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How to get beyond culture of contempt

ELLEN REISS

NEW YORK

THE ELECTION of Barack Obama is important not only because the American people have chosen a person of color to be our president. That fact, certainly, is a tremendous, historic victory for ethics. But the election is also an important ethical victory because the massive use of lies didn't work. And the various scare words didn't scare. And it's important because of something to be seen in an American poem about another election.

Vachel Lindsay, in his poem "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," writes about the election of 1896, in which William Jennings Bryan ran against William McKinley. He describes the large feeling millions of people had about Bryan, and very much young people. Bryan seemed to represent the rights of Americans who were not rich; he seemed to represent their hopes and an America that could belong to all the people, not just the moneyed.

That election was, of course, different from the current one; and besides, Bryan lost. But there is this likeness: the feeling that both Bryan and Obama stood for something kind, against, as Lindsay puts it, "the mean and cold."

There are lines like these, about Bryan: "He brought in tides of wonder, of unprecedented splendor, / Wild roses from the plains, that made hearts tender." Lindsay describes the huge crowds at Bryan rallies, because people felt, This person stands for an America that is kinder, that is truer to herself. Lindsay writes of being at a Bryan rally at age 16, in Springfield, Illinois:

*And Bryan took the platform.
And he was introduced.
And he lifted his hand
And cast a new spell.
Progressive silence fell
In Springfield, in Illinois,
around the world.*

A person can symbolize something to people that they don't wholly understand and which he does not live up to. Had Bryan been elected, he might not have lived up to people's hopes. Barack Obama was elected.

And it is necessary for America to see, and for him to see, what it would mean to meet America's hopes—which are also desperate needs.

For our president-elect to be a good president, for him to succeed, he must want, passionately, to answer this question, articulated by Eli Siegel: "What does a person deserve by being a person?" And he must make sure the economy of America is based on a true answer to that question.

In 1970 Mr. Siegel, founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, began his series of Goodbye Profit System lectures. He explained that the world had reached the point at which economics based on a selfish, ugly, unethical way of seeing one's fellow humans no longer worked. While the profit system might drag on for quite a few years, and sometimes be given a flashy façade, it was a mortally ailing thing.

Week after week, using documents of the past and present—of economics, history, literature and human feeling—he explained why we had come to the time when "there will be no economic recovery in the world until economics itself—the making of money, the having of jobs—becomes ethical; is based on good will rather than on the ill will which has been predominant for centuries."

The profit motive—the seeing of people in terms of "How much money can I get out of you? How cheaply can I employ you? How can I use you to feather my own nest?"—was always ugly. It made for child labor; for miserable working conditions, with their ensuing occupational diseases and maimings; for poverty wages. But

by 1970, the ill will of the profit motive was not only ugly—it was inefficient; it was less and less able to bring in the desired returns.

This year, we have some of the results of the effort to keep that mean way of using people going: we have an American financial collapse, millions of Americans unemployed, and many more about to be—with all the terror and suffering that includes.

The incoming president, and Congress, and the American people need to see that tinkering around with an unethically based economy will not work.

We now have to have economics based, not on profit, but on ethics, justice, usefulness.

Let's take the automobile industry of America. As I comment on it, I'm not speaking in terms of particular legislative or executive decisions, but in terms of ethics. It is, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported (Nov. 8-9), in such a "deepening crisis" that "Washington may have to step in to finance a historic downsizing of the U.S. auto industry."

Letting this industry, which Mr. Obama called "the backbone of American manufacturing," die is unacceptable. But pouring vast quantities of taxpayer money into auto companies based on providing profit to stockholders, is now repugnant to the American people, and furthermore won't work.

With competition from Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Germany and more, there is an expense that must be eliminated from this "backbone of American manufacturing" in order for it to succeed. That expense is profit for individuals who didn't do the work. The U.S. auto industry cannot sustain itself and pay its workers' benefits and pensions, while at the same time paying out those completely unnecessary extras—emoluments to non-working stockholders.

If the people of America are going to bail out auto companies, there is no reason why we ourselves, or the auto workers, cannot be the companies, own the companies. The people of America need autos. The people of America can produce autos. Autos simply can no longer be produced in America on the basis of private profit—with money from their sales going into the pockets of stockholders. Once they could: when car manufacturing took place pretty much in the U.S. alone.

What this "backbone of American manufacturing" now needs to be based on is not the scare word used during the presidential campaign. What it needs to be based on is, as Mr. Siegel once put it, deep American decency.

The election of 2008 was a magnificent victory against racism. Yet as we know, racism still exists, in all its filthiness. The next president and the American people need to learn from Aesthetic Realism what racism comes from. And they need to see that profit economics arose from *the very same source* in the human self. Both racism and the profit motive come from *contempt*: "the lessening of what is different from oneself as a means of self-increase as one sees it."

