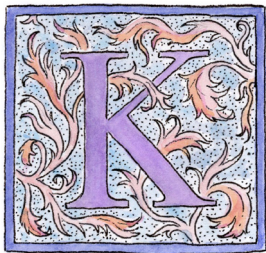


From *My Dinner with Andre* to That Dinner with Kanye



KANYE WEST was nowhere near our minds when, last summer, the editors of SAPIR decided to devote the current issue to the theme of culture. We wanted to focus on the rich varieties of culture that Jews produce and participate in, rather than dwell on the larger culture we inhabit. The Jewish story has never been, and must never be, solely a matter of outrage and fear.

But when one of America's most significant cultural trendsetters decides to go "death con 3" on "JEWISH PEOPLE," and the former president of the United States has him and a notorious Holocaust denier over for dinner, then it's natural for nearly every Jew in America to ask some version of the same question: "WTF?" How did the cultural ground shift so suddenly, and so shockingly, under our feet?

The answer is that it did not happen suddenly. The shift has been taking place over decades. And it has less to do with the status

of Jews in America than it does with the transformation of American culture itself. Think of this as a journey—or a descent—from *My Dinner with Andre* to that dinner with Kanye.

My Dinner with Andre was a 1981 film directed by Louis Malle. It consists almost entirely of a long conversation at the Café des Artistes in Manhattan between the actor Wallace Shawn and the theater director André Gregory, each more or less playing himself. Shawn and Gregory are both Jewish, both products of Harvard, both New Yorkers, both deeply serious about art, theater, the future of humanity, both concerned with the question of the good life.

As a philosophical dialogue, the film is overrated. Still, it was a hit with audiences and critics and remained a cultural landmark for years. It operates on the premise that the things that really matter are the shape of ideas and the interpretation of experiences. And it models a sort of humane ideal for those who, even when at sea in their personal or professional lives, can always find a harbor in warm and serious conversation.

Could a movie like *My Dinner with Andre* be made today, much less do well commercially? It seems doubtful. There is no profanity, violence, comedy, sex, special effects, political diatribes, excursions into victimhood, or shocking personal revelations. The only action is speech. Its passing literary and historical references are to Austen, Bulgakov, Melville, and Speer, among others. To the extent that it has a central theme, it is the fears and anxieties of a pair of urbane middle-aged men.

But it got made because Shawn and Gregory were able to find a famous director who believed in the script. And it succeeded because there was a reasonably large audience that was in tune with its sensibilities and preoccupations and believed it was worth seeing.

This was an audience that shared a certain frame of cultural references. Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy would have been

familiar and important names. So would Saul Bellow and John Updike, Lionel Trilling and Christopher Lasch, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. Politically, most of the audience would probably have seen Ronald Reagan as an intellectual lightweight unworthy of high office. But they would also have been electrified by the Solidarity movement in Poland and alarmed by the revolution in Iran. And the idea of Western civilization would have been precious to them.

That audience, and the culture that mattered to it, was not exclusively or even predominantly Jewish. But it was a milieu where Jews could thrive, and not simply because the barriers of discrimination had by then been mostly swept away. It was also a culture that delighted in the written word. It was familiar with the substance—and distrustful of the consequences—of Big Ideas. It saw skepticism as a virtue. If a single personal characteristic defined it, it was intelligent self-doubt. It knew how to be serious without taking itself seriously.

The culture in which *My Dinner with Andre* met with success was also, in many ways, a troubled one. A generation reared on books in the 1940s and '50s was raising children reared on TV. The rebellious but idealistic youth culture of the 1960s had dissolved into the self-involved and cynical culture of the 1970s and '80s. The academy was in the process of giving tenure to the same radicals who had trashed campus life a decade earlier. Urban life was collapsing. The country was reeling from Watergate, inflation, and the Iran hostage crisis.

But for all the culture's troubles, it was still one that had an instinctive reverence for the power of language, the life of the mind, the world of ideas. In 1982, a few months after *My Dinner with Andre* came out, Reagan gave a speech to the British Parliament. It contained the following lines:

We're approaching the end of a bloody century plagued by a terrible political invention—totalitarianism. Optimism comes less easily today, not because democracy is less vigorous, but because

But for all the culture's troubles, it was still one that had an instinctive reverence for the power of language, the life of the mind, the world of ideas.

democracy's enemies have refined their instruments of repression. Yet optimism is in order, because day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower. From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none—not one regime—has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root.

It's hard to imagine any American politician employing (or even having the capacity for) this kind of oratory today, with its understated echoes of Churchill, its elegant use of metaphor, its philosophical appreciation of the inner weakness of all dictatorships, its accurate prediction that free societies would ultimately endure while Marxist ones were headed for the "ash heap of history." Perhaps the right measure of American culture in the early 1980s is that such a speech would be understood by a broad, and broadly educated, public. It was the kind of public that could turn *My Dinner with Andre* into a sleeper hit.

Some 40 years later came that dinner with Kanye.

