

“Twenty Years Ago Today”

The **Radical Philosophy Association** was born 20 years ago this December at the 1982 Eastern Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association. But its beginnings go back at least another 14 years to the formation of a Radical Caucus within the APA. Spurred by the social protest movements of the 1960s, Richard Schmitt and others sought to bring the spirit and social consciousness of student activism to the staid quietistic professionalism of the APA. Philosophy, like the rest of academe, had joined the Cold War “end of ideology” consensus of the 1950s. Funded by National Defense Education Act (NDEA) money, the philosophical profession had become dominated by those who saw it as a technique of analysis rather than a critique of reality. It was against this abdication of intellectual responsibility that radicals raised their voices by forming radical caucuses in various professions. This revolt finally reached philosophy in 1968, a year of high political temperature worldwide.

While turmoil in the larger society increased through the 1960s, the APA continued to hold paper-reading sessions strong on analytic philosophy, philosophy of language and philosophy of science. But in the nooks and crannies of these professional meetings, radicals were addressing more substantive issues affecting the quality of social life. By 1982 we had reached the point of feeling a need for a freestanding association of radical philosophers, an alternative to the APA itself. While continuing to hold sessions at the APA, we also wanted to have our own activities as well. We wanted to foster a community of radical philosophers that could stimulate, support and nurture radical thought and activism. This was to become especially important for those who found themselves the lone radical in a department –the isolation most of us experienced on our campuses in the hayday of Reaganism..

BUILDING THE RPA

In its early years one of the most valuable things RPA did was to hold a series of **regional conferences** in the East (where our members were concentrated) that brought people together to exchange ideas of common interest. RPA members in the New York City area took the lead by holding three regional conferences in 1983 and '84. Then Baltimore picked up the ball with a series of regional conferences at the newly established Progressive Action Center. At first a potpourri of papers on a wide range of topics, these conferences soon came to focus on issues of gender, race and class. Many of them were jointly sponsored with the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) and the Committee on Blacks in Philosophy of the APA. The intersections of these three dimensions of oppression provided a fruitful common ground for Marxists, feminists, anti-racists, phenomenologists, etc. to come together. These discussions, which were both theoretical and experiential, contributed to the development of feminist philosophy. By 1988 a total of 10 eastern regional conferences had been held, with an average attendance of about 50 persons.

Of course we continued to organize sessions at the APA, at first only in the Eastern Division, but then also in the Central and (by 1987) in the Pacific Divisions. These, along with sessions sponsored by other smaller societies, have attracted increasing attendance during APA meetings to the point where they rival the sessions in the main APA program.

In 1986 RPA began organizing sessions at the **Socialist Scholars Conference** held each spring in New York City. Through these events, attended by thousands of people on the Left, RPA began to attract many who were not professional philosophers. RPA became a major player, sponsoring as many as 11 sessions with 33 speakers. While many persons have been involved in organizing this Herculean job, for many years now Betsy Bowman has been the mainstay. An immense variety of topics have been covered in these sessions, some of them path breaking for the Left. For example, as early as 1989 George Caffentzis and Sylvia Federici were holding sessions criticizing the World Bank and the IMF, long before the anti-globalization movement came to public attention.

In 1990 a number of radicals in Chicago, many of them RPA members, launched a **Mid-West Radical Activists and Scholars Conference**. RPA became a major sponsor, organizing 23 sessions at the inaugural conference that November, which was attended by 1200 people. For five years this was a major event on the Left calendar and brought RPA to many radicals in the Midwest, helping prepare the way for the first RPA National Conference in 1994.

Parallel with the birth of RPA, what was to become one of its longest standing and most far reaching projects was gestating. In May of 1982 Bob Stone and Cliff DuRand were among six U.S. philosophers who went to Havana for the first conference between philosophers from the U.S. and Cuba since their Revolution in 1959. It was led by Ed D'Angelo of the Society for the Philosophical Study of Marxism. Having broken through the barrier the U.S. had constructed against Cuba, we returned eager to continue the exchange. We had invited two Cuban philosophers to speak at the December APA meetings –the same meetings at which RPA was born. The State Department denied them visas however and it was amidst our protest of this violation of our freedom to inquire that we founded the RPA.

For years we attempted to hold a successor meeting with Cuban philosophers, but it wasn't until 1990 that the 2nd conference finally took place. Since then, the **Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers and Social Scientists**, as it is now called, or Cuba Conference for short, has become an annual event at the University of Havana. Coordinated by Cliff DuRand, around this five-day meeting we have built a variety of activities extending over two weeks and designed to give an in-depth look at Cuban society. This is our way of bridging the gap between thinkers in our two countries created by over 40 years of the U.S. imposed blockade. To date we have taken over 600 persons on these trips to Cuba, with many returning again and again. This past June saw our largest delegation –95 persons in all. Some former delegates have developed on-going scholarly relations with their Cuban counterparts, many have become active

in Cuba solidarity politics, some have even married (or nearly married) Cubans they have met through our trips.