To illustrate this fact, I'm going to quote from a periodical of nearly 100 years ago, which Mr. Siegel used in several of his lectures.

In the Aug. 18, 1910 issue of the *Independent* magazine, there is an article by the important writer and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois. He describes being looked down on, because he was black, by an impoverished little girl who was white:

"She was a poor little waif of six or seven years....She was stealing a ride on an Eighth Avenue furniture van and spied me on a passing street car. She stuck out her tongue and jeered and made every contortion of countenance to show her personal disapproval of my kind and the superiority of hers.

"Poor little thrall'd thing! It was not enough that she should be prisoned by poverty and ignorance; this great nation must needs chain her with race prejudice."

Du Bois is eloquent and nobly sympathetic. But we need to learn the reason the little girl could *welcome* being "chain[ed]...with race prejudice": it's that there is a desire in the self to be big by seeing someone else as less. And this ordinary yet foulest desire in the human self is the only reason a nation could feel it is somehow tolerable for some children to be born poor and others rich.

We have had a great, historic election. Now for America to fare well, justice to every man, woman, and child must be the very basis of our economy.

Ellen Reiss is Class Chairman of Aesthetic Realism.



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Susan Boyle's moment in the sun is inspiring

As one of the millions of people deeply moved by Susan Boyle's beautiful performance on *Britain's Got Talent*, I feel the change of emotion of the judges and audience from scorn to respect was as important as her singing ("Her story's like 'a Disney movie,'" *Life*, Monday).

Judge Amanda Holden captured it when she said: "I honestly think that we were all being very cynical, and I think that's the biggest wake-up call ever....It was a complete privilege listening to that."

People are hungry for that wake-up call. I learned from Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded in 1941 by the great poet and critic Eli Siegel, that the purpose of art is the same as the deepest purpose of every person: to like the world honestly. As a singer and teacher of singing, this knowledge is invaluable to me. I learned, too, that we all have a desire to have contempt, to build ourselves up through making less of other people and things, and this is the biggest weakener of our lives.

Boyle's singing was powerful and sweet, bright and deep, and this is how people hope to be. "All beauty," as Siegel stated, "is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

So hooray for Boyle, and may she have the chance for expression she has dreamed of. May she also be a means of people seeing that a human being is not to be summed up and seen with contempt, and that the world has more possibilities of beauty than we knew.

Carrie Wilson
New York

The answer to the crisis in the Mideast *An honest desire to know: Not bombs*

By Ruth Oron, Zvia Ratz, Avi Gvili, Rose Levy, Harriet Bernstein As Israelis who love our country, we feel passionately that Israel is hurting itself by the military incursion into the Gaza Strip. The notion had by Hamas and the Israeli government alike that the conflict between us will be solved through war and bombs is completely false. It has been tried for six decades, since Israel's birth—it does not work.

We respect the many Israelis, including military personnel, protesting the actions taken now by our government. For example, there is Gideon Levy who, in an article in the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz* (Dec. 29, 2008) wrote: "Once again, Israel's violent responses, even if there is justification for them, exceed all proportion and cross every red line of humaneness, morality, international law and wisdom. What began yesterday in Gaza is a war crime and the foolishness of a country. Blood will now flow like water. Besieged and impoverished Gaza, the city of refugees, will pay the main price. But blood will also be unnecessarily spilled on our side."

Sadly, Levy was right. And at this time, nearly 800 Palestinians and 12 Israelis have been killed; more than 3,000 Palestinians have been wounded. Among the dead and injured are many Palestinian children. We say this: There will be no peace until Palestinians and Israelis have good will for one another, and see it as their strength. And the first thing in good will is the desire to understand. Nothing else can end three generations of mutual retaliation and hate. Once we did not see this, as most people don't, because the meaning of good will as tough, practical, is not understood.

The education Aesthetic Realism, founded in 1941 by the American poet and critic Eli Siegel, taught us how to have a deeper, more accurate way of seeing the Palestinian people, and brought out our desire to be fair to them. We learned that in every person, including ourselves, there is a battle between the desire to look down on others, have

contempt, which is "the addition to self through the lessening of something else," and the desire to see value and meaning in other people, and want to strengthen them. We, the Jews, who suffered persecution and the concentration camps, should be the first people to understand the Palestinian people's yearning for a homeland.

In an article titled "The Only Answer to the Mideast Crisis," printed in the *New York Times* in 1990 as an advertisement, Ellen Reiss, Class Chairman of Aesthetic Realism, wrote: "The Mideast situation will not be solved until individuals are trying to see the many people different from themselves as being, also, full individuals real as themselves." And she recommended that every person in the concerned nations write a soliloquy of 500 words, as deeply as he or she can, describing the feelings of a person in the opposing nation. Palestinians would write about Israelis, and Israelis would write about Palestinians. The soliloquies would be read on radio and television, and commented on, so that persons will have a chance to say whether they feel they are described rightly.

