

Culture Wars and the Humanities in the Age of Neoliberalism

ANDREW HARTMAN

IN 1988, a debate played out on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page about whether Stanford University ought to assign John Locke or the anticolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. At the time, such a debate made sense to the nation's reading public. American institutions of higher education were in the grip of the culture wars. This was particularly the case in the humanities—history, literature, the languages, philosophy—where the promise of American life was a focal point of the curriculum. Did Locke or Fanon better help young Americans understand this promise?

Such a debate would be nonsensical now. Instead, we are currently inundated with glowing features of the “problem-solving” technocratic mind at work. Now, Locke and Fanon find themselves on the same side—and it's looking more and more like the losing one. On the winning side? Books about leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators, disruptors, visionaries, game-changers. Sadly, even the almighty Western canon, whether in a traditional guise that includes Locke or in a revised form that embraces Fanon, seems feeble up against the cult of business. Defenders of the humanities are voices in the wilderness. The philistines are on the march.

During the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, left and right shared a commitment to the value of the humanities as a crucial element of American higher education. The humanities were more than a mere luxury. They were vital to higher learning. What left and right disagreed upon, often ferociously, was how to define and teach the humanities. Conservatives contended the humanities should accord with traditional hierarchies and that all American college students should read the Western canon as they defined it—limited to a core group of texts authored by dead white men such as Locke. In contrast,

academic leftists sought a more inclusive, multicultural humanities curriculum and argued that students should read texts that challenged traditional hierarchies, such as Fanon's polemic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

The culture wars that dominated discussions of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s had enduring historical significance. Shouting matches about academia reverberated beyond the ivory tower to lay bare a crisis of national faith. Was America a good nation? Could the nation be good—could its people be free—without foundations? Were such foundations best provided by a classic liberal education in the humanities, which Matthew Arnold described as “the best that has been thought and said”? Was the “best” philosophy and literature synonymous with the canon of Western civilization? Or was the Western canon racist and sexist? Was the “best” even a valid category? How, exactly, should Americans think? Debates over these abstract questions rocked the nation's institutions of higher education during the heyday of the culture wars. But in our current age of neoliberalism, when economic utility has displaced all other criteria of education's worth, Americans are not asked to think about such questions at all.

American universities are currently more racially and ethnically diverse than ever, and women form the majority of college students nationwide. Aligned with these new demographics, the humanities are taught in much more inclusive ways. The canon is livelier than ever. The left won those culture wars. But the victories have proven pyrrhic. These days, not enough students want to study the humanities to justify their existence to cost-conscious administrators, and few public voices are heard defending them, especially conservative voices.

In the dog-eat-dog world of neoliberal capitalism, a humanities education of the type that inculcates intellectual curiosity and humanistic empathy serves no purpose compared to such real-world pursuits as vocational and managerial training. The neoliberal outlook, which pervades politicians from right-wingers like Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to left-of-center liberals like President Obama, is fine with revised canons, with more inclusive, multicultural understandings of the world—but not with public money supporting something

so seemingly useless as the humanities. In our times, people who call themselves conservatives have abandoned their traditionalist defense of the Western canon in favor of no canon at all.

Culture warriors on both sides have been overtaken by events. A bipartisan consensus that emphasizes job training as education's *sine qua non* now dominates the landscape. What follows is my attempt to make sense of this often ironic shift in the historical trajectory of American higher education. How did we get from the culture wars, which dominated headlines in the 1980s and 1990s, to the neoliberal consensus, which is so ubiquitous that most observers assume there is no alternative? And how might we revive the passion for the humanities that animated both sides in the culture wars but has since been displaced by a narrow, market-based, utilitarian perspective? How do we achieve this when Arne Duncan, Obama's secretary of education, and Betsy DeVos, Trump's barely confirmed coice for that position, are both enthusiastic proponents of school privatization, and when Trump threatens to shutter the National Endowment for the Humanities?

