

The Cannons Against the Canon: What Are the Real Targets?

Robert B. Tapp

SEARCHES FOR meanings occupy most humans some of the time and some humans much of the time. Most of the time, most of us are comfortable with those patternings of interpretation that we have inherited. In times of social or personal crises, meaning-systems come under question and may be ripe for revision and replacement. We then look for newer and more satisfying ways to pattern the experiences, feelings, and events that flood us, internally and externally. This 'blessed rage for order' is currently at high surge. Consider the global cultural rearrangements that jostle the living memories of most living Americans a 'good' war against fascism, the devolvement of traditional colonialisms, ill-advised and humiliating adventurism in Viet Nam, the long and costly 'cold' war, the collapse of that adversary and any remaining illusions about dogmatic solutions to economic anomalies. Closer to home, consider the resurgence of a neo-capitalist individualism that has all-but-overpowered a broad liberal hegemony, an increasingly-polarizing society of richer rich and poorer poor, a frightening militarization of diplomacy.

These trends reflect, at some deeper level, the loss of nerve, the retreat from Enlightenment liberalism, the new quest for certainty that pervades spiritual life. Fundamentalism flourishes among those sectors of the populace that are bewildered by modernity. This renewed fundamentalism has

Robert B. Tapp is Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

skillfully seized upon the intellectual vacuum created by the headlong retreat of many intellectuals into cultural relativisms. This is particularly true among those intellectuals whose former utopianisms and favorite nostrums have collapsed. A fit memorial for Sidney Hook would be the recall of his definition of maturity as the 'art of reasoned expectation'.

The curious scene in the Western university

Within today's Western universities (and I intend Western Europe, Canada and the United States, Australia and New Zealand by that designator), heavy battles rage in those corners dealing with the humanities, particularly with literary studies. Two generations ago, Hoxie Fairchild had argued that the locus of the religious consciousness and concern was "shifting to the English departments" of the universities. A more prophetic statement than he could have imagined! These battles have reached broader awareness through recent press and news-journal citation. Most of my hearers could give some contemporary nuances to such slogans as 'politically correct', 'self-esteem', 'Eurocentric', 'hegemonistic', 'marginalizing', 'multicultural', 'metanarrative', 'phallogocentric', 'deconstructionist', 'postmodern', 'neo-neo-Marxist', 'pluralistic'.

I propose to enter this fray here through the door of the canon. Much has been made of the limited and exclusive nature of some set of books and ideas that have come to be associated with Western civilization. The most general charge is that they have been produced by dead white European men. From a descriptive standpoint, this is of course largely true. But current usage inflects each of these terms with a kind of knowing sneer. This shift has emerged within the lived/living memory of most of us.

The humanities are central in this struggle because that is where memory is constructed, reconstructed, contested, preserved. The humanistic sections of our universities are where struggles for academic freedom have transpired in recent times. To underscore this, we need to remember that modern dictators have typically persecuted the humanists (and often also the social scientists, whose researches touched upon social reality). Seldom have the harder sciences felt the jackboot. Even Stalin's suppression of mainline genetics was carried out for the ideologized support of a Trofim Lysenko thought to be a better biologist.

Memory should be a central construct in this analysis. "Lived/living" is employed here as a reminder that only a fraction of what we 'experience' becomes stored within us (in memory) and some small fraction of that remains accessible after the event. We need not become full Freudians to recognize *that* many mental processes that affect the storage, manipulation, suppression, and recall of memory. Factor into this individual process the various social processes, socializations, we each undergo/undertake in our life trajectories. Among the members of this group, for instance what has been involved in moving from varied childhood belief systems (religions or irreligions) to a shared humanism. More accurately, what processes must be created for the deepening and critical reconstruction of this commonality denoted by a shared humanism?

