

WILLIAM W. RASCH

William Rasch served thrice as Germanic studies chair and once as founding chair of the Department of International Studies, so perhaps it's natural that his colleagues associate him with Sinatra, "the chairman of the board" himself, on whose sets he'd eavesdropped in the '60s as a kid in Miami, stationed outside the exit at the Hotel Fontainebleau. Not the dubious man, but the voice of the Songbook, the impeccably-timed swagger, inspired Bill as he journeyed from Miami urchin to pugilistic modernist working at the legendary 8th Street Bookshop in New York City, and eventually found his calling with a Ph.D. in German, which he earned on the coast kitty-corner to Miami's at the University of Washington, studying romanticism with Ernst Behler and 18th-century pedagogy with Jeffrey Peck. Romanticism and the Enlightenment are wide fields, to be sure, but the breadth of Bill's erudition doesn't get at what stands out most in his scholarly profile: his incisiveness, the sharp turn of phrase, the wryness that can't but also mock the vanity of the life of the mind. A conversation with Bill takes off for Bombay with Sinatra and winds up in Mandalay with Lotte Lenya (or is it Marianne Faithfull?) cursing Surabaya Johnny for his seductive lies. That's the kind of stiff romantic enlightenment of which Bill, in addition to his erudition, remains a master.

To hear it from Bill's many loyal *doktorkinder* (dissertators) in German departments across the country, he poured a rich burgundy of theory in the graduate seminars he's taught since arriving at IU in 1990. The wider field of Germanic Studies confirms how his influential readings of the social theorist Niklas Luhmann and the political theorist Carl Schmitt burst the comfortable bubbles of moral righteousness that frothed the glass of German theorizing after the 1960s. His ability to capture a realistic stringency in the German social-critical tradition has transformed our field. Though Bill's thinking eventually moved away from the beatniks and modernists of the 8th Street Bookshop to the heady theorists of Berlin and Bielefeld, he never lost his sense of streetwise irony, of transcendental homelessness (cf. Lukács and Dylan), and of how no one answers the sad-eyed prophets, the Cassandras, out of sympathy with neoliberalism's imperial pretensions.



Bill's career demonstrates an abiding interest in intellectual history, especially the trajectories of the Enlightenment, starting from its own misrecognitions in the late 18th century. Along with his many articles and edited volumes, Bill's books—*Carl Schmitt: State and Society* (2019); *Sovereignty and Its Discontents: On the Primacy of Conflict and the Structure of the Political* (2004); and *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (2000)—point to his interest in thinking about large structures such as states or universities, especially as they came into focus in the Enlightenment as institutions seemingly adhering to laws we could understand and enact in order to establish harmony between nature and reason. But as his titles make clear, Bill was unpersuaded by arguments about harmony and law; in his work we learn, rather, about conflict, paradox, contingency, and discontent. Bill didn't see the world modernity had wrought through rose-colored glasses. It is a tragic world, filled with air wars, emergency powers, pacification instead of peace, unintended consequences, and warily supervised public life. To see these aspects of our world didn't mean to affirm them; Bill simply acknowledged them as part of society, as something for which we—liberals, moderns, colleagues, students—can take responsibility or continue to pay the costs. As a scholar and chair, Bill chose to recognize conflict, not embolden it. Quite the contrary. As colleague Michel

Chaouli has noted, the one model that got to Bill, that brought emotion to the cool demeanor of the "chairman," was the perfectly ordinary "chair," who quietly put institution above interest. That model "filled Bill with overwhelming respect," to which he responded in kind: "He honored the rules of the game even when they did not favor him, and he always placed the good of the institution above his own interest." In a factious world, keen on its interests, convinced of the purity of each private intention, Bill never hesitated, when a conflict arose, to take the hit himself, to have someone else's back, to encourage whoever was down, to inspire us whenever departmental life threatened to run thin. This we tended to take for granted; the right thing happened quickly, without chance to quibble before his characteristic sign-off: "I leave it at that."

But it wouldn't hit the right note to leave it at that, at Bill Rasch, moralist *malgré lui*. Something there misses the mark. As much as we counted on Bill for his sure-handed sense of the right thing to do, it does him no favor to ignore his handy spite for moralists, to misread that subtle sneer (at himself?) as nothing more than posture. Yes, we relied on his fairness, but the Bill we encountered day-to-day wasn't a moralist. As much as he regretted not teaching more often the literature he loved (and songs he cited), what Bill never relinquished, what you sensed whenever you exchanged ideas or crossed paths or heard his response in a colloquium, was the lesson he learned at the Fontainebleau or on 8th Street: the right measure, the bit of syncopation, the beat of irony that dashes sentimentality before clarity turns to mush. That's the indispensable Bill, the one who, alongside his dutifulness, abided by his conviction in the crisp discernment of taste.

Benjamin Robinson