

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED ON THE LOPATE SHOW:

Letter from a Friend

Ira Bloomgarden is a born and bred New Yorker, though it's true he spent a few early-childhood years, back in the 1940s, in San Francisco. But his growing up on Manhattan's upper west side during the decade after that, attending high school at Bronx Science, going on to Columbia College (where, as it happens, he knew Philip Lopate, Leonard's brother), and, after that, taking his Ph.D. in English literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York—all this, and far more as well, makes it true that the fiber of the city is woven through the very being of the man. The city's politics and history, its literary and political trends, the sheer intellectual energies of the place—you'll be made conscious of all of them if you know Ira well or if you converse with him for long. I met him in 1971 and have been his colleague and friend ever since. He was good enough to write the following. In it, you'll find the customary penetration of Bloomgarden's mind along with its quickness of wit, breadth of interest, depth of memory—and occasional, almost pensive touch of melancholy.

July 16, 2006

Sorry this is so late—we are getting ready for the NW trip and have a lot of goodbyes.

I listened to the Lopate show twice, the second time with notebook in hand, and here are some of my thoughts.

I think it went about as well as can be expected. Lopate is so much like his brother, bright and well read, but also artful in feinting and dodging to hew to a line. Often you were eloquent, and LL did give you the opportunity to get into a lecturing rhythm where your lucidity shone.

I wish you had been able to read a bit from ANGB, so the listener could sample the Larsen style. All we got was the grade sheet, enough to put some terror into LL's audience, who, I suspect, never quite did as well in school as they think they did. (Moi: B-minus in Eng Comp, mostly B's in French, usw).

You neatly avoided the Marxist trap early on—LL's intent was to make you irrelevant by painting you a neo-Con, but alas his ilk only know one Bloom, and not yours. A whiff of naiveté here apud Larsen. Note also the subtle class derision of his point about John Jay's lack of a major—good riposte. Cop-hating used to be the anti-Semitism of the Intellectual; now anti-Semitism is the anti-Semitism of the intellectual!

You did get a bit trapped by the old “A question of Taste” re. Joyce, but the “agenda writing” response set at least some ground rules.

You might have taken him up on the idea that victimization studies have brought about desirable change in the Race, Class, Ethnicity public problems. Surely you are right that progress there doesn't balance the death of the individual self, but in fact I'm not sure that

progress has anything to do with Academic departments of suffering, save to employ some unemployables.

By the end of the second break, in spite of your plea, “let’s talk about my book,” you still haven’t read from it, nor do you in the third part, where, bereft of a textual anchor, the enterprise tends to lose bearings.

Note again how he brands you with the Neocon label—Stossel—whose free market politics are much closer to mine than to yours. I respect LL giving you the floor for the recapitulation of the critical point on Sophocles (“About suffering they were never wrong, the old masters”. . . ah). Curmudgeon that I am, I suspect most of the audience (though certainly not your friends) understood you as well as I understand a technical analysis of a football play, though I like to think I do.

Section three picks up a promising wind in LL’s suggesting your political stance is “confused.” It is exactly here that you fall into the grandest tradition of the 20th century: Orwell, Camus, Trilling, Aron, but the tyranny of the clock precludes any serious progress.

So, cut and run indeed, but as noted above, without any anchor cable to cut.

You certainly succeeded in avoiding the labels LL was ready to paste on you—I share your frustration that you couldn’t concentrate more on what you are rather than what you aren’t.

Honorably and well fought—kudos.

Some trivia:

Are you and I the only ones who remember *Insolent Chariots*? I still remember poor Tom Wretch driving his failing Detroit Iron into bankruptcy instead of following the path of wisdom in a Beetle. Tom, though, might have driven past an upside down Beetle, its treacherous swing axle rear suspension having killed its oh so clever owner. You laughed at tailfins—at Bronx Science some poor GM representative who addressed General Assembly was booed off the stage by our prescient, idealistic engineers in training!

My Dad did some work with Vance Packard—it’s a long story. Packard went from serious analysis to broad strokes of generalized anger and so dropped out of public debate.

Finally when the Senate debated Affirmative Action, Hubert H. Humphrey was heard to say, “If Affirmative Action means quotas, I’ll eat my hat.”

Talk to you,
Ira