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Education and the Racist Road to Barbarism

by George Reisman

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Major changes are taking place in the philosophy of American education, changes which are potentially capable of having an enormous impact on all aspects of American life. The changes are inspired by what The New York Times refers to as the “Eurocentrism critique.” According to the Times, “Eurocentrism” is a pejorative term supposed to describe “a provincial outlook that focuses overwhelmingly on European and Western culture while giving short shrift to Asia, Africa and Latin America.”

A typical manifestation of “Eurocentrism,” according to its critics, is the statement that Columbus discovered America. This statement, which most children in America may have learned as their very first fact of history, is now regarded as controversial. Indeed, it is held to be positively offensive because it implies that “there had been no other people on the continent” before Columbus arrived. Traditional American education in general is denounced for seeing the world “only through a Western lens.” Only through that “lens,” it is held, can, for example, African art be regarded as primitive.

In an effort to eliminate such alleged Western and European “bias,” schools are altering the way in which history, literature, and the arts are being taught. Recent changes at Stanford University, where a course on Western civilization was replaced by one in which non-Western ideas had to be included, are only one case in point. The revisions in the history curriculum in California’s public school system, to emphasize Indian and African cultures, are another. Curricula and textbooks are being widely rewritten, and, as evidence of the depth of the changes, the Times reports that efforts are under way “to reconstruct the history of African tribes, going beyond relying on accounts of Western travelers to examining indigenous sources, often oral, and adapting anthropological approaches.”

The implications of these changes are enormous. The acceptance of the “Eurocentrism” critique and its denial of such propositions as “Columbus discovered America” speaks volumes about the state of the educational establishment in the United States and the intellectual establishment in general.

In order to understand the implications, it is first necessary to remind oneself what Western civilization is. From a historical perspective, Western civilization embraces two main periods: the era of Greco-Roman civilization and the era of modern Western civilization, which later encompasses the rediscovery of Greco-Roman civilization in the late Middle Ages, and the periods of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Modern Western civilization continues down to the present moment, of course, as the

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dominant force in the culture of the countries of Western Europe and the United States and the other countries settled by the descendants of West Europeans. It is an increasingly powerful force in the rapidly progressing countries of the Far East, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, whose economies rest on "Western" foundations in every essential respect.

From the perspective of intellectual and cultural content, Western civilization represents an understanding and acceptance of the following: the laws of logic; the concept of causality and, consequently, of a universe ruled by natural laws intelligible to man; on these foundations, the whole known corpus of the laws of mathematics and science; the individual's self-responsibility based on his free will to choose between good and evil; the value of man above all other species on the basis of his unique possession of the power of reason; the value and competence of the individual human being and his corollary possession of individual rights, among them the right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness; the need for limited government and for the individual's freedom from the state; on this entire preceding foundation, the validity of capitalism, with its unprecedented and continuing progress, capital accumulation, and rising living standards; in addition, the importance of visual arts and literature depicting man as capable of facing the world with confidence in his power to succeed, and music featuring harmony and melody.

**Western Civilization Is Open to Everyone**

Once one recalls what Western civilization is, the most vital thing to realize about it is that it is open to everyone. Indeed, important elements of "Western" civilization did not even originate in the West. The civilization of the Greeks and Romans incorporated significant aspects of science that were handed down from Egypt and Babylon. Modern "Western" civilization includes contributions from people living in the Middle East and China during the Dark Ages, when Western Europe had reverted to virtual barbarism. Indeed, during the Dark Ages, "Western" civilization resided much more in the Middle East than in Western Europe. (It is conceivable that if present trends continue, in another century it might reside more in the Far East than in the West.)

The truth is that just as one does not have to be from France to like French-fried potatoes or from New York to like a New York steak, one does not have to be born in Western Europe or be of West European descent to admire Western civilization, or, indeed, even to help build it. Western civilization is not a product of geography. It is a body of knowledge and values. Any individual, any society, is potentially capable of adopting it and thereby becoming "Westernized." The rapidly progressing economies of the Far East are all "Western" insofar as they rest on a foundation of logic, mathematics, science, technology, and capitalism—exactly the same logic, mathematics, science, technology, and capitalism that are essential features of "Western" civilization.