Not everything that happened in American culture in the intervening decades was bad. Cities (at least until a couple of years ago)

became safer and more livable. Women, minorities, and openly gay people rose to positions of influence and power. New industries, based on technologies barely conceivable in the early '80s, were born and flourished. We lofted telescopes that stretched our vistas to the end of space and the beginning of time.

But bad things happened, too—six things in particular. We became ignorant. We became coarse. We devalued the notion of intellectual merit. We became obsessed with identity. We became addicted to outrage. And we got used to it all.

Ignorance: Until the 1970s, American grade schools led the world in educational attainment. No longer. Among Millennials, our literacy scores rank fourth from last among the world's developed nations. As for numeracy: dead last. "Whereas students in the 12th grade used to read at the 12th-grade level, our reading experts tell us that a large fraction, probably a majority, of our high school graduates read at 7th- or 8th-grade level now," the education expert Marc Tucker wrote in 2015. "Similarly, we have learned that the same high school graduates are not being asked to do high school math in our open-admissions colleges and many other colleges because they cannot do it, and are having a hard time with middle school math when they get to college."

Coarseness: In 2021, around the time that Dr. Seuss's publisher was pulling *If I Ran a Zoo* and several other of his titles from their catalogue over purportedly insensitive imagery, the No. 1 song in America was Cardi B's "WAP." It stands for...look it up. Children today frequently learn what they know—or think they know—about sex from hard-core pornography. Bill Clinton normalized sexually predatory behavior by a president, though the fact wasn't fully acknowledged until 20 years later, when Donald Trump normalized sexually predatory behavior by a presidential candidate.

Intellectual merit: The things American culture seems to value most today are self-expression, diversity, inclusion, participation, feeling "safe," and social justice. These are not necessarily bad values.

But, outside certain fields, the mid-century notion that top spots at elite institutions should go to the brightest and most capable people now seems quaint at best. As a result, these institutions, particularly in cultural spheres, are staffed and led by people who owe their position to a self-perpetuating, left-leaning system of race, gender, and ethnic quotas. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, intellectual achievement is often viewed with automatic suspicion, as if a degree from an elite university is evidence of cultural or moral unreliability.

Identity politics: The devaluation of intellectual merit is positively correlated with the rise of identity politics as the entrance requirement into an ever-growing number of conversations, opportunities, and positions in American life. "As a person of X, I think Y" has become the way in which many people now give themselves permission to speak. At the same time, it is also the mechanism by which people are denied that permission: A novelist who is not, say, Hispanic, had better not write a book with Hispanic characters, even heroic ones, if he or she hopes to get it published. Further: The weaponization of identity politics now works to silence not just speech but also, increasingly, thought, imagination, and empathy. That weaponization also finds echoes on the right, which is playing catch-up with the kind of repulsive identity politics typified by the "White Lives Matter" tropes favored by the likes of Tucker Carlson.

Outrage: America has been an angry country before—in the run-up to the Civil War; in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination; at the height of the Vietnam War. But now we have a kind of outrage culture—one that is incessant, often performative, and unappeasable. We have abandoned old habits of intellectual humility and adopted new ones of moral certitude. We have lost the art of conversation with people with whom we disagree. We are also losing the opportunity for conversation, living as we increasingly do in ideologically homogenous communities, both online and in actual life. The result is that half the country now looks

It used to be the case in American politics that the fringes bent toward the center — that is, extremists would try to present themselves in softer colors to gain political advantage. In recent years, it is the center that bends toward the fringe.

at the other half as a foreign and hostile tribe. We distrust their motives, disdain their thinking, despise their hopes. And, deep down, we want to destroy them.

Normalization: Daniel Patrick Moynihan coined the phrase “defining deviancy down” to describe the way in which Americans in the early 1990s had become accustomed to levels of criminality that would have been unthinkable, and unacceptable, to previous generations. Dostoevsky put it a different way: “Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!” Americans have grown sadly used to a world where people who know nothing can say anything, no matter how vacuous or vituperative, provided they don’t run afoul of the shibboleths of identity that, not long ago, we thought it was America’s purpose to overcome.

This is the degraded culture in which Donald Trump had Kanye West over for dinner.



At first blush, the outcome of that dinner should give American Jews grounds for some hope. Neither Trump nor West seemed to emerge stronger from it. Among conservatives, the dinner

compounded the impression of Trump’s bad judgment following the disastrous performance of his preferred midterm candidates. Among progressives, it confirmed their view of West as the ultimate Uncle Tom.

And yet, as John Podhoretz astutely notes in this issue, people like West and Trump “are hearing and responding to cultural whistles inaudible to Americans who live where the transmission frequencies are within recognizable boundaries.” “Subculture hatreds,” he adds, “have a means of organizing themselves as they never have before.”

Contrary to suggestions that West’s hatred of Jews was a function of his “white supremacy,” in truth his hatreds spring from a tradition of black antisemitism that stretches back decades but is rarely discussed in mainstream media. As of 2016, roughly a quarter of black Americans harbored antisemitic views, according to years of survey data from the Anti-Defamation League. (For the general U.S. population, the figure was 14 percent.) Louis Farrakhan retains his cachet in much of the black community, particularly among celebrities and radical black academics. And Black Lives Matter has made common cause with the most extreme elements of the BDS movement, with some BLM leaders calling for the destruction of “the imperialist project that’s called Israel.”