In one sense, we are each recreating our own biological/social families. Yet in another sense we are assembling a common new 'family' for our separate selves. This new family-comprising persons, movements, ideas, perceptions, feelings, pains, joys, and discoveries-also becomes part of our memory. And in turn may assume a dominance over future memory operations. What I am describing is reminiscent of George Herbert Mead's use of 'significant others'. This in turn owed much to John Dewey's focus on 'inquiry' as a desirable human modality outside of, as well as within, the sciences.

In practice, our lived/living memories (our 'operative' memories) are much smaller/than the totality of human memories. That totality might be termed, in contemporary usage, an archive or library never complete but always beyond the total experience of anyone of us.

What do we owe our students?

We owe them the fullest awareness of where cultural matters now stand, with their own tradition and with those other traditions affecting groups of their fellow humans. They need to discover the ways in which traditions are maintained and ways in which they are changed. Above all, they need to foresee the consequences both of culture-maintenance and culture-change. This is good pragmatism-evaluating matters in terms of the individual and societal meanings and events that they entail.

A trendy term in some quarters is 'self-esteem'. Many sufferings and social ills are attributed to a lack thereof. However murky these waters, we must note that the humanities have traditionally fostered 'self-discovery', that process of re-considering individual and social futures in terms of individual and social present and pasts. Such a pedagogy contributes its own kind of self-esteem by the satisfactions it brings to the individuals who have made authentic their newly-chosen sets of values. This parallels a distinction common to the past generations social sciences of status-by-ascription versus status-by-achievement.

...biblical canons

The process of selecting from the archive what persons should know precedes and determines the educating/socializing processes of a culture. For Jews and Christians, this process involved selecting a canon. The Greek/Latin term denoted rule or law, and it was employed religiously to mean a set of sacred books. For Jews, such a list was only drawn at the council of Jamnia (1st century c.E.) and the Jews of the Diaspora included other books in their list. Christians initially meant by *scripture* some precanonical form of this Hebrew Bible (which they would eventually term an 'Old' Testament. Their own additions, a 'New' Testament were not agreed upon until the 4th century and there has never been agreement by Christians as to which set of Jewish scriptures should be accepted as canonical.

...from substance to partisans

To the extent that we can recapture the issue involved in these canonization struggles, substance was by no means the central issue. Debates revolved around the sources of texts (found in the Temple, written by a worthy Moses) or a disciple (*Matthew*). Or around the name used for deity (*Job*). If anything, the criteria came to focus on the particular partisans of a particular text at the time of canon-making. The Christian Fourth Gospel (*John*), for instance, was suspect because it was cherished by groups who had read it quite "pneumatically" and had later fallen out of favor with the majority of canon-makers.

...interpretation to the fore

The most interesting aspect of this canon-making history, and the one that bears most directly on our contemporary situation, is the ambiguity of the canonical texts in relation to the most divisive controversies. For economy, we will restrict our attention to Christian history, but many parallels exist in Jewish history. Some of these controversies were obviously pre-canonical, but particular texts were regularly cited. How is the Christ related to the Father equally-{if so, how can they be distinguished from each other) or similarly (if so, isn't the Christ subordinate, and of lesser power)? Once that controversy was settled (by imperial decree, since it wouldn't yield to any reasoning or experience), attention turned to how this divine Christ was related to a human Jesus. This was resolved by conciliar decree (Chalcedon, 451 C.E.) and the dissidents found self-imposed exile their most prudent course. What about 'human nature'? Were we so fallen as to have lost our 'free will'? Or what about the relation of the Holy Spirit to God and Christ (the famous filioque controversy that contributed heavily to the East/West split of 1054 C.E.).

The clear point here is that none of these controversies were either averted or resolved by the existence of a canon. The central issue was *always and inevitably* how this canon was to be *interpreted*. The same point holds for a series of controversies reaching into our own times. Should baptism be by immersion or sprinkling? Does authority rest in congregations or in bishops and is one bishop (in Rome) superior to other bishops? Are all humans really descended from one human pair~ or should such stories be interpreted figuratively?

