph Lakanal, who had changed the spelling of his name from Lacanal to Lakanal, to distinguish himself from his Royalist brothers and to signal a vote for the regicide. Now, in French pronunciation there's no difference; it's really a repeat of Derrida's the difference of a letter that has to be seen; it's the violation done to spelling. The school is founded on this moment of *différance*, right? *Différance* is right there at the origin, this letter C to K. So, even when my adviser thought I'd be doing this sociological filler, it turns out to show that just at the very base it's about writing over speech. And parliamentarianism is all about speech. But then my adviser also said to me, you know Diane, you've done all these interviews with people who were there in the Twenties and Thirties, but I really want you to look at a class that's right after the post-war reforms, take someone from the early Fifties. And you have what you call in social science your "control." It's

an unnamed control, and you do the same kind of interview, so Jacques Derrida was my unnamed control, because he went to school in the Fifties. And I said to him, would you mind if I came by? And this is the funny thing, too, that earlier he really helped in a way, because when I was at the École Normale I took his seminar on Walter Benjamin. There were all sorts of people sitting in on it, but if you were a Yale-Normalien, you were supposed to come by his office and talk about your thesis, and he'd give you a whole hour, at least twice a semester. And the first time I went, I was really upset, because I thought, he's not going to care about this sociological study of this group of intellectuals and an archival thesis. I wanted to have an occasion to apologize for the fact that I had to miss more seminars than others students, because sometimes if you get a box from the archive or you have an appointment with what's called the president of the room, you must go. Or you've got an interview with one of these 80 year-old fascists or Pétain's lawyer, you have to go. You tried not to, but if that was when they could see you, you went. So, I apologized when I told him what I was doing and, in a way, he said to me—this was before he wrote *Archive Fever*—he said, it's all to be invented, *c'est tout à inventer*. And I had never had that idea. Not the way we talk about fake news now, but of course you don't have the normal scientific relationship to the archive that most social scientists have that do content analysis. It is about making up a story, it is about inventing or imagining. It's a much more creative process, it's not just transcription. So that just freed me up, I mean it really freed me up. It's like oracular speech. When someone says,

"It's all to be invented" it kind of gives you archive fever, right? You're not just going there, searching in this other kind of hermeneutic code. So I really kind of owed him a great deal, but I took a kind of perverse pleasure in paying it back by making him my unnamed control.

People would tell you things. They'd say, you know, being a Normalien is supposed to be everything, but actually the thing that was much more important in their formation were these preparatory high schools. So it was basically that you went to Stuyvesant or Bronx High School of Science and not that you went to Yale or Harvard. And I'm not sure that that's true, but that's how the response was from my interviewed subjects. And then there were subsequent weird things, because I also interviewed people who were not fascists who went to school with these other people. One of the things that's fascinating in terms of history is that in 1928, when Brasillach and Bardèche went to the *École Normale*, there were a lot of noteworthy people in his year, including Simone Weil. But in 1924, they had a class that had Raymond Aron, Paul Nizan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Canguilhem, Daniel Lagache, and if you read in the archives about their exams, they the school authorities said, "What a terrible class! I mean we really scraped bottom there." They're saying things like, "Their written exams were terrible, their orals were even worse." So, it gives you a kind of irony if you're doing this before beginning your own teaching life, like to not trust yourself so much on your in-the-moment appraisals of people, because these "authoritative" people were so wrong. And yet they thought they were

the cultural arbiters. It's kind of ironic, how people remember these things, which is a different sort of side to it. So I really ended up liking that aspect of looking at things.

There were all kinds of fascisms, too. I found that there were fascisms that, intellectually, I could see why people were attracted to certain parts of it. But also people would tell you things about how the economy was going that the Marxist interpretations didn't seem really to work—the idea that it's big capital doesn't really explain all of it. And there's always an important part that's going to remain enigmatic anyway. I mean, I think that's where I differ from a real social scientist, that I'm affected by literature. Because I do have colleagues that think that something doesn't always have to remain enigmatic—and I thank God that it does, but that is quite a different thing. But also, I was told things by my interview subjects, since they did not see me as being Jewish, which was very odd for me. They saw me as being American. Robert Brasillach's brother-in-law, Maurice Bardèche would be talking about those Nazis, why did they have to kill the Jewish grandmothers and the children. He said nothing about people of reproductive years; that the Nazis went too far in this biological racism, in France “we” understood it was more of a cultural kind of thing. People would say things to you because they didn't really think you were Jewish. But also, they thought at that time, if you were interviewing them, I think there was a sort of odd identity politics, they thought you must be someone from the right, because otherwise why would you speak with them? So I have a whole bunch of books, from Pétain's lawyer and other people, inscribed: “To