These annual trips to Cuba have been licensed by the U.S. Treasury Department –a privilege extended to scholars but denied to most Americans. While we have generally been able to obtain these licenses without too much difficulty, this has varied with the changing political winds in Washington. In 1998 we were denied a license and had to mount a political campaign to finally win the right to travel to this forbidden island.

As an extension of Cuba Conference, RPA has sponsored Cuban scholars on speaking tours of the U.S., including most of our National Conferences. We brought Cubans in 1993, 1996, 1998 and in September 2001 (this tour was interrupted by the September 11 crisis). This fall we are again bringing two Cuban philosophers to the RPA National Conference.

This on-going relation with Cuba was bound to attract the attention of those hostile to its Revolution. In late December 1991 as he was preparing to travel to Cuba, Cliff's office was broken into on three occasions and most of the financial records of RPA and Cuba Conference were stolen. Items with street value were passed over. It seemed obvious the culprit, a local drug addict who was caught on his third return, was looking for information, not valuables. But we were never able to learn what right wing group or government agency had taken such an interest in our activities. We filed FOIA requests with the help of the ACLU, but got no clear leads from that. But it was nice to know we had been noticed. (For details, cf. RPA Newsletter # 28 & #31).

GETTING OURSELVES ORGANIZED

From the beginning, we were better at organizing events than organizing our association. It wasn't until 1985 that we began to evolve a set of officers and a steering committee. From the beginning Richard Schmitt and Bob Stone had assumed major roles in attending to the running of RPA. In 1984 we took a step into the computer age when Cliff DuRand enlisted his students to enter the scraps of names into one of the computers at the Progressive Action Center (where a computer coop had been established to make this new technology available to Left organizations) to create the first RPA mailing list. This made him the Secretary. In 1985 Cliff volunteered to also collect RPA dues and so he became Secretary-Treasurer.

Bob Stone was functioning as RPA coordinator, first for the New York City area where we had a large concentration of members, then for the Eastern region, and finally nationally. There were sporadic efforts to establish a Midwest coordinator, but we were weaker in that region. In the west there were only a few scattered RPA members.

From the beginning Richard Schmitt edited the **Newsletter**, had it printed and did the mailing from his home –an increasingly labor intensive job, especially as our mailing list grew. Until the printing and mailing was moved to Baltimore, the RPA Newsletter was a one-man job. Richard continued to edit it until 1997 when Jeff Paris took over its editing and publishing. For 20 years the Newsletter has been the main means of communication among our members.

In 1985 an attempt to establish a steering committee was made and in 1987 a structure for the organization was formally adopted. But in practice RPA activities came from those who volunteered out of a particular interest in something; selection was by elective affinity rather than formal election. Some were uncomfortable with the lack of a clear decision-making process and accountability –not least those who were making the decisions. But it seemed that everyone accepted the decisions being made by the activists in the organization. Writing 10 years after it's founding, Bob Stone summarized the RPA modus operandi well when he wrote:

RPA provides not so much a structure or ideology as a space for initiatives. Up to now our national leadership has been self-appointed. Qualifications are not beliefs or ability but energy to learn the activity chosen. Cliff has learned bookkeeping, Richard has learned desktop publishing, Joe Walsh journal editing and distribution. I've learned how to put on conferences. RPA decisions are made by those who do the work. Similar if-you-can-conceive-it-you-can-do-it processes guided RPA's growth in the Midwest and West. (RPA Newsletter # 29, Fall 1992)

This anarchist style gave space for considerable vitality. It continues to characterize the organization now after two decades.

EXPANDING RPA ACTIVITIES

In December of 1988 Cliff DuRand proposed the establishment of a **Radical Philosophy Review of Books**. An increasing number of RPA members were publishing books and there needed to be a way to disseminate this expansion of radical philosophy to the wider membership. For some time the Newsletter had been carrying brief notes of articles and books by RPA members, but something more substantial was clearly needed. Joe Walsh volunteered to edit the new RPRB and Cliff volunteered to oversee the printing and mailing. The first issue appeared in 1990 and for the next seven years RPA members received free this semi-annual publication. The 14 issues of RPRB carried reviews of some 150 books that included over 80 RPA authors!