For the case of a Westernized individual, I must think of myself. I am not of West European descent. All four of my grandparents came to the United States from Russia, about a century ago. Modern Western civilization did not originate in Russia and hardly touched it. The only connection my more remote ancestors had with the civilization of Greece and Rome was probably to help in looting and plundering it. Nevertheless, I am thoroughly a Westerner. I am a Westerner because of the ideas and values I hold. I have thoroughly internalized all of the leading features of Western civilization. They are now my ideas and my values. Holding these ideas and values as I do, I would be a Westerner wherever I lived and whenever I was born. I identify with Greece and Rome, and not with my ancestors of that time, because I share the ideas and values of Greece and Rome, not those of my ancestors. To put it bluntly, my ancestors were savages—certainly up to about a thousand years ago, and, for all practical purposes, probably as recently as four or five generations ago.

I know nothing for certain about my great-grandparents, but if they lived in rural Russia in the middle of the 19th century, they were almost certainly totally illiterate, highly superstitious, and primitive in every way. On winter nights, they probably slept with farm animals in their hut to keep warm, as was once a common practice in Northern Europe, and were personally filthy and lice-infested. I see absolutely nothing of value in their "way of life," if it can be called a way of life, and I am immeasurably grateful that my grandparents had the good sense to abandon it and come to America, so that I could have the opportunity of
becoming a “Westerner” and, better still, an American “Westerner,” because, in most respects, since colonial times, the United States has always been, intellectually and culturally, the most Western of the Western countries.

Thus, I am a descendant of savages who dwelt in Eastern Europe—and before that probably the steppes of Asia—who has been Westernized and now sees the world entirely through a Western “lens,” to use the term of the critics of “Eurocentrism.” Of course, it is not really a lens through which I see the world. It is much more fundamental than that. I have developed a Western mind, a mind enlightened and thoroughly transformed by the enormous body of knowledge that represents the substance of Western civilization, and I now see the world entirely on the basis of that knowledge.

For example, I see the world on the foundation of the laws of logic, mathematics, and science that I have learned. And whenever something new or unexpected happens, which I do not understand, I know that it must nevertheless have a cause which I am capable of discovering. In these respects, I differ profoundly from my savage ancestors, who lacked the knowledge to see the world from a scientific perspective and who probably felt helpless and terrified in the face of anything new or unknown because, lacking the principle of causality and knowledge of the laws of logic, they simply had no basis for expecting to be able to come to an understanding of it.

It is on the basis of the same foundation of knowledge that I regard the discoverer of the Western hemisphere to be Columbus, rather than the very first human beings to arrive on the North American continent (probably across a landbridge from Asia), and rather than the Norwegian Leif Ericson. I consider Columbus to be the discoverer not because of any such absurd reason as a preference for Europeans over Asians (Leif Ericson was as much a European as Columbus), but because it was Columbus who opened the Western hemisphere to the civilization I have made my own. Columbus was the man who made it possible to bring to these shores my ideas and values. It is not from the perspective of the residence of my ancestors, who were certainly not Italian or Spanish or even West European, that I regard Columbus as the discoverer of America, but from the perspective of the residence of my ideas and values. Just as at an earlier time, they resided in Greece and Rome rather than in the Russia of my ancestors, so in the 15th and 16th centuries, the home of my ideas and values was in Western Europe. I hold Columbus to have been the discoverer of America from that perspective. This is the perspective that any educated person would hold.

There is no need for me to dwell any further on my own savage ancestors. The plain truth is that everyone’s ancestors were savages—indeed, at least 99.5 percent of everyone’s ancestors were savages, even in the case of descendants of the founders of the world’s oldest civilizations. For mankind has existed on earth for a million years, yet the very oldest of civilizations—as judged by the criterion of having possessed a written language—did not appear until less than 5,000 years ago. The ancestors of those who today live in Britain or France or most of Spain were savages as recently as the time of Julius Caesar, slightly more than 2,000 years ago. Thus, on the scale of mankind’s total presence on earth, today’s Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Spaniards earn an ancestral savagery rating of 99.8 percent. The ancestors of present-day Germans and Scandinavians were savages even more recently, and thus today’s Germans and Scandinavians probably deserve an ancestral savagery rating of at least 99.9 percent.

