

THE POLITICISATION OF THE WESTERN CANON

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Politics does not belong in the classroom or the lecture hall. Yet today, there is determined agitation to ban teaching of the Western canon—the generative fundament of all education. By implication, Homer, Plato, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Mozart, and Jane Austen have been cast as agents of the devil, responsible for the rise of a civilisation that has polluted the entire world.

The cultural and social elites, and especially the intelligentsia, drive this self-doubt. A small, but extremely noisy and influential minority crusades today for the moral high ground, and for the moment it is winning. Yet, its cadres are but grasshoppers, the ‘loud and troublesome insects of the hour’ described by Edmund Burke, in reference to their forerunners, the French revolutionaries. By contrast, it is worth remembering that over ninety per cent of Australians identify with their country, and report being happy with it as it is.

George Orwell, while calling himself a socialist, lamented towards the end of the Second World War that the Left intelligentsia in Britain had been secretly pleased whenever the Germans won a battle. When else in human history has a people been so lunatic as to wish its own side to lose a war—and to Hitler! The morning after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, in 2001, and the killing of 3000 innocent people, students gathered in public at Monash University in Melbourne to celebrate.

Cultural masochism is bewildering when viewed from the outside. Let me hazard my own interpretation. The argument runs in stages. To begin, congenital unhappiness tends to find expression in depressive insecurity and self-pity, when it is turned inwards; or in rancour and complaint, when projected outwards—complaint against others, against society, and against the world. Suffering is blind, and turns back against the self; or it hits out.

Stage Two of the argument narrows down to the cultural elites. Unhappiness is not, of course, restricted to those who are better off. But, with them, it can find more powerful expression than in the silent majority. Privileged social position often carries with it feelings of pride and self-importance. Acting in parallel, the intelligentsia has been provided with a weapon for articulating rancour—superior education. The vanity of the former, in combination with the vociferousness of the latter, has produced sustained self-righteous indignation. What starts as a small voice, turns into a roar, by means of its megaphone dominance of educational institutions, the media, and the arts.

Stage Three concerns faith, or belief. In earlier times, when Christianity prevailed, the churches provided relief from unhappiness, in priestly compassion, communal support, and a theology of salvation after death to compensate for suffering in this life. The death of God precipitated a singular crisis for the intelligentsia. When its members began to lose their faith, they first turned on the gods that had failed them. Then, they generated alternative systems of belief.

The principal one was Humanism, but it too lost authority. The current hostility to Western civilisation and its great artistic works is partly a rage against the humanist values that have failed to hold, that have not been inspirational, or convincing enough to replace the Christian God.

Negation followed, the dead-end of the culture in which pleasure is taken in destruction for its own senseless sake. No new order is presented to replace the old. Belief in God gave way to the belief in humanist ideals, which, in turn, gave way to the belief in nothing. The character of the Joker in the Batman films brilliantly projects the psychology at work, taking ecstatic, lip-smacking relish as buildings come crashing down, and innocent crowds are annihilated. Osama bin Laden provided another recent case-study of a passion for destruction, combined with a complete lack of interest in building anything new.

Within radical Leftist politics, a kind of apocalyptic idealism holds that once the existing order has been completely destroyed, new green shoots will miraculously sprout from out of the blackened soil of the wasteland. Karl Marx wrote the blueprint, with his totalitarian communist revolution giving birth, in his mind, to what was in reality a childish unrealistic, fantasy utopia, which, when put into practice, has always turned into its nightmare opposite.

The venting of rage with a good conscience—that is, without normal accompanying guilt—allows the pleasure of emotional catharsis. Such catharsis quickens the blood, serving as an anti-depressant. It may also contribute to identity. *I hate, therefore I am!* More specifically, the morally outraged becomes a person of merit and significance, crusading for the good under the flag of virtue.

Cultural masochism is fed, in part, by power envy. A self that is insecure and fears its own lack of power becomes hostile to its own society's confidence and success. A linked paranoid reflex holds that if I can destroy what has power, and persecutes me, then I myself can gain that power. Hence the radical hostility to the main power on our side, the United States, and, increasingly on the Left, to Israel—as the one prosperous, democratic, and successful country amidst the wretched stagnation of most of the Middle East.

