



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Howard Bloch Sees Human Choices in Medieval History

The Yale professor of French and Humanities shares how cathedral fires “of suspicious origin” played a role in the transition from Romanesque to Gothic-style architecture in Europe. Plus, how his scholarship challenges existing narratives on everything from historical relics to literary movements.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at HKelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018 we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Lawrence: Today I'm delighted to welcome R. Howard Bloch, Sterling Professor of French and Professor of Humanities at Yale University. A graduate of Amherst College and Stanford University, Professor Bloch has taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, University of California at Berkeley, and Columbia University. He has published numerous books and articles on medieval and modern French literature, history, and visual culture, and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. Welcome, Professor.

Howard Bloch: Thank you so much for having me, it's just a pleasure to be here with you today.

Lawrence: Your work covers a wide range: literature, culture, history, including economic and architectural history, medieval and contemporary, so we've got a lot to cover, but

before we jump into that, let's talk about your journey a little bit. Tell us a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, and how does it lead to a fascination in French language and French culture?

Bloch: Well, that's an interesting question. I actually grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, and I think my interest in literature came from the oral tradition which still exists in the south of telling stories on hot nights on the screened porch. And so I would listen to my grandfather and my grandmother tell stories. Later in life I discovered that my grandmother on my father's side, who was from New York, had herself an interest in French literature, which I never knew about, but after her death I was sent a number of her books, which were actually in French.

Lawrence: Did you go to Amherst to study French, or not necessarily?

Bloch: No, no, no, actually I went under a three year engineering program, and while at Amherst one was forced in those days, and there are only a few programs like it today, one was forced to take, it was actually a year and a half of required subjects. You got one elective out of six courses, and I took French, but I also took the physics and the math and the history and the English that we all had to take, and I just became so enamored of the French that I eventually gave up the engineering ambitions and decided that I would... I was interested in how things work, whether it's a work of literature, a painting, a piece of music, I still have an engineer's eye to how a piece is made and the effects of a great work of art on us, so I would say that the engineering part is there, but there are no bridges connected to it.

Lawrence: Well, whether it's the construction of a poem or a novel or of a cathedral, it's still the eye of an engineer that's looking at how things work.

Bloch: Right, exactly.

Lawrence: Well, let's talk about some of those projects, because your lectures that you're giving as a Visiting Scholar cover quite a range of topics including, well let me start with the Gothic cathedrals and state building in the high Middle Ages, where you compare the construction of several well known Gothic cathedrals - Notre Dame, Saint-Denis, Chartres, Sainte-Chapelle - with the consolidation of the French monarchy in the 12th and 13th century. So tell us a little bit about the parallel stories. This seems to be the place that the literary scholar and the historian and the engineer all come together. How are these stories related? Where are the places where they meet?

Bloch: Well, the places where they meet are cities. The architecture before the Gothic cathedrals was Romanesque, and it was mostly in rural areas, along the pilgrimage routes between Northern Europe and St. James of Compostela in Spain, but Gothic cathedrals are really city phenomena, and they're great economic engines for the rebirth of cities in the 12th and 13th centuries. The builder of the first cathedral, a man by the name of Abbott Suger, he went to school with King Louis VI, he was an advisor to the king, and also to his successor, Louis VII. He is sometimes considered the father of the French state because he advised the kings on how to consolidate their power after

this long period where statehood, or what we think of as sovereignty, is treated to local feudal lords.

Bloch: So we have a great combination of money and cathedrals right from the start. Cathedrals brought people to town to build them, they were a great link between the city and the countryside, stone was brought from local quarries, sometimes they weren't even so local, some of the stone at Chartres came all the way from quarries near Paris, floated down rivers and brought by carts to Chartres. So you had the quarrying industry, the carting industry, the building industry, teams of masons, glass makers, metal workers, woodworkers, all teaming up together to drive the building of cathedrals, and the more the cathedrals were a presence in a town, the more attractive the town was.

Bloch: It's a little bit like Microsoft moving into Seattle, or the great computer companies into San Francisco, but these cathedrals were great energies of economic recovery, and with economic recovery came statebuilding that we associate with what's called usually the Renaissance of the 12th century. When Paris became the capital of France under Saint Louis, right next to the Sainte-Chapelle, where he kept his records, he held his court and maintained his counsels, which advised him on how to administer an increasingly large, and what we think of as, state-formed monarchy.