It is important to stress these facts to be aware how little significance is to be attached to the members of any race or linguistic group achieving civilization sooner rather than later. Between the descendants of the world’s oldest civilizations and those who might first aspire to civilization at the present moment, there is a difference of at most one-half of one percent on the time scale of man’s existence on earth.

**The Standard for Judging a Civilization**

These observations should confirm the fact that there is no reason for believing that civilization is in any way a property of any particular race or ethnic group. It is strictly an intellectual matter—ultimately, a matter of the presence or absence of certain fundamental ideas underlying the acquisition of further knowledge.

Those peoples who possess a written language
may be called civilized, inasmuch as writing is an indispensable means for the transmission of substantial knowledge, and thus for the accumulation of knowledge from generation to generation. Those who possess not only a written language but also knowledge of the laws of logic and the principle of causality are in a position to accumulate and transmit incomparably more knowledge than people who possess merely the art of writing alone. On this basis, Greco-Roman civilization is on a higher plane than any that had preceded it.

Finally, a civilization which possesses still further fundamental applications of human reason, such as the far more extensive development and elaboration of the principles of mathematics and science, the existence of the freedoms of speech and press, and the development of a division of labor economy, is a higher civilization than even that of Greece and Rome. (The freedoms of speech and press are an essential guarantee of the individual's right to disseminate knowledge without being stopped by the fears or superstitions of any group backed by the coercive power of the state. A division of labor economy makes possible a corresponding multiplication of the amount of knowledge applied to production and to meeting the needs of human life, for such knowledge exists essentially in proportion to the number of separate occupations being practiced, each with its own specialized body of knowledge. Equally or even more important, a division of labor economy means that geniuses can devote their talents full time to such fields as science, education, invention, and business, with a corresponding progressive increase in knowledge and improvement in human life.)

Such a civilization, of course, is our very own, modern Western civilization — incomparably the greatest civilization which has ever existed, and which, until fairly recently, had repeatedly been carried to its very highest points in most respects right here in the United States.

The fact that civilization is an intellectual matter is not known to the critics of “Eurocentrism." In their view, Western civilization is a matter not even so much of geography as it is of racial membership. It is, as they see it, the civilization of the white man. In reporting the changes in California's world history curriculum, the Times notes, significantly, that Hispanic, Asian, and black students now make up a majority of the 4.4 million pupils in the state. It quotes the co-author of the new curriculum as saying many educators believe that "people who have non-European backgrounds don’t feel their antecedents lie in Europe." Another critic of “Eurocentrism,” who is described as "heading an overhauling of the public school curriculum of Camden, N.J., to stress...a more 'Afrocentric and Latinocentric' approach," is quoted as saying: "We are not living in a Western country. The American project is not yet completed. It is only in the eyes of the Eurocentrists who see it as a Western project, which means to hell with the rest of the people who have yet to create the project.”

In these statements, Western civilization is clearly identified with people of a certain type, namely, the West Europeans and their descendants, who are white. Students descended from Asians or Africans, it is assumed, can feel at home only to the extent that the curriculum is revised to give greater stress to "the ancient civilizations of China, India and Africa, the growth of Islam and the development of sub-Saharan Africa." The critics of “Eurocentrism" proclaim themselves to be opponents of racism. In fact, they accept exactly the same false premise they claim to oppose—namely, that civilization, or the lack of it, is racially determined.

In earlier centuries, men of European descent observed the marked cultural inferiority of the native populations of Africa, Asia, and the Western hemisphere, and assumed that the explanation lay in a racial inferiority of these peoples. In passing this judgment, they forgot the cultural state of their own ancestors, which was as much below their own as was that of any of these peoples. They also overlooked the very primitive cultural state of many Europeans then living in the eastern part of the continent, and of Caucasians living in the Middle East. Even more important, they failed to see how in accepting racism, they contradicted the essential "Western" doctrine of individual free will and individual responsibility for choices made. For in condemning people as inferior on the basis of their race, they were holding individuals morally responsible for circumstances over which they had absolutely no control. At the same time, they credited themselves with accomplishments which were hardly their creations, but those of a comparative handful of other individuals, most of whom had happened to be of the same race and who, ironically enough, had had to struggle against
the indifference or even outright hostility of the great majority of the members of their own race in order to create civilization.

