

BOOK REVIEW

TUDO SE PAGA¹: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S HUNGER OF MEMORY²

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This is an important book but not for the reasons most reviewers have given. Its discussion of affirmative action and bilingual education is only of passing interest, important mostly to those who want desperately to believe that this society really is a melting pot. Unfortunately, Rodriguez's discussion of those two themes will undoubtedly become "data" for policy makers, and so we will discuss his comments and why they cannot (not *should not*, but *cannot*) be taken seriously. That, however, will come later. First, why is this an important book.

The Hunger of Memory has received wide critical acclaim, ostensibly for the clarity and sincerity of Rodriguez's writing. Rodriguez himself, however, recognizes the danger that his untraditional (that is, untraditional for a "minority") views of bilingual education and affirmative action pose. Policy makers of the right have courted him since his first denunciation of affirmative action appeared in the early 1970's. *Hunger of Memory* provides additional ammunition for those who, unlike Rodriguez, oppose the fundamental principle of equal opportunity for oppressed people. While Rodriguez asks questions on which all civil rights and minority activists should reflect, he provides the right with an unlikely ally in their attempts to dismantle the hard-fought victories of the civil rights movement.

1. This phrase may be translated on many levels, ranging from "No free lunch" to "Payback time" to the more fatalistic "Everything is repaid in time." See, e.g., C. Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Riverside, Calif., *Todo Se Paga*," *New Yorker*, Feb. 5, 1979.

2. R. RODRIGUEZ, AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *HUNGER OF MEMORY: THE EDUCATION OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ* (1982). This Book Review, Copyright ©1984 by Gerald Torres and James B. Morales.

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Rodriguez condemns affirmative action, those programs that got him his education and got him his offers of faculty positions from various universities, because he feels he does not deserve special treatment. And, quite possible, *he* doesn't. But he makes the error of moving from the particular to the general without any examination of the way in which a particular case is peculiar. The reason his book does not "resonate" as he would like it to among Chicanos is that he denies the simple fact of his own life. He does not see himself as a particularly lucky member of a class. He does not see himself as part of a class at all. He has a failure of social imagination. He seems to misunderstand the relationship of fascism to class. Rodriguez either fails to see, or denies, that a central feature of racism as a social force is its *definition* of racial minorities as lower class unless or until they have "assimilated" in Rodriguez's sense of the term, to the point at which they are really whiter than white. He is stunned that affirmative action has been promoted as a program of the left, since its primary effect, as he sees it, has been to benefit middle-class ethnics like himself, rather than those economically deprived members of racial or ethnic groups who are "really" socially disadvantaged. But to say that affirmative action has not gone far enough is not a criticism of affirmative action, it is a criticism of liberal reformism in a pervasively racist and class-bound society. His critique reflects the premise Mr. Rodriguez accepts: that of trying to change the complexion of institutions while leaving the structure of those institutions intact.

In his book, Mr. Rodriguez reports feeling uneasy at Stanford University watching the young Mexican-Americans on campus aping their relatives in Mexico by wearing exaggerated ethnic garb. In many ways that uneasiness is understandable. He was uncomfortable with those Chicanos who were suddenly "getting ethnic," who were suddenly becoming aware that they *were* part of a class. Many of those students probably were not "disadvantaged," in the narrow socio-economic sense Mr. Rodriguez adopts, but many of them probably were. Like Mr. Rodriguez, many of them had been fighting against the social role into which they felt cast, and they were discovering the remarkable tenacity of those roles. They were also engaged in a process of legitimizing their cultural experience within the context of a society which had previously denied the importance of their *specific* cultural identity. While sometimes comical, surely Rodriguez can understand such behavior within the context of a developing *political* identity; it is part of the process of giving public content to the personal experience of cultural difference: the very process Rodriguez describes in his book. The comical behavior should not be understood as a flight from participation in the public life of this society, but as an

attempt to identify and legitimize a particular approach to that participation.

