

Resuscitating Liberal Education and Democracy

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Published online: 17 April 2018

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Liberal education and democracy go hand in hand, as crowning achievements of Western civilization—indeed, of all humanity. Throughout human existence, most cultures have been either religious orthodoxies or secular tyrannies, where indoctrination and enforcement perpetuate the necessary socialization and acculturation. “Liberal democracies” more closely resemble individuals, in being comparatively self-determined and self-governed. Socialization and acculturation occur through open discourse (explanatory competition, free speech), already well established in ancient Greece prior to the first true democracies.¹ Together, accurate self-defining information and open discourse define “liberal education,” a precondition for liberal democracy. Only with an informed citizenry composed of individuals who can think, reason, discriminate, and reflect independently can free institutions flourish.²

“Liberal democracy” optimizes rights and freedoms, balanced with equal opportunity in a fundamental tension. Whenever approximated, it confers immense well-being, wealth, innovation, and military power. Underappreciated is its anomalous rarity and fragility—its exceptional vulnerability to attack from both without and within.³ Democracy flourished for barely one generation in ancient Athens, and persisted for longer only within Great Britain and its progeny (and even here for only a brief half-millennium, always under threat.)

¹Philippe Nemo, *What Is the West?*, trans. Kenneth Casler (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006).

²Mary Marcy, “Liberal Education: Democracy, Leadership, and the Role of Liberal Education,” Association of American Colleges & Universities, retrieved on March 15, 2018, <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/democracy-leadership-and-role-liberal-education>.

³David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

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Why this paradox, such incredible power and effectiveness, along with such anomalous rarity and fragility? Two underappreciated keys to this question are also paradoxical.

One, freedom rests on strong authority structures in order to persist—as opposed to being their antithesis. Not just any such structures. Only one particular pattern of equally powerful competing authorities that check and balance one another, all subject to public accountability, will work to preserve freedom as we understand it. This developed uniquely by circumstance in the British Isles during the past millennium and then expanded through conquest, social experiment, and emulation.⁴ In the U.S. it became anchored in religious and moral traditions that converged onto an “American creed” of open competition tempered by work ethic, family commitment, and personal responsibility.⁵

Two, “negative liberty” (from external coercion) is emphasized, but “positive liberty” (for active agency, “authority”) is simply presumed.⁶ Only “freedom from” authorities’ coercion is overtly stated, proclaimed and celebrated. Students may learn of how the Magna Carta checked royal abuse, how the rise of Parliament subjected all authorities to the rule by law, of the emergence of free elections, and of the progressive amendment process built into the U.S. Constitution. But their foundational cultural authority structures, the underlying religious and moral traditions, are simply presumed, covert, taken for granted.

This imbalance works fine when the need for multiple authorities is widely accepted. This had been the case throughout most of human history—save for ongoing conflicts over their application and violent regime changes if and when rulers became too negligent, incompetent, or tyrannizing. Within modern democracies, this tacit acceptance largely persisted throughout the two world wars and early Cold War, but then strangely came apart. Now under attack, the fact that the need for authorities was only presumed has made it more vulnerable than if it had been openly stated.

Turning against Ourselves

During the Cold War, we triumphed over internal evils by enacting integration through the civil rights laws in 1964–1965. But strangely, almost at our very peak of success, a turnabout occurred. Conflict no

⁴Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, 4 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1956–1958).

⁵Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁶Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

longer centered on what authorities were to prevail or how, but on the very need for authorities in themselves.

The self-defining functions of authorities now came under attack.⁷ The opening battles were fought within institutions of higher learning. In the name of “freedoms,” campus radicals turned against the very institutions that underlie them. They made outrageous demands, and to even these radicals’ incredulity, legitimate authorities simply caved. This invited escalating demands, often countered with only weak defense. Destabilization ensued. Soon relabeled as “progress,” it gained momentum, and still defies all intellectual, legal, and political efforts to restore balance.⁸ Education content slowly shifts from learning core concepts to indoctrination into a utopian “political correctness” that claims to expand freedoms without limit and rectify all inequities. Those who try to defend traditional institutions and values are increasingly silenced with *ad hominem* attributions. Free speech has nearly been extinguished on many campuses.⁹ But indoctrination and coercive enforcement are hallmarks of tyranny. Has liberal democracy committed cultural suicide?