A qualitative leap was made in 1994 with the **first RPA National Conference**. Carried out under the visionary leadership of RPA Coordinator Bob Stone, this event not only projected RPA as a national organization, it also drew in a new generation of graduate students. Held at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, it also helped to strengthen RPA in the Midwest. Hosted by Jon Torgerson, the November 3 to 6 event drew 150 persons and was the most financially successful conference RPA has ever had, producing a surplus of nearly \$3000. A \$2000 travel fund donated by employed radical philosophers helped many graduate students to attend. But most significant were the new initiatives that came out of our Drake conference. A decision was made to publish a Directory of RPA Members. Many of the founding generation of RPA members, now fairly established in the profession, volunteered to mentor younger graduate students and junior faculty, helping them get published and find jobs. Many of us, veterans of the 1960s, were pleasantly surprised to find that the new

generation of graduate students often considered it a career asset to be able to list RPA membership on their Resume.

And a big step was taken into the IT age with the establishment of an **Internet Committee**. We had come a long way since 1992 when the Newsletter reported just 14 members with e-mail. Now it was possible to have a RPA list serv as an additional means for our membership to communicate -- instantaneous and more flexible than the Newsletter. Jack Green Musselman started the list serv in 1995 with 125 names. It grew from there, fluctuating between 200 and 300 subscribers. By 1997 RPA was even able to establish its own web site, now at www.radicalphilosophy.org And most recently, thanks to the efforts of Secretary Greg Moses, the Directory of Members is even on the web, available at <http://academic.marist.edu/praxis/radical>

By the summer of 1995 an **Adjunct Committee** was in the making, taking up the problem of the increase in part time adjuncts by universities across the nation. It conducted a survey of conditions adjuncts face and has kept us informed about trends. But we soon found that we could not address the problems of adjuncts as effectively as teachers' unions could.

In 1995 RPA took up one of the great unresolved moral issues of late 20th century America: capital punishment. Several RPA members met that summer at demonstrations to stop the execution of Black journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal and decided to launch a RPA **Anti-Death Penalty Project**. Their aim was to campaign within the academic community for the abolition of the death penalty in the U.S. and internationally. The ADPP worked with other groups to present resolutions calling for the abolition of the death penalty to the Eastern and Pacific Divisions of the APA and to the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, where they were passed by substantial majorities. Under the leadership of George Caffentzis, Sylvia Federici and Everet Green, the ADPP conducted a vigorous program of sponsoring panel discussions, organizing course materials and holding student essay contests on the death penalty and the prison-industrial complex.

In the spring of 1999 ADPP proposed the RPA send a letter to Cuba's National Assembly criticizing that socialist government for its use of the death penalty. Given the long history of U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs, there were many RPA members who were uncomfortable with what looked like a political intervention in its internal affairs. This precipitated a heated debate on the RPA list serv that lasted through the summer months. It was finally resolved by a mail ballot through which we decided that rather than addressing a governmental body, we would initiate a discussion of the death penalty with our philosophical counterparts in Cuba at our June 2000 conference. George Caffentzis's report on that discussion is on the RPA web site.

Coming out of our 1993 "Philosophers Combating Racism" conference in Baltimore (occasioned by the Rodney King beating), an **Anti-Racism Classroom Project** had been established. Rejuvenated in 2000 under the leadership of Kathy Russell, this project shares bibliography, teaching techniques and syllabi at conferences and now on the web.

Seeking to focus philosophic attention on another marginalized group, in 1998 we established a **Disabilities Project** under the leadership of Joan Mason-Grant. With the aim of ending disability discrimination, this project seeks to incorporate disability issues into the work and gatherings of radical philosophers.

Meanwhile, RPA began to expand its internationalist orientation. Responding to the adoption of NAFTA, we conducted our first **Mexico Study Trip**, January 5-15, 1996. Organized by Bob Stone and Cliff DuRand with on-site assistance by Mexico based RPAer Ross Gandy, this served as an introduction to the realities of Mexico and some of the country's leading radical intellectuals. The idea was to establish a U.S.-Mexico philosopher's conference as a companion to our U.S.-Cuban philosopher's conference. Wes Rehberg, who is highly involved with liberation theology activities there, led a second Mexico Study Trip in June 1997.

This opening to our nearest southern neighbor led to the creation of the **Latin American Solidarity Group** at our 2nd National/International Conference, whose theme was "Globalization from Below". Conceived of as a network of RPAers interested in Latin America, it was hoped that LASG would help germinate solidarity activities with those struggling for social justice. By 1998 Fred Evans came forward with a proposal for a **Mexican Labor Organizer Project**. RPA solicited donations to help support a FAT (Frente Autentico del Trabajo) organizer, strengthening independent worker organization in Mexico. To date it has contributed \$2500 to this end, partnering with UE.