Writing this soliloquy changed each of us profoundly. And 21 years ago, on Jan. 7, 1988, in a letter some of us sent to members of the Israeli Knesset, we told about what we learned, and said in part:

"As we thought of a Palestinian person more deeply, granted him the reality he deserves—we came to see this important fact: we are more the same than different. What does a young Arab in Rafiah hope for? What is a mother in Deir el Balah afraid of? Aren't their feelings as real as ours? Isn't their love as passionate as ours? For the sake of our country and for the sake of the people suffering now in the Gaza Strip, every Israeli, every member of the government, every soldier in the army has to write such a soliloquy. We urge you to begin it immediately."

The Holy Land, ever so rich with history and culture and treasured by both peoples, should lead the world in showing the urgency of good will—the only means for lasting peace in the Middle East!

Aesthetic Realism Answer to Racism Event at USC Includes Premier of Play

Staff Writer and Wire Services

A program based on the book edited by journalist and Aesthetic Realism Associate Alice Bernstein, *The People of Clarendon County—a Play by Ossie Davis, and the Answer to Racism*, was featured in the afternoon session of Social Justice Day at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, April 3rd. This day of teaching and learning, in its sixth year, was originated and hosted by Dr. Sadye Logan, Director of the I. DeQuincey Newman Institute for Peace and Social Justice at USC's College of Social Work.

Mrs. Bernstein, anthropologist Dr. Arnold Perey, and educator Monique Michael were invited to speak on what Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded in 1941 by Eli Siegel, explains is the cause of racism—*contempt*, "the addition to self through the lessening of something else." The criticism of contempt, including in oneself, and learning to see that the feelings of other people are as real and as deep as one's own, are essential in ending racism.

Ossie Davis's unknown 1955 Civil Rights play, was "unearthed" by Bernstein in 2004 during the course of interviews with him. It has been published by Third World Press, and as Mr. Davis wished, with essays on the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method and related writings. Dr. Perey and Mrs. Michael presented interactive first grade and high school lessons on science, geography, and social studies. Each was based on the principle stated by Eli Siegel: "The purpose of all education is to like the world through knowing it." They illustrated why this method, in use since 1973, succeeds at all grade levels, under all economic conditions,

in bringing out every child's true intelligence and desire to be kind. Their presentation exemplified what Ruby Dee, actress and wife of Ossie Davis, described: "the success of the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method in enabling children to learn every subject, and ending prejudice in the classroom." In the Q&A a graduate student said, "This method clearly encourages critical thinking in students."

While this program has been given at schools, libraries, churches, and museums in cities North and South, Social Justice Day was its premier in South Carolina, the state where the historic events took place that this play brings alive. In the USC audience were students, graduates, faculty, visiting educators, community leaders, and social justice activists—including persons from Clarendon County. People were moved as scenes from "The People of Clarendon County," directed by actor and writer Whitfield Sims, were enacted by students from Burke High School in Charleston—Sierra Brown, Justin Walton, Candia Monique Rice. Mr. Sims, whose credits include Broadway, played Rev. DeLaine, the leader of the Clarendon County parents who risked death in the 1950s to challenge Jim Crow and inequality in education. Their lawsuit laid the groundwork for the U.S. Supreme Court 1954 ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in public schools. The performance was accompanied by an outstanding chorus of nineteen students from Mayo High School in Darlington, SC, under the direction of Dwight James, and received cheers and a standing ovation.

In the audience were Judge Bernard Fielding, the first African American probate judge in South Carolina; Bishop Frederick James, a leader of the Sumter Movement in the 1960s; Dr. Lonnie Randolph, Jr., president, SC State Conference NAACP; Bud Ferillo, activist and producer of the documentary "Corridor of Shame"; Rev. T. Anthony Spearman, president, Hickory, NC-NAACP; Dr. Ronnie Brailsford, Sr. and Rev. Eddie Mayes.

Wallace Brown, Sr., Chair of the Newman Institute's Board of Directors, and Alice Bernstein gave a joint tribute to Isaac "Ike" W. Williams (1945-2008), Civil Rights activist and Chief Liaison of U.S. House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn. Dr. Logan and Mr. Brown presented Evelyn Williams with the Newman Institute's 2009 Champion of Social Justice Award named for her husband.

"This was awesome," said William Robinson, a community organizer from North Carolina: "We saw Aesthetic Realism in action!" Amanda Diaczenko, a Ph.D. student stated, "I look forward to continuing my study about Aesthetic Realism as a way to end racism and hate between humans; I expect that the philosophy and methodology will inspire me in my personal and professional life and increasingly as I continue to learn more." And, distinguished theologian and human rights advocate Bishop Frederick James of Columbia, who earlier joined the speakers in giving historical background, said to Alice Bernstein, "The University is in your debt for introducing Aesthetic Realism in this blazing manner."