Beginning in the mid-1980s, many high level voices were warning about what was happening on the college campus and what was needed, from almost all angles.¹⁰ But the destabilizing continued to escalate, and the realm of politics fared no better. How did democracy’s long accepted institutions suddenly become demonized as evils to be overcome just when they’d proven their efficacy and beneficence?

Two large scale processes converged. First, Hitler’s tyranny epitomized abuse of authority at its ugliest extreme, traumatizing all parties in the aftermath of World War II. Revulsion soon synergized with horror at our own racism and colonial abuses, driven by fear of the Vietnam draft and its unconvincing rationales.¹¹ Our mirror reflection now looked ugly to many young people. It made sense to revolt against any institution with the authority to enforce behavioral norms or standards. Education’s authorities shared this crisis of confidence, which weakened their resolve to defend liberal education’s foundations. Respect for institutions and

⁷Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁹Kristen Powers, *The Silencing: How the Left Is Killing Free Speech* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2015).

¹⁰Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

¹¹Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, dir., *The Vietnam War*, (Washington: PBS, 2017).

personal responsibility plummeted, while demands for “liberation” and victim entitlements escalated.

A second synergy emerged, both opposing and reinforcing the first. Looking again at WWII’s aftermath, we can ask why there was any less revulsion to Communist tyrants Stalin and Mao, who each killed millions of innocents. Although communists had openly declared themselves toward our destruction, many young idealists could identify with the communists’ stated rationales—trying to create a more perfect world. Our own authorities were increasingly perceived as evil, while our far more tyrannizing enemies evoked sympathy.

Legal doctrines soon arose, designed to protect victim populations from abuse—e.g., child protection, affirmative action, sexual harassment, and disability law.¹² These quickly became entrenched, and are now held to be virtually sacred—despite variably impinging on constitutional rights and lacking truly compelling evidence that they work as intended. Through their growing body of case law, they became institutionalized.

Interestingly, the social milieu that has emerged by default can be analogized to a quasi-communist utopia without a Stalin or Mao. Rather than human tyrants who kill millions of innocents, more impersonal but terribly coercive forces have served to kill off liberal democracy’s foundational institutions. “Political correctness” has taken our very soul.

How to respond to the emerging victim culture

We currently face a “victim dilemma.” Victimization happens, often accompanies egregious wrongdoing, and demands correction. Detering and punishing “perpetrators” who victimize others is an essential function of criminal law, in all societies in all eras. Whether or how much the new post-1960 victim doctrines have improved things beyond this basic protection needs reexamination.

Selectively emphasizing victimhood over personal responsibility has profoundly paradoxical untoward effects—e.g., tyrannizing others, undermining essential social structures, even erroneously justifying tyrants’ military aggressions.¹³ Minority hatreds are escalating, and mistrust of authority and overemphasis on historical sins has led to the creation of a nation of victims, ever ready to take offense and see injustice. Any undesired event or idea becomes “traumatizing.” Victims claim to be traumatized from hearing certain ideas

¹²Laurence Tribe, *American Constitutional Law*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul, MN: Foundation Press, 2000).

¹³Vamik D. Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies & Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships*. (Lanham MD, Jason Aronson, 1994).

expressed and demand “safe spaces” free of such “micro-aggressions.” Traumatic victimhood is escalating.

Corrective antithesis lies in victims’ agency, that which only they are capable of doing for themselves, by acting only at their loci of control. Victims’ responsibilities are currently taboo, though self-evident. To exempt people from responsibility denies genuine equality and robs them of their basic humanity. We’ve learned lots about trauma since Franklin Roosevelt’s “fear of fear itself,” later relabeled “traumatophobia.” New data suggest three ways to reactivate victims’ agency.

One, trauma reenacts itself through addiction to internal psychoactive chemicals that it stimulates.¹⁴ Hence, to abstain voluntarily from traumatic reenactment is paramount for reversing trauma’s effects. When starved of its neurochemical food, the trauma response slowly subsides, progressively suppressed by higher brain centers (“extinction”).¹⁴

Two, educators should foster a social climate that favors abstinence over reenactment. Standing firm against coercive offense-taking is the social equivalent to voluntary abstention. Authors should rarely if ever retract or apologize if a constructive but unwelcome contribution evokes coercive offense-taking. Apologies feed the escalating coercion, by signaling submission.¹⁵ Nor does it work to counter-traumatize, or “fight fire with gasoline.” Rather, one simply stays put. For example, “I don’t want to offend, but here’s where I stand and why, and I won’t be pulled off course!”—like besieged Britons’ “life goes on” attitude during the Blitz.

