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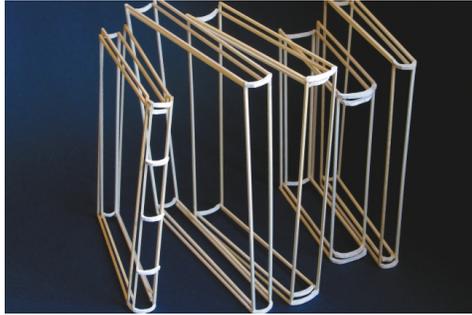
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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The Splintering of the Student Mind

Why the canon is necessary for social justice



Stephen Doyle for The Chronicle

By William Egginton | AUGUST 29, 2018 ✓ PREMIUM

In 2017, when some teenagers in a town in Virginia were convicted of defacing a historic African-American schoolhouse with racist and anti-Semitic slurs, Judge Avelina Jacob sentenced them to a year of reading and writing reports on literary and philosophical classics, such as Richard Wright and Hannah Arendt. The judge's powerful

intuition — that a college-style Great Books curriculum can serve as an education in civics — raises a question: Why wait for kids to spew hate before offering them great literature? At present, Great Books courses are reserved for a minority of students in a minority of colleges. To resuscitate one of higher education's original purposes — the production of engaged citizens — we need to revive and expand access to core curricula that are, at present, the privilege of a vanishingly small elite.

Students at top private colleges seem to realize that there is a connection between the Great Books and a society's political tendencies. But, perversely, they are protesting *against* such courses, largely on identitarian grounds. The modern conservative movement has made countless bales of hay portraying America as awash in a flood of political correctness. Decrying PC culture was a cornerstone of Donald Trump's campaign for president. But while the perceived hypersensitivity about race and gender has been a strategic bonanza for Republicans, students and colleges have been doing their part to keep the narrative alive, in part by attacking the kinds of Great Books programs they should be defending.

The most prominent of such incidents in recent years was at Reed College, in Oregon. In 2016, students there formed the group Reedies Against Racism (RAR) as part of the wider response around the country to the police killings of young black men and women. But RAR's main target was not racist law enforcement but Reed's required introduction to the humanities, Hum 110. As the group's leaders explained in a letter to all incoming freshmen, "We believe that the first lesson that freshmen should learn about Hum 110 is that it perpetuates white supremacy — by centering 'whiteness' as the only required class at Reed." RAR staged in-class protests of every lecture given in Hum 110.

While the Reed activists and others like them are motivated by laudable opposition to injustice, their choice of targets is ill-conceived. Not only do Great Books curricula have nothing to do with the problems the students claim they want to address, but their choices actively distract from that aspect of higher education most complicit in the social ills they rightfully decry: that colleges are engines of elite demographic sorting and socioeconomic inequality.

That such protests take place in what are essentially enclaves of entrenched privilege generates dismal optics on the culture-war front and underlines an essential paradox: While colleges are pilloried by the right for producing a generation of coddled liberals, today's campus unrest emanates from a free-market, pay-to-play university system, which enshrines the individual as the measure of community. This is classical economic liberalism run amok, at the expense of both what could be called "conservative" values, like the nurturing of community, and a civil-rights liberalism motivated by the redress of historical inequities.

Colleges are engines of elite demographic sorting and socioeconomic inequality.

In other words, the focus on identity distorts the social-justice imperatives that motivate a group like the one at Reed. This is because identity, at least since the 1980s, has been co-opted by a logic that de-emphasizes its relation to a history of oppression, and instead turns it into the sort of personal attribute that makes students more attractive members of the diverse community that elite colleges openly seek to compose — what the historian N.D.B. Connolly has called the "diversity regime," which "knows how to celebrate difference without exploring how that difference got produced, imposed, and preserved." The celebration of identity is the flip side of the corrosive tribalism undermining our democracy.