As far back as Philo (20 B.C.E-50 C.E.), the interpretation problem had been central for Jews, and the rabbinical techniques were assumed by Christians. One simply had to decide when texts were to be taken historically, literally, allegorically, figuratively, mystically, or whatever. In fact, Philo's schematization of interpretation served most Christians and Jews quite well until Spinoza's critique. Needless to say, the extension of the canonical concept to include creeds decided by councils and the texts produced by some selected set of 'fathers' came under this same interpretive ambiguity.

As a colloquial example, let me cite Luther's retort when told of Copernicus' heliocentric theory: Hasn't that fool read

Scripture? His referent was to the assertion that God made the sun stand still so Joshua's troops could slaughter more of the inhabitants of Jericho. More circumspect Christians eventually learned to read that particular text figuratively.

Coming to our own time, would a closer reading of the canon of Scripture resolve Protestant/Catholic problems in Northern Ireland? Or bloodletting among various Christian groups in Lebanon? Or among the Catholics and Protestant Minnesotans that Garrison Keillor achieved such fame satirizing?

.. expandability

Christian experiences remind us that canons become expanded (and sometimes contracted) by several practices. Think of the generations of English-speaking Protestants who raised *Pilgrim's Progress* to a status little short of scripture primarily because it resonated with their Puritan reading of the original canon. This was not only a text that the literate could read for themselves. Preachers, poets, artists referred to it often enough that it became part of everyday speech. In earlier times of lesser literacy, texts of Augustine, John of Damascus, and Aquinas became, in their own communities, extensions of the canon. Any study of the maxims recognized by groups of people would show that memories draw no clear lines between Scripture, hymnody, Aesop's *Fables*, and *Poor Richard's Almanac*. In other words, actual social practice determines the breadth, narrowness, focus of memory, and such social practice overlays and modifies any putative canon. Luther's derogations of *James* (a right strawy epistle) and *Revelation* (confusing and therefore dangerous to faith) have persisted among those sympathetic to this version of Protestantism.

Secular canons are more readily subject to such revision by usage. Consider the changing fortunes of a John Donne, or the recent discovery of Kate Chopin. This process reflects not only shifting popular tastes but the impact of informed critics. Or take the more complex case of Mark Twain, who has been variously reviled as a dangerous liberal, a racist, a vulgarizer of language. In some real sense, all of these charges become part of the spectacles through which we view an author's works. We need not move all the way into a postmodern stance of placing all originals and their critics on the same

level to recognize the adherence of judgments to creative works.

...editability in practice

Consider also the interesting effects of translations upon audiences. New metaphors are introduced which often have transformative effects. Sometimes the effects are unintended. Ignorant of the parallel couplets that pervaded Hebrew verse, the editor(s) of *Matthew* misread a prophetic passage from *Zechariah* 9.9 to speak of *two* animals and portrays Jesus making a triumphal entry into Jerusalem upon *them*. Or the "man"..."son of man" construction in Hebrew couplets eventually transforms into messianic coding. Compare *Psalms* 8.4 where the meaning is unmistakably non-messianic. Modern translators (*New English Bible*, 1970) shifted to "man"..."mortal man" and future translators will have to make even this more inclusive linguistically.

...regression to a fundamentalism without education

Continuing with our illustrative use of religious practices, we need to contrast quite different historical trajectories. India's Jains have not made significant canonical changes during their 2500-year history. They have, however, survived under a series of external circumstances (Buddhist competition, Hindu rule, Muslim rule, British rule, the secular rule of present free India). They have done this by a communal traditionalism that preserves the historical memory of one major split. The practice of Jainism has changed relatively little throughout this whole period.

Their Hindu neighbors, by way of contrast, continued to expand their original texts, retaining a quite artificial taxonomy that related each new text to one of the four Vedas. Many of these texts (which were recited and memorized by the upper castes, rather than put into written form) were very cryptic and required fuller explications. This set the stage for the kind of pluralism that has characterized the dominant Indian tradition. Schools of interpretation came to characterize the intellectual landscape—nondualist, dualist, qualified nondualist, etc. The canon remained both expandable and interpretable. This strategy afforded an adaptivity to cultural changes but was dependent on the retention of sub-communi

ties to preserve varied combinations of text-cum-interpretation.