To answer these questions, we must begin with the cultural revolution otherwise known as "the sixties." The countercultural ferment of that era gave birth to a nation more open to different peoples, diverse ideas, altered norms, and new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself. The radical political mobilizations of the sixties—civil rights, black and Chicano power, feminism, gay liberation, the antiwar movement—destabilized the America that millions knew. Black-power activist Stokely Carmichael sought to destroy the American "white power structure" that had bottled up black freedom for centuries. Radical feminist Robin Morgan fought against a patriarchal America in the name of a future "genderless society." Gay liberationist Martha Shelley informed America that homosexuals "will never go straight until you go gay." For them, American culture was always fractured in that they were never included in it. Their radical attacks on America were attempts to make it more inclusive.

Conservatives, on the other hand, viewed American culture as something that, once whole, had been lost. They felt challenges to normative America as the shattering of worlds. Newt Gingrich wrote

an entire book, appropriately titled *To Renew America* (1995), on such a proposition. “From the arrival of English-speaking colonists in 1607 until 1965,” Gingrich wrote, “from the Jamestown colony and the Pilgrims, through de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, up to Norman Rockwell’s paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, there was one continuous civilization built around commonly accepted legal and cultural principles.” For conservatives like Gingrich, the America they loved was in distress. Returning to the values that supposedly animated the nation in the 1950s was the only way to save it.

In the wake of the cultural challenges posed during the sixties, Americans grew more divided than ever over the question of American identity: what does it mean to be an American? Efforts to answer this question have long justified the place of the humanities in American higher education. So it is no surprise that by the 1980s, a nationwide debate over the humanities had emerged as front-page fodder.

Many academics in humanities disciplines like English and history carried the spirit of sixties protest into their classroom. They took a more critical stance toward the Western canon, which they believed too Eurocentric and male dominated properly to reflect modern American society. Books authored by dead white men were insufficient. Toni Morrison was to sit alongside Shakespeare; *I, Rigoberta Menchu* alongside *Leviathan*. As the literary theorist Jane Tompkins put it, the struggle to revise the canon was a battle “among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself.” Many college students agreed with the canon revisionists. In 1986, students at Stanford University formally complained to the Stanford academic senate that the university’s required Western Civilization reading list was racist. They marched and chanted, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go.”

Conservatives interpreted the sixties liberation movements—and their outgrowth in curricular multiculturalism—as threats to the cultural unity of their once-great nation. In defense of America, many conservatives invoked the countervailing power of traditional humanistic values, which they believed were universal and timeless. William Bennett, a leading conservative culture warrior who served

in the Reagan administration as chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and then as Secretary of Education, argued that every American should have an education grounded in the humanities. But Bennett held a traditionalist vision of what that meant. He believed the Western canon should be the philosophical bedrock of the nation's higher education. "Because our society is the product and we the inheritors of Western civilization," Bennett matter-of-factly contended, "American students need an understanding of its origins and development, from its roots in antiquity to the present."

Allan Bloom's 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* made a rigorous if eccentric case for a classic humanities education rooted in the Western canon. Bloom, who taught philosophy at the University of Chicago, believed that a humanities education should provide students with "four years of freedom," which he described as "a space between the intellectual wasteland [the student] has left behind and the inevitable dreary professional training that awaits him after the baccalaureate." Campus leftists were unimpressed by Bloom's dismissal of texts authored by women, minorities, and non-Westerners as lacking merit compared to the great books authored by the likes of Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What demands remembering is that Bloom's antiutilitarian defense of the humanities resonated with many Americans, including many conservatives—indeed, it surprisingly shot to the top of the best-seller lists. To today's ears, his argument for passionate engagement with ultimate questions sounds like a quaint echo of the distant past.

The sixties liberation movements and the ensuing conservative backlash foregrounded the humanities as they had never been foregrounded before. Both sides looked to the humanities for legitimacy. Moreover, both left and right articulated educational philosophies founded on opposition to economic utility. Just as Bloom wanted his students to experience learning as an erotic act—an encounter with the sublime—multiculturalists desired an education that transcended the sordid world of American capitalism. This was even true of the most enthusiastic promoters of identity politics, who have long been accused of subordinating the ideal of liberal education to the

formulaic dictates of political exigency. In *Sexual Politics*, a 1970 critique of patriarchal culture and literature, the radical feminist Kate Millett wrote that what “can be described as distinctly human rather than animal activity is largely reserved for the male.” Millett merely wanted to extend the realm of humanity—and the humanities—to include women.

The culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, when both left and right attributed intrinsic value to the humanities, was an exceptional period in the history of American higher education. Those years, when all sides saw merit in universal liberal education, were an anomalous detour from a longer-standing American belief that education is above all else a tool for personal economic advancement. This exceptional cultural moment resulted from the convergence of the sixties cultural revolutions and the remnants of the New Deal Order that, although already in decline by the 1980s, left behind powerful if residual social democratic sensibilities. A debate about whether Locke or Fanon deserves a place in a national curriculum—a debate about what should constitute common knowledge—could only happen between people who shared an understanding that education is a social good. Such a debate could only happen in a nation where people believed *ideas* were part of a common inheritance.

In addition to legislation that included social democratic landmarks such as the Social Security Act, the New Deal Order included a collective commitment to higher education unparalleled in American history. Legislation such as the GI Bill of 1946, which provided veterans with many benefits, college tuition chief among them, demonstrates such a commitment. It can also be measured by the sheer growth in the number of students who enrolled in the nation’s universities. 3,789,000 students enrolled in American colleges in 1960. By 1970, that figure had more than doubled to 7,852,000. Due to massive public investment, most were able to attend college without incurring the oppressive debt that is so common now.

American universities thrived as a result. Consider, for example, California’s public system of higher education, which for much of the second half of the twentieth century was the most admired system

in the world. Up until the 1990s, California students could expect to attend college at almost no cost to themselves, whether they attended one of the state's elite universities, one of its exceptional state colleges, or one of its many first-rate community colleges. Even as late as the 1980s, in the midst of the Reagan administration, many Americans still clung to social democratic sensibilities about higher education. Many still believed the nation's universities were part of the common good. In this context, shaping the university curriculum was a common endeavor.

The convergence of these two sensibilities—sensitivity to the sixties cultural revolutions alongside a lingering attachment to social democracy—engendered an extraordinary period in American intellectual and educational history. But this era was also short-lived. Black people who attend college can now learn all about their place in American history and literature. But to do so likely requires that they incur burdensome personal debt. To return to the California example: state spending per pupil has been slashed by more than half, a byproduct of the state's shrinking revenues, which is in turn a byproduct of the 1978 taxpayer revolt codified by Proposition 13. In-state tuition at the University of California is now in the range of \$15,000 annually, with tuition also rising exponentially at state and community colleges. A Berkeley student is now likelier to be confronted with a diverse array of human perspectives, but most Californians are priced out of a humanities education, multicultural or not.

Tuition and debt are soaring nationwide, as public support shrinks. In February 2015, Republican Governor Scott Walker drafted a draconian state budget that proposed to decrease the state's contribution to the University of Wisconsin system by over \$300 million over the next two years. Beyond simply slashing spending, Walker also attempted to alter the language that has guided the core mission of the University of Wisconsin over the last hundred years or more, known as the "Wisconsin Idea." Apparently Walker's ideal university would no longer "extend knowledge and its application beyond the boundaries of its campuses" and would thus cease its "search for truth" and its efforts to "improve the human condition," as his proposed language changes

scrapped these ideas entirely; the governor's scaled-back objective was for the university to merely "meet the state's workforce needs." No longer welcome, humanistic dreamers were to be replaced by soulless number crunchers.

When a draft of Walker's proposed revisions to the Wisconsin Idea surfaced, outraged Wisconsinites (including some conservatives) compelled the governor to backtrack. Yet Walker's actions are consistent with recent trends in conservative politics. Republicans today are on the warpath against education—particularly against the humanities, those academic disciplines where the quaint pursuit of knowledge about "the human condition" persists, and where ways of reimagining the social order have historically been incubated.