The New Racism and the Devaluation of Knowledge

Today, the critics of "Eurocentrism" rightly refuse to accept any form of condemnation for their racial membership. They claim to hold that race is irrelevant to morality and that therefore people of every race are as good as people of every other race. But then they assume that if people of all races are equally good, *all civilizations and cultures must be equally good.* They derive civilization and culture from race, just as the European racists did. And this is why they too must be called racists. They differ from the European racists only in that while the latter started with the judgment of an inferior civilization or culture and proceeded backwards to the conclusion of an inferior race, the former begin with the judgment of an equally good race and proceed forward to the conclusion of an equally good civilization or culture. The error of both sets of racists is the same: the belief that civilization and culture are racially determined.

The racism of these newer racists, which is now being imposed on the educational system, implies a radical devaluation of civilization, knowledge, and education. The new racists do not want students to study non-Western civilizations and the conditions of primitive peoples from the perspective of seeing how they lag behind Western civilization and what they might do to catch up. Study from that perspective would be denounced as seeing the world through a "Western lens." It would be considered offensive to people of non-West European origin.

No, what they want is to conduct the study of the various civilizations and even the state of outright savagery itself in a way that makes all appear equal. It is assumed, for example, that black students can feel themselves to be the equal of white students only if their sub-Saharan ancestors are presented as, in a fundamental sense, culturally equivalent to modern West Europeans or Americans.

Now such a program means the explicit obliteration of distinctions among levels of civilization, and between civilization and savagery. It presents ignorance as the equivalent of knowledge, and superstition as the equivalent of science. Everything—logic, philosophy, science, law, technology—is to be ignored, and a culture limited to the level of making dugout canoes is to be regarded as the equivalent of one capable of launching space ships. And all this is for the alleged sake of not offending anyone who supposedly must feel inferior if such a monumental fraud is not committed.

I believe, contrary to the expectations of the new racists, that their program must be grossly offensive to the very students it is designed to reassure. I know that I would be personally outraged if I were told that my intellectual capacities and personal values had been irrevocably defined for me by my ancestors and that now I was to think of myself in terms of the folkways of Russian peasants. I believe that if my ancestors had been Africans and, for example, I wanted to be an artist, I could readily accept the fact that art produced on the basis of a knowledge of perspective, geometry, human anatomy, and the refraction of light was a higher form of art than that produced in ignorance of such considerations. I would readily accept the fact that the latter type of art was, indeed, primitive. I would not feel that I was unable to learn these disciplines merely because my ancestors or other contemporary members of my race had not. I would feel the utmost contempt for the deliberate, chosen primitiveness of those "artists" (almost all white) who had reverted to the level of art of my (and their) primitive ancestors.

Race is not the determinant of culture. Not only is Western civilization open to the members of every race, but its present possessors are also potentially capable of losing it, just as the people of the Western Roman Empire once lost the high degree of civilization they had achieved. What makes the acceptance of the "Eurocentrism" critique so significant is that it so clearly reveals just how tenuous our ability to maintain Western civilization has become.

Western Civilization and the State of Education

The preservation of Western civilization is not automatic. In the span of less than a century, virtually the entire population at the end consists of people who were not alive at the beginning. Western civilization, or any civilization, can continue
only insofar as its intellectual substance lives on in the minds of new generations.

And it can do so only if it is imparted to young minds through education. Education is the formal process of transmitting the intellectual substance of civilization from one generation to the next and thereby developing the uncultivated minds of children into those of civilized adults. Western civilization is imparted to young minds in the teaching of Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics, no less than in the teaching of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle or the plays of Shakespeare. It is imparted in the teaching of every significant subject, from arithmetic to nuclear physics, from reading and writing to the causes of the rise and fall of civilizations. Wherever the intellectual substance of Western civilization is known, its transmission to the minds of students is virtually coextensive with the process of education. For the intellectual substance of Western civilization is nothing other than the fundamentals underlying the highest levels of knowledge attained anywhere on earth, and if the purpose of education is to impart knowledge, then its purpose is to impart Western civilization.

Thus, to the extent that the process of education is undermined, the whole of civilization must also be undermined, starting a generation later. These results will appear more and more striking as time goes on and as more and more defectively educated people take the place of those whose education was better. The worsening effects will likely be further intensified as those whose own education was defective become educators themselves and thus cause succeeding generations to be still more poorly educated.