Diane, who alone understands our suffering.” It’s like in that scene from *The Producers* where they’ve got the armband, they went to speak with the guy who wrote *Springtime for Hitler* and it’s like, take that armband off! So, I don’t know what I’m going to do with some of these books. They’re in my office at school, and it’s just—what to do with these books from people on the right, with these loving inscriptions that I alone understand their struggle and their plight and stuff like that.

LW: Did you ever feel at risk in any of this?

DR: Oh, no, no. First of all, these guys were old. I mean, they really were old. No, no, actually no. It’s just a really very alienating experience of hospitality because some of the French intellectuals are old and no one was speaking to them. So you would go there, and they would have the writings that hadn’t been given over to the archive or whatever. Like Brasillach’s brother-in-law had these things he had written in high school and—because Brasillach’s sister had married Maurice Bardèche, they were very close. One of the people I went to interview said to me that the reason they didn’t hang out with them was not about politics, it was because he thought there was a homosexual relationship between them and that was why Bardèche married Brasillach’s sister. He said, “the rest of us were simpler,” *plus simple*. They tell you things that you don’t know what to really do with. But then they’d always think, you’re American, so then they’d want to drink bourbon or something with you, because someone had given it to them

as a gift. Either Coca-Cola or bourbon, you had a choice. But you knew that they preferred bourbon, so you'd get this big glass, they'd fill something like a highball glass most of the way with bourbon. Or part way through the interview, they'd have to pause because they have to watch Roland Garros tennis for a while, so you're going back and forth and you realize with French intellectuals it's not about soccer, it's about tennis. They have cats, they don't have dogs. You realize all the stuff you see in Bourdieu's *Distinction*. But no, I never felt at risk in that way of physical safety. It's just the question of what you do when you're interviewing. I did not follow up with Bardèche about the Jews of reproductive years, when he just said the Jewish children and the grandmothers, because I wanted to hear his whole spiel about how he distinguished biological anti-Semitism from cultural anti-Semitism. So you do feel this relationship of bad faith but I hadn't brought up that question. He was the one who brought up—I don't know how it came up, when he was just talking about these people and free associating and just got to this place where he was talking about the racial question.

So, no, I never felt in danger. There was one awkward encounter with Drieu's brother. He had the archive from the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and what I wanted to see at his home were articles and books that were dedicated to Drieu from all different people and his correspondence. And when he heard my name, Diane Rubenstein, he said that doesn't sound very Anglo-Saxon. He said to me, are you an American? Actually, all of my grandparents were naturalized here, so I basically felt

pretty American—I mean, I’m not a Daughter of the American Revolution or anything—so, it wasn’t that. The most you could say was that there just moments of creepiness, where people tell you something expecting you to agree. Like when someone was explaining why they collaborated, they said, you know, I was thirty years old, I wanted to see my name in print. How basically you just become a collaborationist writer because of that impulse.

One of the weirder things about my *Nouvelle Revue Française* study, is that not only was a political sociologist on this, but Paul de Man was on it, too. And I would see him regularly for my Althusser paper, he and Jameson, four people were on my committee. And so de Man would always be asking me about how things were going with this research I was doing about the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and I thought I was being so clever because, of course, Henri de Man was this relative of his, and he had a few things that appeared on what they call “planism” in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, under Paulhan even. And I said, you’d be surprised at some of the names I keep coming across. But I will tell you that I never, I mean I was really gobsmacked, I never imagined that de Man had had this whole past. I got kind of criticized when my dissertation came out as a book, since so much of it was deconstructive, for not talking about de Man. But de Man was Belgian, and I was writing about France, and I don’t know where a Flemish-Belgian intellectual publishing in *Le Soir*, where that fits. And how Degrelle’s Rexism was seen at the time by the population—Degrelle wasn’t like Primo de Rivera; Rexism never really caught

on, and I really don't know enough about these things between the Flemish and francophone Belgians. I don't think he would have been sentenced to death, like the way Brasillach or Rebatet was. I don't know how much they sentenced literary people to death. It's very difficult to draw those kinds of things across national lines, right?