For Western Europeans, the break with medieval Catholicism, the invention of the printing press, and the press for mass literacy were simultaneous events. Wide swaths of populations acquired reading skins in order to read the salvific text of the Bible. What emerged, of course, was a plethora of interpretations of that text. This could have served as a lasting lesson that complex religious texts have their own ambiguities, and that expertness is neither easily acquired nor easily identified. Instead we witnessed a struggle between those who recognized that only state power could create religious uniformity, on the one hand, against those who gave up on uniformity and ascended (or retreated?) to the cause of congregational, and even individual, conscience.

Such freedom, coupled with the vast socioeconomic dislocations of the industrial revolution, first generated fundamentalism. We define this as the belief in an inerrant text which is at the same time understandable from a wide populist standpoint. The continuing fissionizations among those who have held this position should have provided conclusive empirical evidence that the meaning of Scripture is not both self-evident and self-interpretive. Instead the equalitarian populist convictions of the new converts necessarily negated the possibility that there might be experts who could be trusted to adjudicate these disputes.

This mixture became especially volatile in the United States after the Civil War. Faced with a series of economic crises, the emergence of feminism, the persistence of racism, a budding labor movement, new Catholic immigrants in urban areas, the numerical dominance of secular land-grant universities and the anomic moralities of the frontier, the Protestant establishment experienced a series of breakaways. The banner was always for the 'old-time' ways, the imagined stabilities of the small town before the impact of education and change.

Education, after all, had buttressed democratizing changes by stressing the progressive potential of knowledge and individual advancement. This world could be improved, it was taught, by the intervention of knowledge and effort. When the Social Gospel movement located sin in the structures of society rather than in the individual soul, it was the last straw. When the Herbert Spencers spoke of evolutionary progress, the Kingdom of God was de-eschatologized. These changes

were too much, and far too rapid, for many Christians. They sought, instead, ways to stabilize time and reject change. Among the evangelical Protestants, a timeless logomachy was created from the Bible (selected texts and themes, to be sure). The Catholic conservatives relied upon an insistence upon hierarchical authority (as against a university-centered modernism).

Great books

Western history, fortunately, cannot be told simply in terms of the fortunes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That history is salvaged by processes of pluralization and secularization. The Renaissance reassimilated the texts of Greek and Latin culture from a larger perspective, and the emergence of a science of nature led to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. In some symbolic sense, the French Revolution broadcast these gains. But in less dramatic (or tragic) ways, the English and American Enlightenments did the same thing. In principle, these thinkers were claiming a larger human heritage as the birthright of future generations, and expanding the library of texts that would support this birthright.

Rather than recount this process in detail, let me skip to the 1930s and John Erskine's attempt to create a canon of Great Books that would furnish the basis of a liberal education. That attempt reached a fever pitch with Robert Maynard Hutchins failed reforms of the University of Chicago, the very canonical curriculum of St. Johns University at Annapolis, and with the Mortimer Adler and Encyclopedia Britannica's promotion of a Great Books Program. Either by way of legitimizing these reflections or to reveal my true colors, I should confess that I led a Great Books course in 1947 at Long Beach City College and went on to become a trainer of leaders and even a TV regular. We subsequently incurred Mortimer Adler's wrath since our canon included James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This was in Southern California (where else!) and the Chicago headquarters insisted that *the ir* canon must be observed if we were to be franchised (as we would now say). I should further note that this book of Joyce's has now been included in the official list.