Lawrence: For the monarchy to have not only the power, but the legitimacy, it's obviously not coming from an electorate, as we think of in the contemporary sense, so it's got to come from someplace, and it's coming from God, it's a divine right of kings, so I would think that having the chapel next door was a message that was lost on no one in terms of where the king got his authority from.

Bloch: But it wasn't only the chapel next door, it was the fact that Louis decided he would acquire as many important relics as he could, and it was those relics that allowed him to gain the authority that he had. In 1237 his cousin Baldwin, who was the Latin emperor of Byzantium, offered to sell Louis the crown of thorns for a huge amount of money, represented about half the budget of the state of that year, and after some negotiations Louis brought the crown of thorns to Paris with a huge ceremony, and the Sainte-Chapelle, which is a giant reliquary for the crown of thorns, was built to house it. Then Baldwin ran out of more money in his wars to try and maintain control of Constantinople, he was known as Baldwin the Broke, so he decided to sell a number of other important relics, the sponge with which vinegar was given to Christ, a piece of Christ's tunic, of course pieces of the holy cross, and one Relic from the Old Testament, which was the rod with which Moses struck the rock.

Lawrence: To make the water come forth.

Bloch: To make the water come forth in the desert, and Louis saw himself as another Moses, he was known as a law giver and as a peacekeeper, and this gave him a tremendous aura of power which allowed him to collect the men and the money to embark on the disastrous seventh crusade, in which he spent six years abroad accomplishing very little, but it did allow him to consolidate power at home.

Lawrence: Let's talk about Chartres Cathedral a little bit, which I've always thought of as a museum of Gothic architecture, it took so long to build, but you've got different phases of Gothic architecture all exhibited there.

Bloch: Absolutely.

Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about that whole process that turns into this extraordinary work of non-consistent architecture, which is what makes it so spectacular.

Bloch: Right. Well, cathedrals in the Middle Ages were never really built, they were always rebuilt on the remains of a previous cathedral, and what we find in the 12th century is very interesting, which is that in the early part of the century, cathedrals were built in the Romanesque style, but everybody suddenly, after Saint-Denis and Notre Dame, wanted a cathedral in the new Gothic style. And there were an extraordinary number of fires in cathedrals that were, let's just say are of suspicious origin in the second half of the 12th century, including one in Chartres in 1194 in which the cathedral burned, the whole town burned, we have some descriptions of it which make it sound exactly like the Notre Dame fire of 2019 in which the lead on the roofs melt and come down all over the city and in the cathedral itself, and some of the relics were saved, and the new cathedral was begun very shortly afterwards.

Bloch: These cathedral fires are very interesting, and here comes the engineer in me, because they've managed to, in a number of the fires ... there was another one at Amiens, they managed to take wood from the original roof, and through dendrochronological analysis of the rings, they can tell when these trees were felled. And the reason that the fires look suspicious is that trees were cut down in order to build a new cathedral within such a short timeframe of the fire, and sometimes even before, that they look even more suspicious.

Bloch: But Chartres, they were able to rescue the west facade, which is from the previous cathedral, and then they just built from there. Actually it's one of the best preserved of all the cathedrals because it's a little distant from Paris, and the revolutionaries who destroyed cathedrals in the aftermath of the French Revolution were less harsh at Chartres than they were elsewhere. So we have this amazing collection of that blue glass when you enter the cathedral that makes you believe the cathedral effect of making you believe that you're already part way in paradise, works there almost better than anywhere else.

Lawrence: Let's talk a little bit about that terrible fire at Notre Dame.

Bloch: Sure.

Lawrence: But putting it in the context that you just said of the medieval cathedrals, where the fire, it almost reminds me of the stories about what they call mountain lightning, when a hotel that was not doing very well, they would somehow miraculously be burned and they get insurance money, this is not for insurance money, this is to rebuild the cathedral in a different style. We just assume we would not do that with Notre Dame,

we just assume we'd try to put Notre Dame back more or less to the extent we can to what it was before the fire. Is that right? Or should we be doing something different?