The French have a particular thing about not just their intellectuals, but precisely ones who had gone to elite schools. So the first words of indictment for Brasillach were "Alumnus of the *École Normale Supérieure*." The trial was basically about the fact that because of the prestige of all this, he had really put a dark mark on what France really valued. But I don't know that other countries value their intellectuals in the same way or, if they do, they value getting accepted into elite schools as opposed to graduating. A lot of the people who got accepted into the *École Normale*—it wasn't how they finished up, it was basically that they got in. So it's like getting into Harvard but not graduating from it. But, you know, that's where you get your elite status in acceptance, not where you're going to continue your studies. It's a very different kind of thing. But I don't know if that's what you meant about the dissertation thing.

LW: Yes, that's wonderful. I was also kind of wondering if you had a sense that the intellectual work you were doing was sort of risky, in the sense of being—

DR: I never thought that I'd get a job. No, actually, I should tell you that when I was at Yale, people tried to discourage me from continuing in political science. Emily Apter's father, David, in fact said to me, Diane, don't put your head in a pencil sharpener, you don't belong in political science. He also said a lot of crazy things, too. He said I was Hannah Arendt with a sense of humor, which doesn't make sense to me because, I mean, she could be sarcastic, but I don't really see her as like a laugh riot, you know. But I said, well how about if I just do a joint degree with comparative literature. He said that would be fine. So, in order to do a joint degree, I had to do languages which got more complicated with Fred Jameson because he was not permitted to be in comp lit. When he got to Yale, he was just put in French, and I didn't want him to have to work with me as a comp lit person, but it meant I had to take Italian. Because I had Latin, I had French, I had German, but for a French degree, you have to have another Romance language. But they had so many obstacles, I never thought I would actually obtain the joint degree. What I thought would happen is that they would let me spend my years there, and then when push came to shove, I would end up getting my degree in political science. But that I would proceed, take an extra year of course work. I was able to TA for Umberto Eco. I was able to do these things that if I was just in political science I wouldn't have been able to do. Because they said I had to get a distinction in political science, which I didn't think was going to happen—they didn't give that many out per year, so I didn't really think it was going to happen. Then it happened, and they said you can

have your degree. It will say, PhD Political Science/Comparative Literature or the other way around. And then every single person except for the political sociologist Juan Linz sat down with me. Jim Scott told me that, you know Diane, you'll never get hired in political science with this degree. Because they'll think that the hyphen means it's qualified, that I don't really know political science—when I had actually done all the stuff you have to do to get that. Because I came in with a master's in political science. Then Jameson said well, you know Diane, if you decide to go on the market in political science, I'll write you a letter, but I can't help you with all my contacts who are in the MLA. I can't really help you with a job. And Paul de Man said, Diane, why muddle or dilute the comp lit degree, because comp lit is everything, and I tried to explain to him that actually there were things I did in political science that I still do from time to time having to do with the law that are kind of technical. So, I made the decision based on what I thought I could teach as opposed to who I thought my colleagues would be. And I thought I could teach—I would always teach ideology, no matter if what they gave me to teach was comparative politics. But I think I really expected honestly that I would do this for a certain number of years but probably that I would—that's why I took the degree in political science—I would probably go work in politics. There was a lot of stuff that was being done in the Seventies in terms of local government, that I would probably basically become a city planner or do something where I'd be working in local government. And my political science degree would help me with this. I expected to do local activ-

ism and not to teach. But I somehow always managed to have these odd jobs teaching literary theory in a political science department.

What I have gotten in terms of blowback is that, there were certain times when many people, like Pierre Bourdieu, had liked my thesis and helped me with publishing it, in English. He helped me with a revision of it, and he had sent it along to one of his editors and different people liked it such as Georges Balandier, who contacted my American publisher for the rights. But there is a kind of Normalien old boys' association which doesn't like thinking of its collaborationist history. So, around the time of the bicentennial of the *École Normale*, people thought that would be a good time for a French translation to come out. But they had all these hagiographies and other things of the *École Normale* published that year. So the translation never happened.