Criteria

The varied proponents of the great books often claim their criteria to be those works that say worthwhile things in worthwhile ways. Such judgments are bound to vary and to change. A key word in the Hutchins-Adler rhetoric, often overlooked by critics, was 'conversation'. They never proposed that their set of 100-or-so books contained any kind of consensus or convergence. Quite the contrary, they argued that there had been a great conversation across the ages (the current buzzword for this is 'intertextuality') that represented continuing inquiry into some 100-or-so Great Ideas.

Culture *is* ~ontroversy, and that ~ontroversy ~an only be effectively furthered by those who understand the past well enough to move critically beyond it. When we reflect that the Great Books canon contained Aristotle, Aquinas, Montaigne, and Marx, the implicit variety and controversy becomes apparent. As Alastair MacIntyre, one of the conservative contributors, has recently noted, "a living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."¹ From a quite different perspective, Lionel Trilling noted that a new kind of 'self' emerged in Western civilization at the end of the 18th century, one that held "an intense and adverse imagination of the culture in which it has its being."¹

In short, the currently-disparaged canon is far from being a hegemonistic metanarrative. We need only minimal acquaintance to realize that it represents a lively and expanding conversation about matters that matter in life, about perceptions and evaluations that engage human fulfillment. We might also note that one of the discoveries that furthered Trilling's *opposing* self was the enrichment of Western culture by the Enlightenment discovery of the riches of China and India, a discovery that both signaled and reflected the end of Christendom's claims to a monopoly of virtue and wisdom.

A parallel criterion is that these canonical selections should say things in a worthwhile way, that is to say, reflect an excellence that produces in the reader some kind of pleasure. These arguments about selection resonate with the quote from Alfred H. Barr that greets the visitor to the Mu-

¹After *Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press (1959, 1961, 2011).
 ~ew York: ~king, 1955. Preface.

seum of Modern Art, summarizing his curatorial task as "the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity."

A number of cheap shots have been taken at this undertaking, and its slogans now seem somewhat outdated. But we need to remember that 'book' for them meant, in cases such as Plato and Aristotle, a whole corpus. And we need to credit Adler for his famous indexing of the Ideas from the Books (which he labelled the Syntopicon). One of my graduate professors had spent 11 years researching *nous* in Greek philosophy, and Adler reduced that task to a much briefer period (all of this, it must be said, in pre-computer days). A further evidence of the not-inherently-doctrinaire nature of the venture can be seen in Adler's books on the Great Ideas. 'Freedom', for instance, took two massive volumes to cover and he did not limit himself to the 100 'great authors'. One might, of course, wonder if 'Angels' (also a great idea) would get or deserve equal time.

Notwithstanding these caveats, it seems clear that we do 'converse' across space and time, whether we are artists, philosophers, poets or politicians. And we usually make more useful contributions after we have paid the price of admission, after we have learned where matters now stand.

A more serious criticism has been that this approach removes books, persons, and ideas from history. More accurately, that it removes 'texts' from the persons and times that produced them. Unless we are committed to a complete relativism, this seems less than compelling. A text may be interesting, instructive, cautionary, or pleasing in its own right. And those observations will often lead us to more historicized examination which may well alter our first reading. Is/was *Huckleberry Finn* racist? Is/was *Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic? How did slave-owning affect Jefferson's politics or his sex life?

Greater inclusiveness

Canon-making, in this literary rather than scriptural sense, is not new nor was it invented as a solution to the general education problems of the American multiversity. Oxbridge institutions also have their 'Greats'. What should hold our interest are the ways that these lists are revised. In the last century, scholarship made available the *Sacred Books*

of the East, for instance. As a result, British highschool students must still take instruction in religion, but it can now be in 'comparative religion'. Mortimer Adler recently added four women to his list. Does this make it 'better', less 'controversial'?

Many might say Yes, and recent years have seen the publication of anthologies of 'women's' and 'black' literature. In recent years, Mary Cassatt has been recognized as a major Impressionist painter. Was her exclusion based on any lesser quality of her work or on the simple fact of gender? It almost goes without saying that the political/moral arguments surrounding equal opportunity and affirmative action swirl about such issues in the arts and literature. What should inclusiveness mean? Proportional to the population? To the producing population? Or should it even be corrective, as in affirmative action!

