

Claudia Franziska Brühwiler

Political Awakenings

Political Initiation in The Plot Against America

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Political Awakenings

Political Initiation in *The Plot Against America*

Politics is the great generalizer,... and literature the great particularizer, and not only are they in an inverse relationship to each other—they are in an antagonistic relationship. (I Married A Communist, 223)

- 1 Thus does Leo Glucksmann scold his young mentee Nathan Zuckerman in *I Married A Communist*, when the latter clings to the ideas of his fatherly companion, Ira Ringold. Literature and art in general cannot serve as political mouthpieces without imperilling their inner quality, Glucksmann maintains—which might hence mirror the opinion of his creator. Although Philip Roth himself made his contempt for the Nixon administration not only known in interviews, but also cast it into the satiric closet drama *Our Gang*, he does not deem political satire to have any factual effect. Consequently, he maintained that « repeating... ‘It can happen here,’ does little to prevent ‘it’ from happening » (*Reading Myself and Others*, 207)¹. With regard to the many critics interpreting *The Plot Against America* as Roth’s warning and comment on the current state of affairs, the author himself stated in a recent interview with the *New Yorker* that the novel was « neither an allegory nor a metaphor nor a didactic tract ; *The Plot* is about what it is about, which isn’t now but then ». He also affirmed this position with regard to his most recent novel, *Exit Ghost*, stating unambiguously that he was « not out to make fiction into a political statement. Rather, I’m out to do what fiction and only fiction does : to portray in a sustained narrative those who did make political statements »².
- 2 If not as an allegory on the government of George W. Bush, Jr., or as a post-9/11 tale, of what interest is *The Plot Against America* then to a political scientist? Of none, many would answer, at least none if one does not read it as a work of art, but through the lens of political science, for, as Somerset Maugham explains,

[...] only the very ingenuous can suppose that a work of fiction can give us reliable information on topics which it is important to us for the conduct of our lives to be apprised of. ... If readers are concerned with the pressing problems of the day, they will do well to read, as Chekhov advised them to do, not novels or short stories, but the works that specifically deal with them.³

- 3 One might allege this is confirmed in the case of novels with a political scenario, as Vacha termed plots carrying the question « what would happen if ...? » further⁴, given that these take a path beyond historical reality : how can twists and turns devoid of any factuality interest political scientists who, if not contemplating the ideal state and other utopias, are bound to empirics? How can it serve as proof?

Through the Lens of Political Science

- 4 Fiction can, up to a certain point, serve as a source of social data, transmit common values, testify to globally held convictions, and, quite generally, represent the *Zeitgeist*⁵—and encourage a scholar from an alien field to focus on aspects literary criticism considers insignificant. Worse, a social scientist will probably tend to analyze a text only fragmentarily—i.e. that social scientist will take a splinter of a work and neglect the whole. But while this approach may appear questionable to a literary scholar, the abstraction and segmentation of single aspects constitutes the core of the social scientist’s methodology. It is thus with a good conscience that we can—partly—disregard Brauner’s observation that politics is « peripheral » to the novel⁶.
- 5 Even if *The Plot Against America* may not be interesting as a political instrument and Roth is not working as a political historian, these are, according to Blotner, only two of five possible fields of interest for the political scientist⁷ : one could see in the novel a representation of the national character, since it depicts—though in an exaggerated manner—fascist tendencies that were indeed present in U.S. society and politics on the eve of World War II, but neglected due to the nation’s trust in the unshakability of its democratic fundamentals.

Moreover, the novel traces collective political behaviour by describing how the American masses moved at charismatic Lindbergh's merest wink and easily disposed of their cherished democratic ideals. Pursuing these topics further, the political scientist could indeed be blamed for concentrating on minor aspects. But, to stay within the range of Blotner's categories, in a fifth approach, political science and literary criticism might agree on priorities : by delving into the « intersection between the dramas of domestic life and national politics »⁸ and considering how this intermingling influences individual political behaviour—or, to put it more clearly, by focusing on the awakening of Philip's and Sanford's political consciousness.