As for Trump, many Jewish conservatives expressed shock that “the best friend Israel ever had in the White House” would be willing to sit down with West *after* the latter’s “death con 3” tweets. Why the shock? The former president is nothing if not the country’s foremost conspiracy theorist. Antisemitism is nothing if not the world’s foremost conspiracy theory. And West is nothing if not America’s foremost antisemite. These things have a way of meeting up, figuratively and, in this case, literally. Trump also has a history of playing footsie with the most extreme fringes of the Right, the ones who came out for him on January 6. Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem does nothing to erase two inconvenient facts: first, that in Trump, the worst elements of the

American Right saw a champion; second, that he does nothing to dissuade them from their admiration.

American Jews should not underestimate the effects of this play to the extremes. It used to be the case in American politics that the fringes bent toward the center—that is, extremists would try to present themselves in softer colors to gain political advantage. In recent years, it is the center that bends toward the fringe. Chuck Schumer fears a political challenge from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Kevin McCarthy needs the support of people such as Marjorie Taylor Greene. Primary voters reward candidates—such as Pennsylvania’s Doug Mastriano—who openly play to antisemitic prejudices. Whether the election results chasten those primary voters remains to be seen. But they have shown us who they are.

So it’s the deep cultural current, not the surface political wave, that should worry us most. As another Moynihan maxim reminds us: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society.” The politics that have been failing us for the past several years are the result of a culture that has been failing us for the past several decades. Eventually, the accumulating effects of a degraded educational system and the vulgarization of nearly every aspect of culture are bound to have consequences.



How, then, do we save the culture? As Frost might say, “I can see no way out but through.” Three thoughts:

First, we need to relearn the dying art of disagreement. To disagree well, it’s necessary to understand well. To understand well, it’s necessary to engage deeply and empathetically with opposing points of view. To engage that way is to open ourselves to the possibility that we might discover errors of our own, to open our ears so that we may be able to change our minds.

The politics that have been failing us for
the past several years are the result of
a culture that has been failing us for the
past several decades.

That is what used to be at the core of a liberal-arts education. It’s been lost as grade schools and universities have become zones of intellectual mediocrity and ideological conformity. Since that is unlikely to change, we need to create workarounds. Summer schools such as those offered by the Tikvah Fund and programs like the Open Society Foundations’ Global Debates are good models. But how about media platforms that devote themselves to showcasing the intelligent confrontation of ideas, rather than advancing a single point of view? Or academic departments that deliberately seek ideological heterodoxy among their faculty? This is a task for university presidents and trustees as well as entrepreneurs and philanthropists. They need to step forward.

Second, we need the aid of religion. Cultural change does not inevitably mean cultural decline. Revitalization is also possible, but only if a culture knows that it is ailing, discovers a renewed sense of purpose, and develops practices that advance that purpose. Organized religion can help, provided it is yoked to a civic consciousness that understands that what America desperately needs is empathy, depolarization, and a recommitment to the foundational ideas of a free society and the rule of law.

The task would be helped along by charismatic clergy that can speak convincingly to audiences across sectarian and partisan divides. Here again, philanthropy plays a vital role—to train clergy in the habits of a free mind; to foster intelligent conversation

among leading secular and religious figures; to uphold the principles of a free society based on religious pluralism and respect for individual conscience. The John Templeton Foundation and Lilly Endowment are some of the organizations engaged in this kind of work. There need to be more.

Finally, we should do much more to confront the current plague of historical illiteracy, if only to remind younger generations of the catastrophic consequences of dangerous ideas left unchecked. The word “Balkanization” used to mean something to Americans, particularly those who witnessed the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. But how many young Americans have even heard of Yugoslavia today, much less of the extreme identity politics that overtook Serbia in those years? Similarly, those who grew up behind the Iron Curtain have a keen understanding of what it means to live under regimes where mediocrity reigns, independent thought is forbidden, and political slogans are “true” — even when they are patently false. It would be a start if young Americans simply knew what the Iron Curtain was, why it descended across Europe, and how it was finally torn down.

Right now, the historical profession in the United States is in deep trouble, mostly of its own making. But the hunger for good history — history that tries to understand the past on its own terms rather than twist it to our current purposes — is strong. What kind of effort could restore it to health? The question should be on the mind of every ambitious philanthropist and university president.



None of these steps alone will suffice to restore America’s culture to its former vitality. But we need to start with the recognition that the patient has been ailing for a long time and that a decadent culture inevitably has grave political consequences. For now, we are fortunate that both Trump and West are — or at least seem to be — two

of the culture’s most recent has-beens. Their day just passed, though mainly for reasons that have nothing to do with their innate odiousness: the former president’s midterm misjudgments; the artist’s apparent struggles with his mental health.

We won’t always be this lucky. The work of saving a culture from itself does not happen by itself. Let’s talk it over at dinner one evening. I know of a good place on West 67th Street. *

December 17, 2022