Mr. Rodriguez betrays a limited theory of political and social development, or else he believes in one that is limited to individuals, which is not really a theory of social development at all. Except in personal and romantic terms, Rodriguez never clearly explains his understanding of how this society creates or denies opportunities for people to define their place or role in society. He is merely discomfited by those who see, and feel defined by, class and racial bias. He thinks those who recognize and identify concretely with their social identity are deluded and obstruct the process of assimilation which he sees as central to full "public" participation in American society. He cannot understand how some would view his concept of assimilation as the ultimate delegitimization of a cultural heritage, a form of cultural genocide.

Rodriguez is alarmed by the desire of ethnics to retain some material link to their culture because he feels that the maintenance of this link is achieved at the cost of not forging new links to the culture that surrounds them. In a way, of course, he's right. But what he doesn't recognize is that as to Mexican-Americans the truth he belabors has already taken deep root. Why else, for instance, would Mexican-Americans cease calling themselves *Mexican-Americans*, and start to call themselves *Chicanos*? Rodriguez would answer that it's because they are slavishly imitating the lower class Mexican, who was once referred to as Chicano, and he would point for evidence to the fact that many middle class Mexican-Americans don't like the term Chicano. That, however, is beside the point. He fails to understand that the term Chicano embraces the fact that we are American. We are culturally American in a significant way, and we are politically American in a significant way. Chicano militants recognize that fact, and have pursued a political line that is designed to provide for the greater material assimilation of hispanics into the dominant culture and, at the same time, to change the dominant culture.

Rodriguez describes the reality of the immigrant experience. His graceful prose illuminates the transformation that all immigrants must go through to make the leap into another culture. He describes the personal sacrifices demanded of the immigrant before he is allowed to feel he has gained a legitimate place in the dominant culture. It is his own sense that he is an American that causes him to bridle at the suggestion that he should use his Spanish more, or that his exotic features would suit him to fashion modeling. It is because of the vast payments that he has made in his personal life that Rodriguez reacts with such violence and dis-

gust at those middle class ethnics who attempt to retain their grip on their cultural identity by pretending it is unchanged by living in a larger American society. Do they do this just to be cute or sentimental? Or is it a reaction to the cultural loss occasioned by assimilation on terms dictated by someone else? Rodriguez recognizes very clearly that there are tremendous costs to be paid for a full assimilation into what he calls public life. He mistakenly gives a one-dimensional cast to the term *public life*, using it definitionally to equate assimilation on the one hand, with acceptance as full members of society on the other. Through that conflation, Rodriguez attempts to press his own experience as proof to support policies which will define the experience of others.

Rodriguez sets out the dichotomy on page one: The central division is between public and private; his story is the story of movement from private alienation to public assimilation. His is a story of the immigrant, moving out of one culture and into another. Yet, his is also a private story, or so he claims. It is one that has reference only to his own life and will, as he puts it, "resonate with significant for other lives" only if his story is true. What does he mean by this? He certainly is not naive enough to think that people will read his book and not view his life as though it has meaning and reflects other lives. Neither can he be so naive as to assume that people will take his views on ethnicity and its relationship to class as merely the views of one person. That he has become the darling of the right is proof of the pernicious quality of such self-serving and self-protective claptrap. Given his view, his successes and life choices stand as a vindication of the meritocracy. That others don't succeed as he has only reflects on their merits or efforts and does not implicate the sexism, racism, or classism of the society in which they live. That being so, moreover, Rodriguez is neatly absolved of any culpability for the use of his experiences as a justification for policies which limit the life choices of others. His claim that affirmative action has become a sop to ethnic politicians and should focus on class differences instead does not alter the real-world consequences of the position he takes. Rodriguez also cannot really believe that he can separate his own life from the life of the culture that produced it. The culture that produced it was the culture of his family, and the culture of his society. What he doesn't see is the way in which the culture of his society in fact changed the culture of his family.

In discussing his childhood, Mr. Rodriguez describes a happy family life, a close family life. He describes a family that viewed itself as nobody's fools, as no one's victims, but a family moving into a strange culture and happy with that move. But that was his view, not his parents'. His father cannot understand why he does.

not take a position at the university. His father explains, "But we never had any chances."

