

Burying 'Dead White Males'

In the on-going debate over whether “dead white males” like William Shakespeare are needed anymore in English courses, Sheffield University, one of England’s leading institutions of higher education, says No.

According to a report in [The Telegraph](#), an induction video for first-year students asserts that “academia has historically been a white dominated space” and encourages students to call out “racial bias” in the curriculum.

Writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, George Eliot (a woman, actually), Charles Dickens and Samuel Beckett are described as white writers whose works survive in the curriculum because they “simply fit better” with academic culture.

“Many of the writers, thinkers and academics who are traditionally studied are white too,” the video says. “This doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re the ones producing the best work, rather that they simply better fit into an academic culture that’s affected by the same racial biases that we see in the rest of society.”

On the other side of the pond, [Yale University](#), one of America’s oldest and finest universities, has ditched its famous art history survey course. Apparently students are disturbed by the “overwhelming” whiteness, maleness, and straightness of canonical Western artists. Its replacement will examine art in relation to “questions of gender, class and ‘race’” as well as capitalism and climate change, according to the instructor.

These are just two examples of an academic scramble to assert that Western civilization, if it exists at all, is just a chronicle of racism, sexism and imperialism. As a result, young women and men who have the privilege of studying at some of the world’s great centers of learning are being cheated out

of their past. They are being denied the intellectual tools for understanding themselves and the society in which they live. *Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*, wrote a very dead white male, Tacitus, about how the Roman Empire treated subject nations: “where they make a wasteland, they call it peace.” Some universities are a bit like that.

The desolation is eerily similar to the setting of one of the last century’s most famous sci fi novels, [A Canticle for Leibowitz](#). A nuclear holocaust is followed by the Simplification, a violent backlash against technology. Literate people are killed by rampaging mobs of “Simpletons.” Illiteracy becomes almost universal and [books](#) are destroyed. In one of the novel’s most imaginative touches, Benedictine monks in the 26th Century painstakingly illuminate copies of electrical diagrams which no one understands any more.

We’re not there yet, but the possibility of getting an education in “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” as 19th Century critic [Matthew Arnold](#) put it, is becoming increasingly remote.

Of course, 150 years later, with more access to other cultures, “the best” needs to include contributions from India, China, Japan and other civilizations. But “Western civilization” is far more than a reeking dung heap of gender and racial bias.

A report by Stanley Kurtz, a cultural commentator, reviews the history of American universities’ repudiation of “Western civilization” in an excellent short book, *The Lost History of Western Civilization*, published by the National Association of Scholars. (Available on [Amazon](#) and also as [a free PDF](#).)

He uses the disintegration of humanist scholarship at Stanford University as a lens to analyze skeptics of the achievements of the West.

In January 1987 students chanting “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Culture’s got to go” kick-started the erosion of Stanford’s commitment to “the canon.” They were protesting a course called Western Culture which was required for first-year students. It was eventually abolished.

One of the main guns trained on the status quo, Kurtz says, was an influential article written in 1982 by historian [Gilbert Allardyce](#) which traced the idea of “Western Civilization” back to World War I. Allardyce described it, Kurtz writes, as “a modern invention devised during World War I as a way of hoodwinking young American soldiers into fighting and dying in the trenches of Europe.” Western Civilization was “a thinly disguised form of neo-imperial war propaganda.”

Kurtz expertly debunks this argument, which found enthusiastic supporters and allies amongst historians. He reviews the most influential historians of the 19th Century in the United States – the Scot William Robertson and the Frenchman François Guizot – and shows that they had demonstrated the existence of a distinctive Western Civilization long before “the Great War.” It’s a fascinating history, and Kurtz deploys it to critique contemporary developments as well. Citing a number of other conservative scholars, he argues that the soul of the nation is at stake:

We’ll argue, among other things, that: 1) Postmodern academic skepticism, and the broader collapse of faith it reflects, has backed us into a corner in which inflated accusations of racism, bigotry, and genocide are virtually the only remaining sources of collective purpose; 2) Postmodern academic skepticism has become a petrified orthodoxy every bit as due for critique as the Aristotelianism of Hobbes’s day; 3) So-called multiculturalism isn’t really about preserving traditional cultures at all—instead “multiculturalism” has ushered in a radically new sort of culture in which perpetually expanding accusations of racism,

bigotry, and genocide stand as quasi-religious ends in themselves; and 4) The American experiment cannot survive without checking or reversing these trends.

If “Western Civilization,” which has a history stretching back 2,500 years, can be deconstructed, so can its nihilistic critique, which has a history stretching back 40 years. In the long run, Western Civilization will survive.

But how long is the long run? The monks in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* labored over their mysterious scraps for generations. “The Memorabilia was there, and it was given to them by duty to preserve, and preserve it they would if the darkness in the world lasted ten more centuries, or even ten thousand years.”

Surely ending this deconstructionist madness will not take that long!

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