

One Root of Cancel Culture Can Be Found in How We Teach History

Ours is an age in which, when one thinks of undergraduates, one thinks of cancel culture. This was on full display recently when students at the University of North Texas [shut down a program](#) that was to discuss the merits and demerits of child sex transitions, surely a debatable issue. Some may wonder how we got this point. Our approach to teaching the subject of history in the schools offers a good clue.

In the wake of World War II, there was much soul-searching as to how the ideological fanaticisms giving rise to the war may be averted in the future. “A one-sided training of the intellect in technical work may lead to a violent reaction of the neglected irrational impulses of the spirit, but not to a real harmony of critical self-discipline and inner creativeness,” German historian Friedrich Meinecke wrote in his 1946 work, [The German Catastrophe](#). It would instead lead to “a new one-sidedness that clutches about wildly and intemperately,” Meinecke wrote. An advocate for the study of history, Meinecke recognized that such study should lead to greater tolerance and fewer wild clutches.

Judge Learned Hand expanded on this idea several years later in an essay included in [The Spirit of Liberty](#). “[Mankind] needs an endowment as rich as possible in experience, an experience which makes the heart generous and provides his mind with an understanding of the hearts of others.” It is this temper or mindset alone, Hand wrote, that produces “any political success which will not leave behind rancor and vindictiveness that are likely so deeply to infect its benefits as to make victory not worthwhile.” In other words, in the realm of politics only a true understanding of opposing

viewpoints and the persons behind them can lead to worthwhile victories.

There were numerous post-war projects aimed at providing a better understanding of history and its figures to college students. One of these was the [Amherst Project](#), which lasted from 1959 to 1972. The project replaced high school American history textbooks—designed either to indoctrinate or to emasculate the subject matter—with a series of 150-page pamphlets on such topics as the Missouri Compromise and the Pullman Strike, each assembling speeches and public documents of the period. For example, the unit on the Pullman Strike contained speeches by President Grover Cleveland, Attorney General Richard Olney, the labor leader Eugene Debs, Illinois Governor John Altgeld, and others. Multiple booklets were composed; at least 30 were published by various publishers, including D. C. Heath and Addison-Wesley. All are now out of print.

Yet the problem-solving that Hand favored, and that the Amherst Project encouraged, eventually gave way to the shallow utopianism that Meinecke and Hand had both warned against. At the end of its run, the Amherst Project concluded “that the curriculum work of the 1960s was no longer of use ... something more radical was needed.”

What followed was a shift to “community service” programs, which foster premature political commitment, and which are one of the main malign legacies of the '60s. In 1971, the educationist Jerome Bruner published an article, “The Process of Education Revisited,” asserting that the 1960s curricular movements had the goal of making students better problem solvers, but that they had become distrustful of applying logic to problems because of all the extra-curricular events going on around them. According to Bruner, poverty, racism, riots, the Vietnam war—all these things were considered atrocities by the students of that era, and they abandoned logical problem-solving for the experiential learning of

direct encounters.

The quintessential expression of this more radical view was Hillary Rodham's 1969 [commencement address at Wellesley](#) calling for student political engagement in place of book-learning: "We protested against the rigid academic distribution requirement. We worked for a pass-fail system," she said. "We questioned the meaning of a liberal arts education ... we feel ... that our prevailing, acquisitive, and competitive corporate life, including tragically the universities, is not the way of life for us. We're searching for more immediate, ecstatic, and penetrating mode of living." This was a call not for discussion, but for demonstrations and direct action.

Neither American high school nor college education has completely recovered from the experience of the late '60s. For example, the one-time Director of Admissions at Yale, R. Inslee Clark Jr., replaced the previous class-bound admissions system not with meritocracy, but with affirmative action, admitting a "fifth column" whose political protests convulsed the university in 1968. Virtually all major American universities, with the honorable exception of the University of Chicago, under pressure of student demonstrations and with the aid of grants from politically correct foundations have since succumbed to the "cancel culture."

The spirit in which history—and all subjects—are taught should instead be that of [Ecclesiasticus 11:7](#), stressing, as Hand did, the importance of understanding that which one criticizes: "Blame not before thou hast examined the truth; understand first, and then rebuke. Answer not before thou hast heard the cause: neither interrupt men in the midst of their talk."

The reigning cancel culture would do well to listen to such wisdom.

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