We in higher education have undermined the ideal of diversity by using it as window dressing to cover our role in not only failing to address rampant inequality but exacerbating it. Parents treat the education of their children, beginning at the earliest age, as an outgrowth of the opportunities afforded by wealth and privilege. Educational sorting widens the divide between the winners and the left-behind. In Baltimore, where I live and work, such sorting is highly racialized, and its victims largely African-American.

Meanwhile many badly-off whites have come to revile both the university, whose admissions policies have traditionally focused on ethnic and gender diversity, and the Democratic Party, whose platform they incorrectly perceive as oriented toward the needs of minorities. In fact, the vast majority of working-class people of all races are excluded from the upper echelon of the education pyramid. Because the goal of diversity has been deprived of its historical motivation in rectifying injustice, its reduced, cosmetic remainder ends up neglecting the economically marginalized of every group.

What the "diversity regime" doesn't fail to support, however, is the focus on the individual as economic agent and civic centerpiece of America. Both reactionary pundits mocking campus speech codes and the social-justice warriors they love to hate are complicit in reproducing the kinds of inequality that tribalism feeds on.

The lack of minority voices in courses like Hum 110 remains a barometer of racial power relations in education and beyond. At the same time, such courses represent a tradition of thought that enables the very values of respect, equality, and inclusiveness valued by student protesters. Great Books-style programs like Hum 110 are not in tension with what those protesters claim to want: a society in which women and minorities are respected as equals. In fact, such courses can inculcate precisely those liberal virtues — tolerance of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, rejection of cruelty — that provide intellectual and ideological ballast for the protesters' ideals. The liberal-arts tradition that such courses represent is instrumental in transmitting a political philosophy dedicated to balancing the rights of individuals against the needs of community cohesion. This tradition asks questions like: Who gets to be counted as an individual? Who belongs to a community? These are the very questions students need to be raising in order for democracy to flourish. The Great Books can teach the respect of and openness to other people and traditions that are the minimal condition of a diverse society.

This debate, for me, is personal. One of my favorite courses to teach is "Great Books at Hopkins." In our version, Virginia Woolf and Aphra Behn join nine men, and Frederick Douglass makes an appearance in an otherwise white crowd. How, I asked students in a recent class, did they feel about a course that might seem to associate greatness with a largely white and male tradition? One student, Katy, marveled at the surprising relevance of ideas written by "someone who is so different from you and who has been dead so long." For Katy, we read Great Books to discover what connects us to others across the chasms of history. In this sense, Great Books programs are an antidote to fundamentalist and tribalist thinking. As David Denby said of Columbia's famous Core Curriculum, "the ethos of religious totalitarians and suicide bombers is a negation of everything that such courses ... would hope to inculcate in its students." The real purpose of the liberal-arts curriculum was always to expand community and strengthen democracy.

This is true even when we teach books that long predate the rise of Western secularism, or books that question or challenge democratic and egalitarian values. In last fall's course, we followed a discussion of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* with Nietzsche's scandalous, vitriolic attack on egalitarian ethics, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Such a book can be a hard read today, some of its passages rife with racist imagery and others having been used, or misused, to justify eugenics and anti-Semitism. But the purpose of Great Books curricula is not to submit to the texts we read; it is to critically engage with them and to emerge with new tools for interrogating the individual's relationship to society.

Few books are more explicit in airing those questions than Nietzsche's, which prods, annoys, and just plain insults its readers into questioning the accepted morality of modern society. And reading Nietzsche right after Douglass galvanized precisely those kinds of

critical resources. Nietzsche's abstract invocation of how apparently neutral social relations naturalize adverse power relations came alive in Douglass's recounting of the damage inflicted on a kind white woman's soul by her participation in the barbarism of slavery. Entertaining and debating such questions does not mean accepting any particular interpretation of them. Rather, and more crucially, such debates hone the critical resources needed to question and protest the grounds of a society's self-justification. In that way, even a supposedly anti-democratic thinker like Nietzsche can be integral to the very democratic project of forming an educated citizenry that is the legacy of the liberal arts.