Bloch: Well, that account I don't think is right in the sense that right afterwards there were all kinds of proposals to make Notre Dame with a completely glass roof, to use all the new building materials that the French had developed to make it an ecologically supportive area with a garden for endangered insects and animals on top. So there were numerous, to make a stained glass roof up on top, there was one design that looked a little like Captain Video's spaceship, if you remember that old show.

Lawrence: Yep, yep, yep.

Bloch: And to shoot a beam to the heavens. There must have been a dozen proposals. I was quite frankly surprised, given the recent history of French buildings, which like to show their technical acumen, if you look at something like the Beaubourg in the eighties, or the pyramid at the Louvre, or the Defense Arche, I frankly thought the French would be reluctant to spend a billion euros and have it look just like it did the night before the fire, but that is what they decided to do.

Lawrence: So what's your theory? Why is that, and why did that not happen in the Middle Ages? After those fires they weren't going to put up another Romanesque cathedral, nor did anybody really think that they would.

Bloch: The Middle Ages, it was a question of style. Everybody wanted a Gothic cathedral the way that many colleges at a certain point needed Gothic or neo-Gothic buildings.

Lawrence: Right.

Bloch: It really was just a style, and that style was associated with the modern, the new. And this time around I actually think it was probably a question of time. They needed to finish by 2024, and they saw from the start it was going to take two years to clean up the lead, so that only gave them three years, and that's not much time. So they hired a general, General Georgelin, who was a really can-do guy, and all of a sudden they started discovering all the kinds of things in the cathedral that were interesting, archeological things underneath the ground, and the archeologists wanted to delay it, and the architects wanted to discuss different designs. And at a certain moment the General just said, "I command we stop all such discussions, we're going to build it and finish it by 2024 and the Summer Olympics in Paris." So they decided simply to go with the old spire from the 19th century and to rebuild it as it was.

Lawrence: So let me take you from the soaring verticality of cathedrals down to tapestries, and your work on the Bayeux Tapestry, which, as many of our listeners probably know, is this 70 meter long, which is about three quarters of an American football field, tapestry telling of the Norman conquest in 1066, that miraculously survived numerous narrow escapes, up to and near our own time, the Second World War and the Nazi occupation.

Bloch: Right.

- Lawrence: So tell us a little bit about the Bayeux Tapestry, for those who've not had the opportunity to see this extraordinary work.
- Bloch: My interest in it came from my mother, who was a textile engineer by training, and who did what was called creative stitchery, and she took me to see the Bayeux Tapestry in the early 1980s. And I had always been fascinated by it, mostly because nobody really knew who had made it, when it was made, or exactly how it was made. And it struck me as a fascinating monumental work that had to be made by women, very unusual in that respect, and when I started to think about it, I went back to visit it many years later, and I feel that I've always worked on things that I couldn't understand, and I wanted to understand it. And often that not understanding is just a mysterious, almost spiritual experience in which I feel something resonate. It's what Wordsworth calls that inherent spirit in all things, in all living things.
- Bloch: So I started to read about it and to, again, try and discover not only how it was made in terms of the stitches that went into it, but how it, in tapestry, created a particular vision of an important historical event, how it moved us, how it kept us moving in one direction for those 70 meters in order to arrive at the outcome that it did. And then I made a discovery, which was only one of interpretation, which was that though people tried to determine whether it was a Scandinavian object, or an English object, or a French object, or a Norman object, I realized that the tapestry contained all of those elements, and was in fact a kind of peace weaving, which was the equivalent of, of course, the one who wants to make peace is always the victor. But it had all of those elements combined in what seemed to me was a marvelous, almost a constitutional piece of art.
- Bloch: I gave a talk at the Yale Law School on the question of the legal implications of the tapestry, deathbed confessions, because there's a deathbed confession in it, but you don't know exactly what poor Edward the Confessor said on his deathbed, so everyone can read themselves into it.
- Lawrence: Right, and then there's the heavily didactic aspect of this in terms of the narrative that it's telling and weaving, pun intended, that is designed to take the viewer into a certain direction and reach certain conclusions.
- Bloch: Exactly, exactly, yeah. History could not have come out otherwise.
- Lawrence: Exactly, and if that's your takeaway, then the designers have accomplished their goal. But as you say, we don't exactly know who the designers were, do we?
- Bloch: No, we don't.
- Lawrence: Let's move into contemporary times, this is what I meant by the astonishing range of your projects, you're involved in a study of a major poem of Stéphane Mallarmé, who is, himself, an extraordinary figure. A 19th century poet who I think it's fair to say is much more significant in the 20th and even 21st century than he was in the 19th century, has a big impact on the beat poets, Kerouac and some of his crowd, he has an impact on cubism and futurism and dadaism.