Education in the United States has been in obvious decline for decades, and, in some ways that are critical but not obvious, perhaps for generations. The decline has become visible in such phenomena as the rewriting of college textbooks to conform with the more limited vocabularies of present-day students. It is visible in the functional illiteracy of large numbers of high school and even college graduates, in their inability to articulate their thoughts or to solve relatively simple problems in mathematics or even plain arithmetic, and in their profound lack of elementary knowledge of science and history.

I believe that the decline in education is probably responsible for the widespread use of drugs. To live in the midst of a civilized society with a level of knowledge closer perhaps to that of primitive man than to what a civilized adult requires (which, regrettably, is the intellectual state of many of today's students and graduates) must be a terrifying experience, urgently calling for some kind of relief, and drugs may appear to many to be the solution.

I believe that this also accounts for the relatively recent phenomenon of the public's fear of science and technology. Science and technology are increasingly viewed in reality as they used to be humorously depicted in Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi movies, namely, as frightening "experiments" going on in Frankenstein's castle, with large numbers of present-day American citizens casting themselves in a real-life role of terrified and angry Transylvanian peasants seeking to smash whatever emerges from such laboratories. This attitude is the result not only of lack of education in science, but more fundamentally, loss of the ability to think critically—an ability which contemporary education provides little or no basis for developing. Because of their growing lack of knowledge and ability to think, people are becoming increasingly credulous and quick to panic.

Thus the critique of "Eurocentrism"—and any changes in curricula that may result from it—can hardly be blamed for inaugurating the decline in American education. On the contrary, it is a product of that decline. The fact that it is being accepted almost without opposition is evidence of how far the decline has already gone.

Why Cultural Relativism Prevails

The equivalence of all cultures, the equivalence of civilization and savagery, is the avowed claim of the doctrine of cultural relativism, which has long been accepted by practically the whole of the educational establishment. It in turn is a consequence of the still older, more fundamental doctrine that there is no objective foundation for values—that all value-judgments are arbitrary and subjective. The new racists are now merely cashing in on this view and attempting to apply it on the largest possible scale, in the process substantially altering the manner in which subjects are taught. Today's educational establishment has fewer compunctions about putting absurd ideas into practice, probably because of the deteriorated state of its own educa-
tion. (Many of its members were educated in the 1960s, in the environment of the “student rebellion.”)

The fact that the educational and intellectual establishments are fully in agreement with the fundamental premises of the new racists helps to explain why even when their members are opposed to the “Eurocentrism” critique, they have nothing of substance to say against it. As reported by the Times, the objections raised amounted to nothing more than complaints about the difficulty of finding non-European writers, philosophers, and artists to replace the European ones dropped from the curricula, and grumblings about the lack of Americans able to teach authoritatively about non-European cultures.

In capitulating to the “Eurocentrism” critique, the educational establishment has reached the point of reducing education to a level below that of ordinary ward politics: education is now to be a matter of pressure-group politics based on the totally false assumptions of racism. If there is a majority of black, Hispanic, or Asian students in an area, then that fact is to be allowed to determine the substance of education, in the belief that these groups somehow “secrete,” as it were, a different kind of civilization and culture than do whites and require a correspondingly different kind of education.

Colleges in the United States have demonstrated such utter philosophical corruption in connection with this subject that if there were a group of students willing to assert with pride their descent from the Vandals or Huns and to demand courses on the cultural contributions of their ancestors, the schools would provide such courses. All that the students would have to do to get their way is to threaten to burn down the campus.

But what best sums up everything involved is this: from now on, in the state of California, a student is to go through 12 years of public school, and the explicit goal of his education is that at the end of it, if he envisions Columbus being greeted by spear-carrying savages, and he happens not to be white, he should identify with the savages—and if he does happen to be white, and therefore is allowed to identify with Columbus, he should not have any idea of why it is any better to identify with Columbus than with the savages.

This is no longer an educational system. Its character has been completely transformed and it now clearly reveals itself to be what for many decades it has been in the process of becoming: namely, an agency working for the barbarization of youth.

The value of education is derived from the value of civilization, whose guardian and perpetuator education is supposed to be. An educational system dedicated to the barbarization of youth is a self-contradictory monstrosity that must be cast out and replaced with a true educational system. But this can be done only by those who genuinely understand, and are able to defend, the objective value of Western civilization.

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