What underpins the success of the United States, and more broadly of the Anglosphere—which has not lost a major war in two hundred years—is Western civilisation itself. Accordingly, the prime target of Leftist agitation, at its radical extreme, has finally emerged, as illustrated recently in Australia: the corpus of Western self-understanding, strength, and self-belief—the canon.

Visceral hostility to this great body of narrative and reflective work, with its vast scope, is aroused precisely because of its power. Shakespeare's works are quite simply awesome. The liberal progressive mind, were it being rational, should object to, say, Sharia Law, but it doesn't, because Islam is of minimal cultural threat to the West—its power is feeble. 'Canon' puns fittingly.

Humanism had placed its confidence in the power of the human individual, by means of the singular powers of reason and free-will, to make of both self and society anything it wanted. As one of the Renaissance founding fathers, Pico della Mirandola, put it in 1486: 'We can become what we will!' Humanism celebrated great individuals—the Leonardos and Newtons—as it praised great creations—Gothic cathedrals, the Sistine ceiling, Shakespeare's plays—and as it would find later vindication in modern medicine, clean water, hygiene, codified law, town planning, the railroad and the aeroplane, and the bountiful proliferation of industrial technology. Humanism believed in knowledge.

By the end of the First World War, Humanist optimism was badly shaken, as German sociologist Max Weber reflected in a 1918 lecture titled, 'Knowledge as a Vocation'. Weber focussed on the university and questioned whether the academy was viable in a godless and prophetless time, a time in which the traditional ultimate values had lapsed, and no new ones had appeared. Weber observed that many were looking to the university to provide the meaning that had gone out of a disenchanted world. However, knowledge cannot provide meaning, in the ultimate sense of answering the deep metaphysical questions of why we are here, what we should do with our lives, and what happens to us when we die.

In the twentieth-century, the failure of university purpose opened the door to one quite different strategy: to create a politically active institution. In the ashes of self-belief grew the university as training camp for political and social reformers.

In the 1930s, it appeared, for instance in Germany, with students becoming active Nazis, and in England, where a Marxist socialism became the fashion amongst intellectuals. The political motivation returned in the 1960s, and has continued ever since, this time pioneered by Leftist students and staff demanding that radical social reform replace learning as the main activity of the university.

Activism was energised by a displacement of religious zeal into politics. With the death of God, salvation came to be sought in social crusades loosely guided by Marxist ideology. One might have imagined that the main historical lesson of the twentieth century would provide a cautionary tale, that redemptive politics—whether communism or the messianic nationalism of fascism—leads not to utopia, but to a human wasteland strewn with a hundred million corpses. The universities, free from any constraining reality principle, were blind to this lesson.

By the way, it is a lesson fundamental to the strength of the Western tradition, deriving from Jesus' teaching that religion and politics are quite separate domains, and should remain so. The same separation holds for education and politics.

The masterpieces of Western culture are apolitical, in the sense that they do not, collectively, point in any particular direction. Many works are not interested in politics at all—for instance, the major novels of Henry James or Patrick White. Others, like Shakespeare's history plays, open up discussion of qualities of leadership, political virtue, and what are the best ways to organise a society, given the challenges and circumstances of the moment. It is a discussion in which ideology has no place.

While on Shakespeare, there is a serious case to be put that the master humanist created our modern concept of identity and self. We would not know who we are without him, and his myriad lines of influence. He did this through unmatched explorations of character and motive, of virtue and vice, of strength and weakness—in dozens of complex portraits of humans in love and friendship, at war, subject to tragedy, suffering betrayal, the madness of jealousy, the extremes of ambition, the joys of buffoonery, and the everyday struggles to survive and make sense of what life is about. A proper and rounded education today is inconceivable without immersion in the works of Shakespeare

Within the Academy, it is simply unprofessional for lecturers to intrude their own political views into the classroom. For instance, when I lectured on Marx's theory of capitalism, I would have been

embarrassed if students were able to decipher my personal attitude to the author of *The Communist Manifesto*. The controversy surrounding the Ramsay Centre, and its ambition to bring back, and teach, the major texts and artistic works of the Western tradition, is entirely because what should be above politics has become deeply politicised. This is a great pity.

