

# Politics is Crowding Out Culture and Childhood

Many years ago, when I was teaching at Providence College, I showed up for a meeting of the faculty senate. That was rare for me. I loathe campus politics. But a friend of mine had put forward a proposal for a program in Classics, and I attended to lend my support.

It turned out that on the same day, a professor of sociology brought along an entourage of a dozen students or so, to get the senate to approve a program in Black Studies. The students were permitted to speak a bit, and then they remained to make sure that the senate did the "right thing."

Our school had no such program before, nor did it have any program prior to this that was defined by a political aim, or defined by race. Nor were the promoters terribly specific about exactly which courses then on the books would qualify, or what new courses would have to be invented. They presented no syllabi. One sympathetic professor asked whether the school had the teachers ready to staff the program.

That was when I got up and made a suggestion. Since we already had courses on African history and literature, why not call the new program *African Studies*? That way, we would avert the problem of personnel, and we would also open the program out to the world, and not just have things focused upon contemporary America. I added that one of our professors had long wanted such a program in African Studies, with a requirement that students learn one of the principal African literary languages other than English: French, Portuguese, German, Arabic.

The sociologist rose to condemn that suggestion. He did not address the issue. He hid behind the students. He said that

the students had a *right* to define the program as they saw fit. And there the students sat, self-satisfied, indignant, sure of their righteousness.

No frank discussion of the merits of the proposal, or how such a program should be constituted, could then occur. No professor was bold enough under those circumstances to seem to oppose the students. They folded.

That was my first experience with the use of young people for political leverage. Sex, too, was a part of it. The leader of the students was a young white woman, and she spoke against "African" and for "black," not addressing the specifics, but merely expressing her indignation that she and her fellow students should be rebuffed. I cannot imagine grown men taking a line like that from a mere youth were he a male. He would be gently reminded of who he was and where he was, and we would have gotten around to a serious discussion. The unspoken rule that you do not throw a punch at a girl, would not have applied.

I was put in mind of these events recently because of the teenage girl from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, who has made a name for herself around the world, scolding the delegates at the United Nations for having "stolen her dreams," and surrendering her to the climatic calamity of global warming. How do you tell a teenage girl that she has no place in this debate? She is too young to know anything useful about meteorology, agronomy, biochemistry, archeology, or economics; she cannot really even conceive the problems that beset the developing world, in Africa and parts of Asia, as they undergo an industrial revolution of their own, bound to release into the atmosphere plenty of carbon emissions, at least for much of the next century.

But the problem with children in politics is not simply that their presence is bound to "[perplex and dash / Maturest counsels](#)." It is that childhood itself is ushered into the

blood and mire. We forget that there are reasons why it takes so long for the human being to arrive at adulthood. There is much to learn – the fundamental human things, most of all. The child must learn who he is. He must experience the baffling variety of human personalities, with their strengths and deficiencies, their wisdom and folly. He must be practiced in the cardinal virtues, especially in the prudence that does not come by nature. He has a trade to learn. He must learn how to appreciate the heritage of art and literature into which he has been born; the history of his people; their songs, their folkways, their glories and their shame. He must learn how to stand before God.

All these things are not only more important than politics. They are both before and after politics: the foundation upon which politics must build, and the end for which we have political structures in the first place. But the realm of practical politics is eminently a realm of conflict, if not hatred. In our time it is amplified by noise. It crowds out culture. It relegates the human things to the last remaining cubicles of privacy, but even these are invaded by social media. All politics, all the time; all conflict, condemnation, crisis.

No, Miss Thunberg. The governments of the world have not robbed you of your dreams. Politics has robbed you of your childhood, and you, if you get your way, will complete the robbery, and make sure that as many children as possible suffer it also. Go home, settle your mind, read a book, plant some trees, and cease to take yourself so seriously.

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