In 2012, Florida Governor Rick Scott proposed a law making it more expensive for students enrolled at Florida's public universities to obtain degrees in the humanities. As Scott and his supporters argued, in austere times they needed to, in the words of Republican State Senate President Don Gaetz, "lash higher education to the realities and opportunities of the economy." In other words, a humanities degree, unlike a business degree, was a luxury good.

Republicans seem to have forgotten the anomalous detour of the 1980s and 1990s—the time when some of their leading figures worried less about the bottom line and more about the soul of America. But Republicans are not alone in this. Even President Obama joined this chorus when he half joked that students with vocational training are bound to make more money than art history majors. Unlike right-wing politicians such as Walker, Obama has not made a career of attacks on the values taught in the humanities. Indeed, his own educational background would suggest the opposite. Columbia University, where Obama earned his bachelor's degree, is one of the few universities that requires all students take art history. But perhaps this irony is indicative: what's good for Obama and the rest of those privileged enough to attend Columbia is not necessarily what's good for everyone, at least not from the neoliberal perspective.

Such anti-intellectualism, a strong animus against the idea that learning about humanity is a worthy pursuit regardless of its lack of

obvious labor-market applicability, has deep roots in American history. Richard Hofstadter's classic work, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), traced this tendency to the early nation's large evangelical population, for whom book learning was useful only insofar as it aided Bible reading. By the early 1900s, evangelical anti-intellectualism had converged with progressive practicality. President Theodore Roosevelt advised that "we of the United States must develop a system under which each individual citizen shall be trained so as to be effective individually as an economic unit, and fit to be organized with his fellows so that he and they can work in efficient fashion together." Contemporary conservatives (and many liberals) are thus merely following the crude utilitarian logic that has informed many politicians and educational reformers since the nation's first common schools were founded in the 1840s.

But, as the history of the culture wars demonstrates, such logic has not always carried the day. Despite their anomalous character, the culture wars deserve attention as the moment when right and left agreed on the value of the humanities, however narrowly or broadly they defined the curriculum.

So how did we get from the cultural conservatism of Bloom and Bennett to the economic nihilism of Walker and Scott? How did we arrive at a situation in which the humanities taught in the nation's universities generally adhere to multicultural values, and yet the impact of such values is limited by the diminishing number of students who choose to major in subjects like history and English? Ironically, the culture wars that made the humanities a topic of national conversation also paved the way for the contemporary attack on them. And both left and right are to blame.

By fostering the notion that the humanities were in crisis, conservatives like Bloom and Bennett played into the hands of such reform groups as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which lobby for massive disinvestment in public education and wish to reorganize universities more closely to resemble corporations. The privatization of education has long been one of the policy objectives pushed

by ALEC, which formed in 1973 as a nonprofit consortium of conservative state politicians and corporate representatives. The traditionalist attack on “politically correct” left-wing academics weakened the public’s trust in universities, leaving them vulnerable to the legions of ALEC-type reformers who wish to make universities more focused on the bottom line. When profit is the chief motivation, the humanities do not fare as well as business-friendly subjects like management and technology that attract wads of private cash.

But on the flip side, the academic left’s focus on identity politics was somewhat self-defeating in the long run. Identity politics are often in conflict with social democratic values in the sense that they divide people who should be united. The logic of identity politics submerges class and is focused instead on creating opportunities for individual ascent by previously excluded peoples. In this way identity politics—perhaps unintentionally—go hand in glove with the neoliberal dismantling of a social welfare state, since individual achievement is emphasized rather than the greater social good. Hillary Clinton nearly shatters the glass ceiling, but millions of women remain in poverty, with little chance of accessing higher education. In short: identity politics pose little threat to neoliberal capitalism. Quite the contrary. Social democracy, on the other hand, is the very thing that neoliberal policies are designed to destroy.