Unfortunately, the politicisation of the university continues unabated. For instance, until a decade or so ago, courses teaching Shakespeare and Jane Austen remained common. Today, students study creative writing, without any systematic engagement in what has come before, which requires an intense study of the *Oedipus's*, *Don Quixote's*, *Great Gatsby's*, and diverse other examples from the great tradition. It is cruel to encourage uneducated and naïve nineteen-year-olds in the belief that they have it in them to write a great novel, without any disciplined study of the techniques that have been used by the best who have come before. Even the young Leonardo undertook an apprenticeship in the workshop of his master, Verrocchio.

If Jane Austen is to be found in any English Literature department today, it will likely be because of politically-loaded trivia, like her critical picture of colonialism. And, if the tarring brush of political ideology can be applied to Jane Austen, there is no limit to what else it might blacken into insignificance. Dishwashers may be next.

What started in the universities has now percolated down through schools, and spread more and more widely through Left-Green political culture, if usually in more mellow tones. Generations of students in schools and universities have now been subjected to Marxist ideology, teaching them about the West's capitalist exploitation of other peoples, of its own minorities, and of the disadvantaged in general. That the West is evil has become the default reading for much of the tertiary-educated upper middle class. Yet, only a small, noisy minority are rancorous. For most, a vague reflex view of the world has come to prevail, ignorantly held, while occasionally grounded in genuine empathy for those who are less well off.

Where to now? A university depends on collective belief in universals of goodness, beauty, and truth—and that they carry with them some kind of transcendental value. Experience in the last century proves that, without such a belief, it becomes demoralised, and those teachers who are not completely listless in their vocations, tend to become negational, teaching against the authorities and truths of the inherited culture. All that remains is to tear down and to shock.

The high priest of modernism, Marcel Duchamp, entered a urinal in an art exhibition in New York in 1917. His intention was to shock, but also, more seriously, to challenge that there are no absolute standards left by which to say that a porcelain piece of plumbing is less beautiful, good, or true than any of the works of the Old Masters. Duchamp has carried the day, both in contemporary art, and in university Arts faculties. Moreover, the mainstream of Western High Culture has, for a century, produced nothing but less-witty derivatives of the porcelain urinal, thereby acting as major player in the dismal story I have been telling.

The best societies have strong cultures. Culture is rooted in myth, not knowledge. Myth in every culture is transmitted through archetypal stories, ones created in the beginning, a long time ago. The Western *mythos* was sourced in Homer, Greek tragedy, and the Jesus narratives, then reinterpreted

in such masterpieces as Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Bach's Masses, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. And to repeat, the *mythos* is a-political.

The narrow pursuit of knowledge is a sure sign that the sacred myths have lost authority. Knowledge has merely helped us become more comfortable. However, without belief in a higher order of some kind, human life becomes meaningless, losing purpose and direction—the condition characterised by Weber as the disenchantment of the modern world.

Here was Humanism's critical mistake, to presume that reason and knowledge could give birth to the kind of ultimate values whose modern absence Max Weber lamented. Academic history stands as a cautionary example, always in danger of degenerating into the abstract charting of profane and boring facts—what happens to it once real ties to the past have withered, family ties, communal ties, and national ties. Our own Anzac Day makes a salutary contrast, in its revitalised mythic force.

Central to any viable idea of the university, whether Christian, humanist, or other, is a retelling of the human story as a kind of epic, with gravity and dignity, following the diverse ways it plays out its fateful tragedies. This requires interpretations of the story, which reveal that life is more than a string of painful and disappointing episodes, interrupted by a few passing pleasures. All humans seek some ultimate truth, in answer to the big questions. They want to live in hope rather than fear. They want life to be more expansive than enclosure in the microcosm of a brittle self, craving power and esteem. Deep engagement with the best literature, art, music, and philosophy of our own Western culture is fundamental, articulating the mythic core. Today's students crave just this sort of education.

Here is the mission of the custodians of the culture—their duty—as was exemplified and honoured by our remarkable ancestors, the ones who created the canon, and who began the constant, vigilant, on-going task of interpreting and teaching it.

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