The mantram in many circles is 'gender, race, class'. Our learning, it is said, should 'focus' on these issues. They are, it is claimed, at the bottom of our varied social evils, and proper attention will in the long run lift consciousness and improve the world. When we move past slogans to serious implementations, however, problems appear on two fronts. Is the answer to literary womens' representation simply the addition of more women writers? Or are there women and women (shades of Orwell), some counting less or even negatively. One of my colleagues dismissed a reading list that included an 'androcentric' woman. Parallel instances emerge when something as ambiguous anthropologically as 'race' becomes the criterion of inclusiveness. Langston Hughes? James Baldwin? The situation becomes even cloudier when we try to increase class representation. Will popular culture's representations suffice?

In each of these instances, a major issue is whether we are trying to add persons to the canon because they represent certain underrepresented groups? Or because they speak of the victimized status of such groups, whatever their own group membership? In either case, what about alleged 'canons of excellence'. Were these created, or have they nonetheless served, to exclude these underrepresented groups or interests? Need they be revised to permit greater inclusiveness? Or should we simply start with the liberal stance that any existing statistical group disadvantages are measures of the distance that the society must change to achieve justice?

Given our present day knowledge of the relationships between genetics and ability, the conservative stance that groups get what they deserve simply has become indefensible.

More serious is the problem that the race, gender, class mantram in explanation of victimization and social injustice is too simple and therefore intellectually naive. The Stanford faculty recently voted to add 'religion' to the mantram. If we take a larger) geographically, and longer, historical view of human history, the grounds for victimization must be expanded to include 'nation', 'tribe', 'land', 'ethnicity', 'resources', 'caste', 'ideology'. My own list would add 'boredom' (an observation I owe to Aldous Huxley), 'sadism', and alleged 'wimpishness overcompensated by becoming the bully' (a factor that recent history reminds me). The rationalizations that have led groups of persons to persecute other groups form a large list, and accurate description is a task for careful cultural historians, not ideologues.

Risk of one-word solutions

Alfred North Whitehead said "Seek simplicity, and distrust it." This maxim could well guide us here. Contemporary theory abounds with simplifications: 'power is the only motive'. 'No, it's pleasure'. All of these grand reductionisms fly in the face of a simple logical fact; unless there is some non-A, A-ness loses its meaning.

Nihilism

Two 19th-century thinkers are associated with concerns about an emerging nihilism. Dostoevsky was convinced that loss of god-beliefs would mean that nothing was forbidden. Nietzsche announced the 'death' of god, at the same time voicing a fear that the loss of the only meaning system humans had known would lead to moral bankruptcy. The current trendy version of this is in Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. All systems, he argues, contain fatal flaws and contradictions, and the role of criticism is to unmask these pretensions.

...but does absence of *telos* obviate human will?

It was Darwin's evolution (almost more than Charles Darwin himself) that effectively eliminated, for thoughtful moderns, the possibility that the cosmos contained any *telos*, any final cause that had historically been associated with a god. In some real sense the modern age begins in 1859. But one can also see this date as a 'scientific' starting point of a modern humanism which sees humans as solely and wholly responsible for whatever purposing the cosmos allows and supports. I say 'scientific' start because some earlier thinkers were already moving in this direction 'philosophically'. The deists had taken the challenge of Enlightenment and modernity to mean that we were responsible to and for the universe. The natural theology on which they rested their case permeated Darwin's thinking and that of many of his followers. From this perspective, the fortunes of the divine and the human prospered inversely, and the death of god ushered in the birth of humanity.