At the same time Patricia Huntington and Martin Matustik launched the **Chiapas Solidarity Project** in support of indigenous communities in the Zapatista rebellion. This project has raised \$17,246 to help build a health clinic and provide it with over \$100,000 of medical supplies in La Realidad, which RPA adopted as a sister community.

In 1998 Fred and Patricia were elected as co-chairs of LASG. Under their leadership, Mexican philosophers and independent labor leaders have been invited to speak at our national conferences ever since. Under the title "North-South Dialogue", a series of joint conferences with Mexican philosophers and social scientists has taken place in Mexico in 1997, 1999 and 2001.

With the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, RPA began to move in an additional direction: opposing U.S. military intervention abroad. A group of RPAers in New York began to speak out publicly about U.S. militarism. They eventually published a pamphlet titled "Against NATO's War in Yugoslavia" in March 2000. Expecting that more such interventions were likely in the post Cold War period, RPA established an **Anti-Intervention Project** at its national conference that fell under the leadership of Betsy Bowman. Witnessing the growing U.S. involvement in Colombia under the guise of combating the drug trade, Richard Schmitt researched and wrote another pamphlet "Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace? Plan for War?" in the spring of 2001. Then a year later he came out with another pamphlet on Afghanistan designed to provide basic information and perspective on the U.S.'s latest intervention. These and other documents about the cultural basis for public acceptance of intervention have been made available on the AIP page of the RPA web site. Now with the Bush

administration's War on Terrorism and its strategic doctrine of pre-emption, AIP has added 911 documents to the web page and is gearing up to oppose expanded U.S. interventionism.

Our international perspective even gained a poetic voice when in 1999 RPA took on Bob Randolph as our **House Poet**. Hailing from the social protest culture of Berkeley, California, Bob's provocative poems have graced our last two National Conferences, several of our Cuba Conferences, as well as the pages of the Newsletter.

RPA had held **national conferences** every two years since our first one in 1994. In 1996 we met at Purdue University, focusing on the theme "Globalization from Below". Our 3rd International Conference was in 1998 at San Francisco State University on the theme "Radical Philosophy for the 21st Century: Towards Formations of New Political Cultures and Directions". In 2000 we met at Loyola University in Chicago for our 4th conference on "Radical Philosophy and Politics: To Begin a New Millennium". Now we gather at Brown University for our 5th conference on "Activism, Ideology and Radical Philosophy".

Since our first national conference, it had been our desire to publish the proceedings of our meetings. Bob Stone did issue a photocopied volume of proceedings of the 1994 papers and the 70 copies of the first printing quickly sold out. A commercial publisher was found for subsequent volumes and in 2000 Prometheus Books published Proceedings from the 2nd conference titled Race, Class and Community, edited by Andrew Light and Mecke Nagel. In 2001 volume 2 of the Proceedings The Problems of Resistance: Studies in Alternative Political Cultures was published under the editorship of Steve Martinot and Joy James. Bat-Ami Bar On and Greg Moses are editing a 3rd volume from the 2000 conference. The **Proceedings series** is under the editorship of Bat-Ami Bar On and Andrew Light.

With the 1997 retirement of Joe Walsh as editor of Radical Philosophy Review of Books, a new editorial group came in to replace him. Under the leadership of Lewis Gordon and Andrew Light, our journal was reinvented as **Radical Philosophy Review**. Since 1995 Bob Stone had been looking for a commercial publisher to take up our journal. This finally bore fruit in 1998 with the issue by Humanities Press of RPR as a forum to "hash out and develop ideas and conflicts on the left today." After encountering the shifting sands of the publishing world, RPR is now poised to resume publication with a new publisher.

Since its 1st national conference in 1994, RPA has grown and greatly diversified its activities. At the 1996 conference at Purdue University we finally adopted a constitution (only to rewrite it in our 2000 conference). Bob Stone retired as Coordinator and Richard Schmitt took his place. At the 1998 conference Cliff DuRand retired as Secretary-Treasurer after 16 years of service. His job was divided in two with Harry van der Linden becoming Treasurer and Joanna Crosby becoming Secretary (to be replaced two years later by Greg Moses). Now in 2002 Richard Schmitt steps down as Coordinator to be replaced by Anatole Anton and Mecke Nagel as Co-Coordinators.

At age 20 RPA continues to transfer leadership of the organization from the founding generation to a younger one. We've diversified our activities considerably. We've grown in size with a mailing list of 1650 (though probably only 250 of those pay dues in any given year).

We've come a long way in the last two decades. So has the world. We now face new and more serious challenges. May we learn from our past as we seek to shape the future, carrying on that tradition of activism and ideology that has been the hallmark of radical philosophy.

What is radical philosophy?

"The uncompromising critical evaluation of all that exists." --Karl Marx