Three, confronting enabling and self-deceiving are even more challenging. In principle, academic administrators should do far more to support beleaguered faculty who come under offense-takers’ heavy artillery.¹⁶ Here, educators can seek levers that might be available but underutilized. Political action? Litigation? Mobilizing alumni donors toward collective action? All of these options are worth exploring, and there are undoubtedly others.

Resuscitating Liberal Education and Democracy

Here are some recommendations, summarized:

¹⁴Bessel A. van der Kolk (Ed.), *Psychological Trauma* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1987); Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁵Anita Eckstaedt, “Ego syntonic Object Manipulation: The Formation of a Submissive Relationship,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 70 (February 1989): 499-512.

¹⁶Peter Wood, “The Article That Made 16,000 Ideologues Go Wild,” National Association of Scholars, October 16, 2017, https://www.nas.org/articles/the_article_that_made_16000_ideologues_go_wild.

One: Label attacks for what they actually are, real attacks—whether by external enemies (e.g., ISIS) or internal undermining of our basic structures (e.g., counterculture, offense-takers). Two: Make overt what’s covert, at two levels: (a) expose the widely shared self-deceptions behind destructive attacking, wherever it’s being concealed, rationalized, enabled, and defended; (b) explain the positive functions of what is being attacked, i.e., emphasize “positive freedom” and the necessity for the foundational political and moral authority structures without which our freedoms will perish from this earth.

Covert attacking presents a far more formidable challenge. Consider two of the most sensitive current issues, “black lives matter” and the “campus rape crisis.” The former suggests that minorities should seek more police protection, to save thousands from inner city violence. The latter suggests that fewer women will be raped if they are able to preserve their capacity to deny consent by moderating their own drinking. What betrays these movements’ aggressive intent is that natural responsibilities are denied in favor of violent rioting and coercive offense-taking.¹⁷ No matter how well they’re rationalized, to label these attacks as being attacks is a precondition for society’s defense.

“Multiculturalism” is more subtle. Insisting that “all cultures and life styles are equally valued” denies the far greater prevalence of stasis and tyranny within most cultures. Whenever there’s an implicit message that all cultures are equal—“except ours,” this constitutes another covert attack whose self-deceiving rationales demean the West’s multifaceted contributions to cumulative culture.¹⁸

Indoctrination by educational institutions further undermines democracy’s underlying structures. Without historical memory of who one is and where one came from, there’s no cultural identity. Fewer graduates will appreciate their precious heritage. Absent factual correction, socially constructed falsehoods get taken in as if they were the real thing.¹⁹

Three: Ask opponents what liberal education and democracy should be replaced with, if overthrown. This is an empirical question and has been amply tested. Rather than *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, the utopian French experiment led to a reign of terror. Neither the Russian nor Chinese experiments led to classless societies or communal parkland, but to the slaughter of over millions.

¹⁷Taleb Starkes, *Black Lies Matter: Why Lies Matter to the Race Grievance Industry* (CreateSpace Publishing, 2016); and KC Johnson and Stuart Taylor Jr., *The Campus Rape Frenzy: The Attack on Due Process at America’s Universities* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017).

¹⁸Carol Iannone, “Who the People?” *Academic Questions* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 259–65.

¹⁹Laura Spinney, “The Shared Past That Wasn’t: How Facebook, Fake News and Friends Are Altering Memories and Changing History,” *Nature* 543 (2017): 168–70.

Our own utopian efforts have yielded political correctness and stifled free expression.

Education must also address wrongs, grievances, grounds for rational guilt and cautious vigilance. But these need not negate our pride in having faced down and overcome so many evils, taking human civilization to unprecedented levels. Two overarching goals emerge: to (a) restore education in Western history, culture, and self-defining institutions; and (b) defend the free speech that is essential for culture to remain cumulative and self-correcting.²⁰ Free competition among diverging viewpoints need not polarize, but even more, can paradoxically lend a hidden hand to greater cooperation toward the mutual benefit.

²⁰Peter Wood, *The Architecture of Intellectual Freedom* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2016), https://www.nas.org/articles/the_architecture_of_intellectual_freedom.