Nihilism as inverse of perfectionism

The variety of theoretical approaches to literature and culture now jostling within Western universities seem to share several features. They have mounted a consistent attack against the Enlightenment and political humanism. Since they operate in Western democratic societies, this leads them into an anti-societal alienation. Hegel's 'slaughter bench' of history is taken as a consistent generalization. One can, as noted, focus on the victims of history, in which case the role of learning should be somehow to expose the undesirable motivations of the victimizers. This is the partially Marxist element in these new critical stances. What is often missing is the possibility that improvement is possible by some revolutionary restructuring. This neo-neo-Marxism has become extremely problematic in the past year with the massive collapse of the Russian form of Marxism. Many Western Marxists had long viewed this as a counterfeit and dangerous form of the faith, but it seems doubtful if the generic term 'socialism' can retain much credibility.

Much more devastating, we predict, will be the resurrection of a variety of unsocial structures suppressed during the long 'dictatorships of the proletariats'! Nationalism, sexism,

racism, religious irrationality, greed-all seem to be resurfacing in their traditional forms.

The clearer form of nihilism, which goes beyond simple alienation from an existing society, prefers the trope of irony. Not only are all existing social arrangements problematic, but all meliorative schema are foredoomed. The role of the intellectual is 'to see through these traps, avoiding commitments'.

Targets in the present university battleground

The rhetoric in today's university is heated, and the contenders are highly polarized. The most vocal opposition to the new trends in the humanities comes from the National Association of Scholars and from chroniclers with such titles as "The Hollow Men," or "Tenured Radicals." It does seem clear that several targets that have been identified with the stated and unstated university climate are under attack. Let me identify them under the following rubrics:

...liberal education

The deliberative pluralism inherent in liberal education, and its respect for the differential rates of individual learners fail to meet the political agenda, with its almost-apocalyptic rush to some kind of action, of the critics. By narrowing the focus to an immediate social agenda, education is turned into indoctrination.

...liberalism

The assumption that the results of a liberal education would be both individually liberating and socially meliorative, and that these ends could be achieved by an extension of the evolutionary process, has been at the core of liberalism. This tradition has sought to replace the brute force of elites with the rule of law, and to broaden the participation of an educationally-informed participatory democracy. From the perspective of the critics, Western politics in the decades since World War II have rendered this naive.

...the sciences

Common to current critical theories is a rejection of the sciences. They are either parts of the oppressive structure of bourgeois power or ideologically-tainted and mistaken claims to objectivity. If 'the cosmos' is without meaning, then no meanings can be found anywhere within it. Claims of 'objectivity' and 'value-free inquiry' are simply viewed as naive.

...rationalism

The Enlightenment reconception of reason, so dependent on the emerging sciences, is viewed by the critics as a rigid mentalism that somehow denies the existence of body. Nietzsche was eloquent on this point, and it became part of his own attack on science. Even Freud, who reflects a wistful Enlightenment stance at his core, is made to be the critic who destroyed the pretenses of 'Reason', and thus of any humanism based upon the possibility of fuller and more rational human functioning.

...Western civilization

In this new view, the globalization of Euroamerican civilization was not only economically motivated but has persisted in an unalloyed economic form. The West needed raw materials and markets for its subsequent surplus production. The vast military establishments built to secure these objectives remained useful in maintaining access and in 'pacifying' nationalist uprisings in the conquered territories. Older liberal interpretations of this process stressed the benign concomitants of this imperialism: science and its technology; the rule of law instead of arbitrary authoritarianisms; the secularizing effects of education (even of education under Christian auspices!); the spread of the capitalist rationalization of production and of the work ethic; the forwarding of egalitarianism in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, caste; and above all, the fostering of democracy that recognizes individual rights and dignity.

Contemporary criticism minimizes these accompanying features of imperialism, focusing on the structural and occasionally overt violence forced upon other cultures once they have been subjugated. This brute fact negates any and all sig

nificant impacts that might be made by any of the accompanying factors. Society is seen as a zero-sum game in which those on top must keep all others down in order to maintain their own status (as against the common liberal view of an expanding pie in which each share grows).