- Bloch: Right.
- Lawrence: So tell us a little bit about who this person was, but maybe more to the point, who his work still is and why it speaks to the 20th and 21st centuries as compellingly as it does.
- Bloch: Well, he was an incredibly obscure poet who lived for literature. He's one of the only poets in France of the time who wasn't one of the ones they called *le poète maudit*, the cursed poets. He was a good family man, he taught high school all of his life. He did nothing which would surprise the most modest missionary, and he held a weekly salon from which people kept copious notes. But here again, he wrote this great poem called *One Toss of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*, and I encountered it in graduate school, and I didn't understand it. I couldn't understand it. But I was teaching a course on modernism in which we read the poem, and I suddenly realized that there was a medieval influence, an influence of the layout of medieval manuscripts on this poem, which really is a piece of concrete poetry. It's laid out on the page such that the design of the type is supposed to imitate or reproduce or perform the thing of which it speaks.
- Bloch: So it's about a shipwreck, and of course it's modern in that respect, since modernity concentrates so much on disaster, but when it talks about the ship going down, it shows the typescript across two pages is organized such that you have the rocking of the boat going back and forth, and the mast going down. And when he talks about debris on the surface of the water, the typescript is scattered in debris like shapes all over. And I thought back to Saint Augustine, who defines the sacrament as an instance in which the shape of meaning reproduces the subject of meaning, and I thought that even though Mallarmé was a great secular poet, and modernity is by and large secular, that there was something deeply religious under the surface. I also, in everything that I've done, tried to run counter to what I can read around me. Michel Foucault once told me, he said, "Intellectuals get paid in order to go the other way when everybody lines up in one direction," and so I tried to reintroduce something like religion into a great founding poem of modernism like *One Toss of the Dice*.
- Lawrence: I always like to ask my guests on Key Conversations to recommend a couple of books for our reading lists, particularly for people who are interested in increasing their engagement with French culture, perhaps even improving their access to French language. I wonder if you have a couple of suggestions for us, although I'm going to put one on your list, you've got a new book called *Paris and Her Cathedrals*, and what else might you suggest, either in French or in translation?
- Bloch: There's a wonderful writer by the name of Maryse Condé, originally from Guadeloupe, she spent time in Africa, then Paris, and then back to Guadeloupe, who wrote a book called, in French, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière: I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*. It's been translated into English, has a preface by Angela Davis, and it's the story of a young woman from Barbados who arrives in the French colonies and eventually ends up mixed up in the Salem Witch Trials, she shares a cell with Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, and ends up marrying the first Jewish settler in the colonies. I highly recommend it.

Bloch: Otherwise, I like very much the works of Colette and would recommend one called *The Vagabond*, which is a great work of fiction. And I have a friend who just published a book about the relationship between Sigmund Freud and President Wilson of the United States, and it's called *Le President est-il devenu fou? Was the American President Crazy?* And it's about the analysis that Freud actually did of Wilson at the time. It's a fascinating story, I've read in it, but it will come out in English soon, it just appeared in French.

Lawrence: I love your description of an intellectual journey based on finding things you don't understand and trying to unlock them, trying to follow them. In many ways I find in that a wonderful rendering of the motto from which Phi Beta Kappa gets its name, Φιλοσοφία Βίου Κυβερνήτης (*Philosophia Biou Kybernētēs*), which we usually translate as "love of learning is the guide of life."

Lawrence: Thanks so much for joining me on Key Conversations today.

Bloch: Thank you so much.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Paulina Velasco is managing producer, Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is *Back to Back* by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our visiting scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening, I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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