My intention is not to render a condescending judgment born of hindsight about the sixties liberation movements and academic identity politics. Marching on the English Department was a worthwhile crusade insofar as the nation’s cultural gatekeepers were excluding perspectives provided by women and people of color. Winning the culture wars over the humanities canon is an achievement that the left should take pride in. But the more diverse culture that the left won has been cut off at the kneecaps by neoliberal policies, which, unfortunately, identity politics have helped empower.

Proving the historical truth of what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer called the “dialectic of enlightenment,” the ethos of the sixties liberation movements has merged with new constraints.

The culture of American capitalism discovered a new dynamism by incorporating the oppositional themes of identity politics. If any single ethos now represents American culture, it is that promulgated by Madison Avenue and Silicon Valley: multiculturalism, so important to shaking up normative America, has become a milquetoast commodity, no more, no less. Such are the cultural contradictions of liberation.

These cultural contradictions, which plague both the traditionalism of the right and the social democracy of the left, are worth pondering. Perhaps Robert Bork of all people was correct when he made the heretical argument that the individual freedoms enshrined in the Declaration of Independence were dangerous because they set into motion a society dedicated to permanent cultural revolution.

How does one set limits on the proposition that “all men are created equal”? Against the assumptions of those who signed the Declaration, “all men” eventually came to include, in fits and starts, nonproperty holders, slaves and former slaves, black people and other racial minorities, immigrants from strange lands, Catholics, Jews and other non-Christians, atheists, women, gays, lesbians, the transgendered, the disabled. Viewed in this way, the sixties liberation movements made manifest an ethos that dated to the nation’s founding.

But, as the history of the culture wars shows, such liberation, no matter how foundational its ethos, met with fierce resistance. When new peoples challenged the existing meanings of nationhood, a seeming consensus about American identity fractured. The humanities curriculum fractured too. It could not have been otherwise.

Permanent cultural revolution makes a common culture a very difficult proposition to sustain. And without a common culture, it is hard to build the solidarity necessary for social democracy. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that the modest American social welfare state—the New Deal state—was constructed during an era of unusual cultural stability, an era, for example, with a highly restrictive immigration regime. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the economic reforms enacted in the years between the presidencies of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson overlapped with a cessation in the cultural

revolution—a moment, for example, when challenges to conventional gender roles had temporarily stalled. Perhaps it is no coincidence that an era of unprecedented economic equality was also an era when cultural norms were intensely policed.

Can we have both multiculturalism and social democracy? If there is an answer to this question it might lie in the humanities. If common ground is a prerequisite for social democracy, then Americans need to find something meaningful that unites them. One thing that has consistently united Americans across history, indeed perhaps the only thing, has been the continuing debate about what it means to be an American. We rarely agree on answers to this question, but we almost always seem to agree that the debate is worth having.

What better place to have the debate about what it means to be an American than in the humanities disciplines? What better place to hash out questions of American identity than in university classrooms dedicated to investigating the nation's history and ideas? Grizzled veterans of the culture wars might not want to hear it, but in order to save the humanities we may need to restart the debates that saturated higher education during the 1980s and 1990s.

But how to have this debate again without recapitulating the forces that helped pave the way for neoliberalism? How to recreate this culture wars debate in a higher education system that has been transformed by neoliberalism and thus limited faculty power—indeed, in a system where a growing number of faculty are contingent? How to restart the culture wars without repeating the liberation-crisis dialectic that provided an opening for those who wished to destroy the humanities and public education? Right and left would both have to give something up. Conservatives would have to reengage with the academic left minus the “sky is falling” crisis talk. They would have to recognize that a debate about the canon invites them back into the humanities from which they believe they have been excluded.

For their part, academic leftists would need to relent from their hyperprofessional disdain for traditional approaches to history and literature. Humanities professors may be certain about the answer to

the Locke or Fanon question—and questions like it that no longer have purchase in academic discourse—but for many people, especially conservatives but also those unfamiliar with recent trends in the humanities, such questions are far from settled. More important, they are intellectually exciting. By rekindling the culture wars, the humanities could once again become *relevant* to broader arenas of public debate.

So which is it: Locke or Fanon? Or maybe both?