Mr. Rodriguez recognizes a clear line between the public and the private, but public and private are only categories for organizing thoughts, not for defining reality. The public and the private merge, just as the personal and the political merge in all levels and at all times. The separation that Mr. Rodriguez attempts to put on them is merely a construct, but also a construct that he has reified and that defines his own alienation. The truth that Mr. Rodriguez claims others will find in his work is a simple truth, but simple in the sense of small, a truth that doesn't go very far, a truth that doesn't help us understand anything but Mr. Rodriguez.

It is this public/private construct with which he reifies his life that causes him to oppose bilingual education so vociferously. He misunderstands its effectiveness in making the public, as he defines it, accessible, for making the public and private distinction less stark, less severe, and for breaking down the Anglo-centric barriers to social participation. He thinks that bilingual education is merely a shield for those ethnics who cannot face the fact that they live in a society that is multicultural in many respects, but unicultural in the one important public respect, which is the way in which power is allocated and shared. He thinks that those ethnics cannot face the truth of political culture in America. He is wrong. He misunderstands a principal motivation for bilingual education, thinking it a desire to maintain a type of illegitimate or ersatz closeness. What it is really designed to do is to prevent a generation of Spanish speaking children from being left farther behind. Can he neglect the statistics in California which demonstrate that testing Chicano children in English generates false categories of "intelligence" which label these children for the rest of their academic and physical lives? Can he forget the thousands of Spanish speaking children in California who are put into classes for the mentally retarded because they took tests in English when they spoke only Spanish? Does he think that because he was a successful product of the sink-or-swim method that it is a just or sensible policy prescription for all students? Surely he cannot.

We do not for a moment think that he lying to us about what happened in his own childhood, about what he felt about what happened in his own childhood, or about what others told him. So what truth is he revealing? Perhaps he is defining or describing what it means to be raised as a immigrant in this society. If he is, then he should recognize that the truth of that statement has no relevance to the lives of most Chicanos in this society. Most simply are not immigrants. Most do not relate to the United States as a foreign country. Most relate to the sovereign authority and the

cultural authority in a different way. If anything, he is describing the truth that an ambitious Anglo-identified boy with a supportive family and a supportive school life can succeed, particularly with a lot of luck. Of what meaning is that truth to those who would use his views to make normative prescriptions? It is of limited meaning at best. It merely suggests that the system succeeds for those whom it was designed to serve.

Mr. Rodriguez describes a scene in his book where three Black children enter a public bus and he feels oppressed and angry with their boisterousness. He feels alienated because of their public closeness, because of their language, which is not his. He becomes angry at these children for being *Black*. He slips from that memory into a critique of those who would define Black English as being a legitimate language possessing its own constructions and its own rules. He suggests by his analysis that Black English should be eliminated because it has nothing to teach us, and because it prevents the assimilation of those children into American culture: that understanding it as a separate language is not useful. What he fails to see is that the acceptance of Black English as a separate language, not one that replaces the dominant language or one used in formal contexts, but its acceptance as a language possessed of its own integrity, changes the way we view people who speak that language. It teaches us to acknowledge and respect a cultural intelligence that creates a language of its own even though it is different. Rodriguez fails to see how that understanding could change the public life. He opposes bilingual education because he mistakes it for an attempt to impose the language of closeness on the public. What Mr. Rodriguez misunderstands is the difference between the language of closeness, familiarity and the language of understanding.

Mr. Rodriguez was lucky. He recognizes it, but doesn't understand its significance. His words obscure his meaning. Mr. Rodriguez would have us substitute luck for affirmative action. That substitution won't work. He does not seem to recognize the particularity of his good fortune, but he would like to make it the basis of a generalized policy. So would we. We would like to make the good fortune we have had available to all students who find themselves in similar positions. He would take just the reverse stand. Mr. Rodriguez would say that you can't institutionalize a willingness to work hard. He is right, you can't institutionalize a willingness to work hard, but you can institutionalize opportunity, and that's what he refuses to acknowledge. He refuses to acknowledge that in order to institutionalize opportunity you must change the structure of society. It is the restructuring of society that we seek.