6 In the course of the narrative, we witness the two youngest members of the fictional Roth family

experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or [themselves], or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead [them] towards an adult world. It may or may not contain some form of ritual, but it should give some evidence that the change is at least likely to have permanent effects⁹.

7 In other words, we are participating in their (tentative) initiation to the political realities and treacheries—or, to use the parlance of political science, we are viewing a stage in their political socialization, i.e. a moment in the process through which both of them acquire the attitudes, norms and values considered important by the group and society they belong to¹⁰. By following the changing attitudes of the two characters, their reactions to external events and how they struggle with their doubts, the « great generalizer » politics will learn from the « great particularizer » what its concepts and theories mean if put to, albeit fictitious, life.

8 Admittedly, testing fiction for its credibility is not particularly original, but with regard to theoretical assumptions a nonetheless thought-provoking venture. And looking at Philip's (II.) and Sanford's (III.) political awakening may cause theorists in political socialization to rejoice : we see how the family steers a child through the paths its thoughts may take and, accordingly, how the parents have the most considerable impact on their child's future political opinions¹¹. Children— and in the present case also their literary representations—get an idea of the political landscape even before they enter elementary school¹². Just as seven-year-old Philip's knowledge of « the country's foremost philatelist, President Roosevelt » (*The Plot Against America*, 1) conveys, American schoolchildren recognize from an early age iconic political figures like the president¹³.

9 As Easton and Hess poignantly put it,

each new generation emerges upon the political scene as a *tabula rasa*, politically speaking, upon which a political system must seek to imprint its image¹⁴.

10 This hardly ever happens by means of logical arguments or a deliberative process ; instead, it is achieved by the transmission of certain, however irrational, positive feelings experienced by those already socialized by the system. And, ultimately, by indoctrination : in theories on education, one speaks of indoctrination in cases of non-evidential teaching, misuse of evidence, perversion of the teacher-pupil relationship, or if intellectual virtues are left out¹⁵. The most basic learning processes may fall within that range, since children often learn to imitate irrational behaviour or to adapt beliefs and convictions. As a consequence, many initiation patterns would naturally be forms of indoctrination : traditional initiation rites are coercive and are forced upon the initiate.

11 In the following, however, we have to distinguish between the natural imitating behaviour Philip displays (II.) and the indoctrination exercised from above, through agents of the State, as is the case in the luring of Sanford (III.)

Philip : Childhood Lost

12 Young Philip has no doubts about his national, social identity : an American—that's what he is and what he will remain. The elderly man collecting funds for a Jewish « homeland » causes indignation ; after all, solely one home is possible and this home has already been found. The cleavage between the America inhabited by his family and the « goyshe » reality is hardly ever forced upon Philip's consciousness, and if so, uniquely in instances when he gets to feel his

parents' doubts and fears, when « his bulwarks against the world »¹⁶ slightly crack. Still, his heroes are Americans like himself, all neatly tucked away in his cherished stamp collection, which allows the boy to trace the history of his country—and the eventual turn of its fate. One of the stamps celebrates Charles Lindbergh, the man who is to dethrone the stamp collector Roosevelt,

Lindbergh was the first famous living American whom I learned to hate—just as President Roosevelt was the first famous living American whom I was taught to love—and so his nomination by the Republicans to run against Roosevelt in 1940 assaulted, as nothing ever had before, that huge endowment of personal security that I had taken for granted as an American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world. (*The Plot Against America*, 7)

13 But, like his hatred of Lindbergh, his love for Roosevelt is not feelings developed in his own heart, but rather the result of his father's endless lecturing in relation to the presidential elections. However, even though Philip's political world remains in his family's orbit, he resists dismissing his past starry-eyed view of the aviator too easily and keeps treasuring Lindbergh in his stamp collection.