Reactionary pundits are complicit with the social-justice warriors they love to hate.

For Thomas Jefferson, who imbibed the liberal arts as a young man at the College of William & Mary, the purpose of public education was not merely to serve personal advancement but also to strengthen civic culture and democratic values. Though he conveniently postponed action on the enslavement

he was personally perpetuating and benefiting from, freedom from political tyranny was always at the front of Jefferson's mind. Equally pressing was freedom from the tyranny of "ignorance and prejudices" that enabled "kings, nobles, or priests" to shackle "the minds of their subjects."

The key to protecting those rights from the majoritarian encroachments of custom and prejudice was the idea of toleration and respect for others stemming from the liberalism of such thinkers as John Locke. That idea belied and, ultimately, transcended the extraordinary moral blindness of Jefferson, Locke, and others to how their selective exclusions — of blacks, of Native Americans, of women — from the realm of such respect contradicted the core of their thought.

Unlike traditions that privilege community coherence over the individual, the liberal tradition distinguishes between truly unalienable rights and mere social conventions, the way a culture goes about expressing what is specific to it. This distinction accepts and protects a far greater toleration of cultural difference than is the rule for most other traditions.

The toleration that was on the minds of Locke and Jefferson was primarily religious toleration, which resonates with us today even if the examples that burned for them were of sectarianism within Christianity rather than interreligious strife. In his influential *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke identified the content of religious belief as a variable social convention, affirming a vision of civil society that would allow for total respect of all "practical opinions," so long as "they do not tend to establish dominion over others." In his words, "neither Pagan, nor Mahumetan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the Civil Rights of the Commonwealth because of his Religion."

Locke's view on toleration, absorbed by Jefferson, would become the first page in a long, fitful, and contentious story about a form of community based on toleration. That kind of toleration is at the heart of the Great Books. As Lucía Martínez Valdivia, a professor at Reed College who opposed the protests against Hum 110, put it, the one requirement in her class is that students develop "empathy," "stretching our imaginations to try to inhabit and understand positions that aren't ours and the points of view of people who aren't us."

Great Books programs have become the icing on the cake of an expensive education, available only to the wealthiest few and, even then, seen as a luxury that kids on financial aid should think twice about. This exclusivity exacerbates inequality, because the advantages of a liberal-arts education are monopolized by the most privileged.

Instead, properly understood and taught, Great Books ought to be the linchpin of the kind of liberal-arts education that the political scientist Danielle Allen says engenders competent political engagement in the form of "participatory readiness." As she explains, "there is a statistically significant difference in the rates of political participation between those who have graduated with humanities majors and those who graduate with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors." The more humanities courses you have taken in your life, the more likely you are to participate in politics. Reading narratives like Douglass's, which teach about "participatory readiness" in our own national past, inculcates valuable postures of political engagement in the present. While it remains true that wealth correlates with greater degrees of civic participation, the correlation between civic participation and education is closer than that between civic participation and economic attainment.

At their best, the Great Books exemplify the intellectual ground out of which our democracy grew — the liberal arts. Today the liberal arts are being outflanked by two powerful forces: a neoliberal ethic in which students are not citizens but merely future earners, and a focus on balkanized identities at the expense of a consideration of identity in relation to a larger community. Those trends are transforming education from a public investment in the future of democracy into a commodity meant to maximize social distinction. Yet colleges remain the only institutions where it is possible to achieve a grounding in the liberal arts and the Great Books. It is ironic that the Great Books should attract the ire of those who wish, rightfully, to see greater diversity in their classrooms and in the world.

We need more discussions of Locke's theories of toleration; more Nietzschean interrogations of apparently natural power formations; more narratives like Douglass's exemplifying the interrelation of learning, eloquence, and civic action. In short, we need more Great Books courses, not fewer.

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