The critique of hierarchy and hegemony now in vogue argues that racism and sexism are equally endemic to Western civilization. Since education (the solution of an older liberalism) cannot produce major changes, intellectuals become relegated to the role of analysts. Despite this cynicism, there has been an undercurrent of romantic revolutionism-romantic because it underestimated the resistances to change. The collapse of the Soviet brand of socialism has considerably chastened such romanticism. But for many this has only made for a more universal cynicism

Civilizations as such

When Marxism collapsed (at least in its Leninist form), the major alternative to Western civilization could no longer be cited. After Tiananmen Square, few were ready to hail China as passing through some kind of necessary Jacobin phase. A broader disenchantment is now surfacing. There are several routes to the conclusion that civilizations-as-such are inherently victimizing and oppressive. We can identify with Freud's 'discontents' who see the taming of instinctual life as a necessary but tragic element of social life which is not worth the pain it causes. Or we can project some utopian schema, from which perspective all hitherto existing social arrangements are characterized by their rigidity and oppression. Both of these positions share a kind of romanticism that is hard to maintain reflectively.

Reason for comparative study

Students who have some exposure to another cultural tradition are in a better position to understand the grammar, logic, and lexicon of their own. Let me refer to India since this is the second culture I know best. An awareness of the stakes, as the early Vedic layer was worked over by the writers of the Upanishads and the more radical Buddhists and Jains, shows how the same vocabulary of concepts leads to very different intellectual conclusions as well as social arrangements. A

fuller exploration of early Indian literature also serves to show that the lines between 'sacred' and 'secular' literatures can be drawn at quite different boundaries.

Historicizing present societal concerns

The student who has some knowledge of the variety of cultural traditions is in a much better position to evaluate the variety of ways in which inequalities are created and handled (race, gender, class, etc.). Why are there such differences in the status of women in the U. S. military forces and the Islamic society of Saudi Arabia? Such differences are sometimes too blatant to permit any romantic equating of cultures under the heading of cultural relativism. In other words, students need to understand and explain, by the widest possible tools, the similarities and differences among humanities many cultural traditions. They will almost inevitably find it necessary to determine which of these differences are trivial and which substantial, and enter more intently into the dialogue dealing with the desirability of such differences.

Western or an emerging universal civilization?

But what happens as the 20th century winds down and we raise such critical questions about this particular segment of the civilizations humans have constructed for themselves? Our overall judgment must surely be that we are surrounded by much brutality and stupidity. But we must eventually ask "As compared to what?" At that point, the score improves somewhat.

If, however, we begin to articulate the metanarratives by which we understand ourselves and our historical situation, the matter can become less bleak. We see an emergent naturalism based on the sciences since the 16th century, an emergent respect for human dignity surfacing in the Renaissance, and an emergent recognition that the ground of that dignity lies in intelligence. Taken together, these led to a liberal democratic vision which has displaced older oligarchies in a few Western societies. It is by no means clear that this particular evolution is a necessary one. What is clear is that older societies are not transformed by a few ritualistic trappings such as ballot boxes.

If this democratic vision, based on human rights and human fulfillment did first emerge within white Euro-American states, the period since 1945 has seen its slow deracination and universalization. Those who doubt the viability of this vision need to take second looks at India, many of the Pacific rim societies, at Tiananmen Square, and perhaps most of all at the non-violent bringing down of authoritarian regimes in the Russian orbit. My version of this attractive metanarrative is *the desirability and possibility of expansion of self in ways that expand other selves*.

Let me give a last word to V. S. Naipaul, that brilliant novelist and cultural observer from Trinidad. In a lecture last fall at the Manhattan Institute he said:

The idea of the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the [emerging universal] civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery. I find it marvelous to contemplate to what an extent, after two centuries, and after the terrible history of the earlier part of this century, the idea has come to a kind of fruition. It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don't imagine my father's Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of intellect, the idea of vocation and ~rfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist, and because of³ that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away.

3. *New York Times*. November 5, 1990. The full text has now been printed in *The New York Review*, January 31, 1991.