14 Yet with his father's challenging Lindbergh's legitimacy, Philip likewise learns to question authority and no longer accept what comes from above as truth—even if, as the keeping of the iconic stamps shows, this authority is represented by his father. Faced with an increasingly virulent anti-Semitism, the latter cannot shield his family from the political changes and can no longer guarantee their security : neither can he defend himself and his family against the humiliating dismissal from a hotel in Washington, D.C., nor can he prevent his youngest son from finally seeing himself as a Jew and learning what being Jewish in a fascist country means. In short, he can no longer guarantee « that huge endowment of personal security » and has to see how Philip is bilked out of his childhood : Philip has « never before had to grow up at a pace like this » (172).

15 Given the growing fragility of « his bulwarks » and the weakening of his designated protector, Philip increasingly questions his father's views and turns to his peers' and relatives' opinions. After all, how could his father be right if everyone around him believes the contrary?

Since what Uncle Monty said to him about Lindbergh was exactly what Rabbi Bengelsdorf had told him—and also what Sandy was secretly saying to me—I began to wonder if my father knew what he was talking about. (*The Plot Against America*, 125)

16 But due to the growing hostility of his environment and his cousin's wartime experience, Philip remains entrenched in the political world of his parents, all the more so since he discovers his « otherness », or, as Coetzee expressed it, since from a Jewish American he is turned into an American Jew—or « just a Jew in America »¹⁷. He finally loses his illusions about « his » America together with his treasured collection of stamps, of images of a lost America and unmasked icons.

17 The loss of his stamp collections is not only a painful experience in figurative terms, but quite literally so, since he loses them on his flight to the orphanage during an unfriendly encounter with horses. Pain often marks the climax of an initiation process¹⁸ and such is the case here : Philip's awakening to reality, his sober view on the changes within his family and in his environment, is marked by injury and pain.

18 Yet, in the end, his political world will fail to reach its full maturity and his political initiation will not be complete¹⁹ : as a child, Philip does not reflect on political developments in relation to their effect on society. Instead, he merely sees them from a personal perspective. It is only by contemplating what happens in his familiar circles and relating it to external causes that Philip can reflect on the changing political landscape. In addition, he very much relies on filtering systems, namely his family, who explain to him the information received on the radio. The information is often simply forced on him, since he does not listen to Winchell's radio programs on account of a genuine personal interest, but rather joins a family ritual. He remains an observer whose understanding is at times enlarged, a fact that is also signalled in the rupture between the child's narrative voice and the adult narrator's account : while the events within the family and in the neighbourhood are recorded, with the exception of occasional ironical

comments, from the viewpoint of young Philip, the historical dimension is covered by the adult narrator looking back at a marking period in his childhood. It is to a certain point unclear how much the child at that time truly apprehended and to what extent the adult narrator teaches his past self to interpret episodes and see them as they truly were.

Sanford : An Errant Rebel

19 Between Philip and the world stand not only his parents, but also his elder brother who has « always known everything I [Philip] didn't know » (93) and who becomes Philip's connection to Lindbergh's new America : at the beginning of the portrayed changes, Sanford is twelve years old and has come to a rebellious phase in his development. Out of the corner of his eye, Philip sees his brother's coming of age, the changes in his physical appearance and his subsequent discovery of the opposite sex—but first and foremost his struggle for independence and the beginning of his emancipation from parental custody.

20 The beginnings of Sanford's disengagement are quite innocent and mirrored by his younger brother's behaviour : while the younger brother keeps the stamps honouring Lindbergh, the elder one hides his personal portraits of the aviator and president. As the plot progresses, however, the reader recognizes patterns already known from the coming of age of another Rothian youth : in *I Married A Communist*, Nathan Zuckerman leaves the paternal orbit by attaching himself to the Ringold brothers who

were the one-two punch promising to initiate me into the big show, into my beginning to understand what it takes to be a man on the larger scale. ... Be a good boy wasn't the issue with them. The sole issue was my convictions. ... But once little Tom Paine has been let into the company of men and the father is still educating him as a boy, the father is finished. (*I Married A Communist*, 32)

21 Much in the same manner, Herman Roth tries to maintain his influence on Sanford, but keeps lecturing him just like Philip and does not respect the difference in age and development. Hence it is only natural that the adolescent should turn for guidance to those who (seemingly) take him seriously and do not treat him as a minor, but let him play a role, to quote Philip, let him be « somebody » (184). Thanks to the influence of Aunt Evelyn and Rabbi Bengelsdorf at the Office of American Absorption (OAA), he is not only able to encounter the world of the Midwestern Mawhinney family, whose father is

a Christian, a long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, ... one of those unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it— ... the men who laid down the law and called the shots and read the riot act when they chose to while my [Philip's] father, of course, was only a Jew. (*The Plot Against America*, 93)

22 Sanford is also able to tell the world on behalf of the OAA about his mind-broadening experience among Gentiles, and he even receives an invitation to the White House. Unwittingly, he thus undergoes a rite of initiation into the new America imagined by Lindbergh : following van Gennep's classical tripartite initiation model, according to which an initiate passes the stages of separation, transition and incorporation²⁰, Sanford is at first separated physically from his family and his known surroundings. Thereby, he glides into the system of the OAA which finally tries to incorporate his force.

23 That he could be manipulated, abused for the purpose of political propaganda, is in his eyes only a vile suspicion nourished by paranoid parents that he decries as « Ghetto Jews » (227). All he sees in their precautions are attempts at tying him down and spoiling « his fun », reproaches that are likely to be familiar to most parents of adolescents at the height of puberty. As he calls his father a « dictator worse than Hitler » (193), the portrayal of the rebelling youth constantly struggling against family bonds is rounded off.

24 While his younger brother may believe in his parents' invulnerability for a long time, Sanford went through that phase much earlier and does not think them infallible as a result. Given his insight into the world outside Newark, his daring to taste food normally forbidden to him and his direct involvement with the OAA, he considers his knowledge superior to his father's faith

in radio commentator Walter Winchell's every sentence. His reaction when, in the end, he is forced to accept his parents' foresight, is unfortunately left open due to the focus on Philip. It is, however, permissible to guess that Sanford will experience a crisis, he will get to understand his erring and learn a final lesson in the process of his political initiation. He may have done right in not blindly trusting his father's views, but he will come to understand that this does not relieve him of the duty of putting other beliefs to the test.

Conclusion

A father remodelled, a brother restored, a mother recovered, eighteen black silk sutures stitched in my head and my greatest treasure irretrievably lost, and all with a wondrous fairy-tale swiftness. (*The Plot Against America*, 239)

- 25 A first encounter with evil, the recognition of the limits of parental protection, maturation, and a gain in knowledge²¹—Philip goes through all the elements or stages of an initiation story. We witness his transformation from a carefree young boy into a frightened child, tied down by the fear of those close to him. Following the evolution of his political consciousness as if it were a casebook model, we find that he slowly learns to question his parents' views and to distrust those in charge. But due to the stage he has reached in his overall development, he is, unlike his elder brother, not yet ready for open rebellion. While the latter hesitates at first to mark his opposition and prefers to hide his devotional portraits, he increasingly stands up for his views, however misguided, and becomes an alien, at times even hostile, element in the Roth family.
- 26 Facing the development of these two literary figures, the political scientist can no longer hide behind aggregate anonymous data, but has to confront possible inconsistencies in the theoretical framework—and he or she has to learn what science cannot teach : how the individual struggles with the reality around him, how he or she perceives events, and how he or she often tries to escape facts. Admittedly, we are here only entering imagined worlds, but in the case at hand these obey the rules of « the realistic », and may bear the potential to nourish new theses.
- 27 In this case, the development of the two characters may conform to theoretical expectations, but how the loss of convictions and security shatters Philip's world, what feelings indoctrination truly instils in an adolescent, are « facts » lost to factual science.

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Notes

- 1 Also cit. in a similar context by David Brauner, *Philip Roth* (Manchester and New York : Manchester University Press, 2007), 192.
- 2 « Age Makes A Difference », *The New Yorker* online 1 Oct. 2007.
- 3 Cit. in Rowland Egger, « The Administrative Novel », *The American Political Science Review* 53 : 2, 448.
- 4 J.E. Vacha, « It Could Happen Here : The Rise of the Political Scenario Novel », *American Quarterly* 29 : 2, 200.
- 5 James F. Davidson, « Political Science and Political Fiction », *The American Political Science Review* 55 : 4, 856. See also Lewis Coser, « Literature, though it may also be many other things, is social evidence and testimony. It is a continuous commentary on manners and morals. Its great monuments, even as they address themselves to the external existential problems which are at the root of the perennial tensions between men and their society, preserve for us the precious record of modes of response to peculiar social and cultural conditions », cited in Thomas R. McDaniel, « The Search for the 'Administrative Novel' », *Public Administration Review* 38 : 6, 545).
- 6 Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 192.
- 7 Joseph Leo Blotner, *The Political Novel* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955) 10 et seq.
- 8 Brauner, *Philip Roth*, 192.
- 9 Mordecai Marcus, "What Is An Initiation Story?" (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 19 no. 2) 222.
- 10 R.W. Connell, « Why the 'Political Socialization' Paradigm Failed and What Should Replace It », *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique* 8 : 3, 215.
- 11 See R.W. Connell, « Political Socialization in the American Family : The Evidence Re-Examined », *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 : 3 ; Eleanor E. Maccoboy, Richard E. Matthews and Anton S. Morton, « Youth and Political Change », *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 18 : 1 ; for a more recent article, see Boris Wernli, « La transmission intergénérationnelle de l'orientation idéologique en Suisse dans les familles à plusieurs generations », *Swiss Political Science Review* 13 : 2.
- 12 David Easton and Robert Hess, « The Child's Political World », *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 6 : 3, 235.
- 13 Roberta S. Sigel, « Image of a President : Some Insights into the Political Views of School Children », *The American Political Science Review* 62 : 1.

- 14 Easton & Hess, « The Child's Political World », 232.
- 15 Elmer John Thiessen, « Initiation, Indoctrination, and Education », *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 10 : 3, 234 et seq.
- 16 Alan Cooper, « It Can Happen Here, or All in the Family Values : Surviving *The Plot Against America* », Derek Parker Royal, ed., *Philip Roth : New Perspectives on an American Author* (Westport, Connecticut and London : Praeger Publishers, 2005), 243.
- 17 J.M. Coetzee, « What Philip Knew », 6.
- 18 Alan Morinis, « The Ritual Experience : Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation », *Ethos* 13 : 2, 151 & 171.
- 19 This stands in contrast to his social maturing : he will in the end not remain the one to be cared for, but will instead have to care for someone else—the orphaned Seldon.
- 20 Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone : Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles ; London : University of California Press, 2000), 104.
- 21 Arno Heller, *Odyssee zum Selbst : Zur Gestaltung jugendlicher Identitätssuche im neueren amerikanischen Roman* (Innsbruck : Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, 1973), 26.

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Résumés

Le Complot contre l'Amérique de Philip Roth décrit l'initiation politique de ses deux protagonistes, le narrateur Philip et son frère aîné, Sanford. Tandis que ce dernier passe par un processus initiatique quasi classique — il se déroule conformément au schéma tripartite de van Gennep — l'apogée de l'initiation de Philip est marquée par douleur et blessure. Toutefois, tous les deux connaissent seulement une initiation partielle, car le premier doit d'abord admettre ses erreurs tandis que le second va devoir apprendre, non seulement à remettre en cause l'autorité, mais également à développer ses idées de façon indépendante.

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* traces the political awakening of its two child protagonists, the narrator Philip and his elder brother Sanford. While the latter undergoes an initiation process nearly in accordance with the classical tripartite scheme as coined by van Gennep, the height of Philip's initiation process is marked by physical pain and injury. However, both experience only a partial initiation, since the elder brother will have to recognize his errors and the younger one will first have to learn how to go beyond the mere questioning of authority.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Philip Roth, fiction politique, socialisation politique, initiation, adolescence
Keywords : political fiction, political socialization, coming of age, political scenario novel.