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A New Battle of the Books

*How (Jewish) publishers can save
Western civilization*



AMERICA and the West are going through a civilizational crisis. The clearest sign of it here in the United States is the rapid rise of a radical socialist movement winning elections all over the country, coupled with a vicious turn against Jews and Israel and an alarming embrace of political violence. Americans who wonder how this movement emerged seemingly out of nowhere have since learned that its roots lie in a farrago of anti-Western, anti-capitalist, anti-American ideas that have been taught for years in elite universities and are now being exported to society at large.

Many feel the problem is insoluble. But as a 40-year publishing veteran of the American culture wars, I reject this despair-

ing assessment. It may seem quixotic to suggest that all this civilizational damage can be undone by the activity of publishers. But we shouldn't underestimate the continuing power of books to change minds and influence social and political outcomes.

In a word, books got us into this mess, and I believe that only books can get us out.



In 1704, Jonathan Swift published “The Battle of the Books,” a dramatic representation of a literary argument then raging between parties called the Ancients and the Moderns. The Ancients held that the wisdom contained in old books had not been surpassed by modern authors, who stood upon the shoulders of these giants. The Moderns held otherwise. In Swift’s satire, the books come to life in the king’s library and slug it out in physical combat. He doesn’t say who won.

In fact, the battle never ended. Nearly three centuries later, Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* kicked off what were called the Canon Wars—a passionate debate that arose in response to the multicultural movement that had recently swept through American universities. Bloom made a powerful argument against the cultural relativism that underpinned this movement and defended the Great Books as the best form of education for modern democratic citizens whose culture and institutions had their roots in the Western tradition.

Many liberals at the time agreed with the “inclusive” multicultural agenda while worrying that an ethos that celebrated difference over unity would dangerously fragment our society. But the radicals prevailed, and decades later, it is possible to see what they have wrought. In higher education, the Western classics, if they are read at all, are viewed as instruments of white male capitalist supremacy. Meanwhile, multiculturalism has replaced earlier

assimilationist models of citizenship, with the result that the electorate is increasingly split into warring identity groups. Americans may still live in the same country, but no longer are we a nation inhabiting the same mental universe.

This social fragmentation has everything to do with the loss of a common culture, since a large and diverse nation like ours must have a unifying principle other than ethnic or religious identity. In the United States, this has traditionally meant adherence to the civic nationalism enshrined in our founding documents, which in turn have their roots in the twin streams of the European Enlightenment and what we broadly call the Judeo-Christian heritage—a uniquely dynamic inheritance that has helped to make America exceptional. In recent years, however, the idea of American exceptionalism has come under attack, and the national story that people of my generation grew up with has been discredited and replaced by one that sees America as inherently bad—born in the original sins of slavery, ethnic cleansing, colonial theft, and genocide.

In 2017, writing mainly in reaction to the election of Donald Trump, columnist David Brooks directly linked the displacement of the traditional liberal arts curriculum during the Canon Wars to a host of contemporary problems, including the collapse of centrist parties, the emergence of authoritarian strong men, threats to the liberal world order, and the rise of anti-Western ideologies.

All these developments, Brooks wrote, were ultimately the result of jettisoning the Western narrative—and, with it, important liberal ideals. He cited as evidence one of its most influential vehicles: *The Story of Civilization*, by Will and Ariel Durant. This immensely popular 11-volume series, published over four decades between 1935 and 1975, presented Western history as “an accumulation of great ideas and innovations, from the Egyptians, through Athens, Magna Carta, the Age of Faith, the Renaissance and the Declaration of the Rights

of Man.” Significantly, this influential Western narrative, though undoubtedly selective, was also “confidently progressive,” advancing ideals of tolerance, free speech, rule of law, and universal human rights that fostered a sense of pride and civic unity in a nation of assimilating immigrants.

In stark contrast, the anti-Western narrative deconstructs this liberal story and replaces it with a simplistic morality tale in which everything Western is bad and everything non-Western is good. It also portrays liberal values and the idea of the West itself as a smoke-screen for domination and hypocrisy. This intellectual jiu-jitsu has led to an astonishingly rapid erosion of civilizational confidence, along with a decline in the cultural unity and sense of shared identity we once took for granted.

But it is also, in its way, a backhanded testament to the continuing power of books. For we can hardly fail to notice that the bad effects Brooks pointed out were the direct result of replacing one set of canonical books with another. At Columbia University, the original home of the Western Civ curriculum, books by Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Paulo Freire, and Howard Zinn are heavily assigned in core humanities and social science courses, to the point where the anti-Western movement is virtually unopposed in the institutions molding our future leaders.

The amazing success of this strategy of narrative inversion should lead us to ask how the Western canon, and the cultural identity and unity it fostered, became canonical in the first place. The answer is, it didn’t arise out of nowhere; it was the product of a decades-long effort by a group of like-minded educators, writers, and publishers. As it happens, Jewish immigrants were deeply involved in this project and frequently played overlapping roles. Those who seek to reconstruct the classical liberal narrative today have much to learn from their success.



In 1918, the War Department developed a course for young men about to go abroad to fight in Europe. Offered as part of Student Army Training Corps programs at some 500 colleges around the country, the “War Issues” course sought to inculcate an understanding of the causes and stakes of the Great War and featured readings in economics, government, history, literature, and philosophy. The idea was to improve morale and make them better fighters—naïve perhaps, but also a ringing endorsement of the role of books in shaping minds and forming character.

After the Allied victory, a follow-up program was devised for the million-odd American soldiers still in Europe waiting to be shipped home. Eighteen months of brutalizing trench warfare had rendered many of these young men unfit to return to civilized society. The solution? More books! The “Peace Issues” program provided instruction in the history of the West, the cultural traditions of its peoples, and an introduction to the philosophic study of humanity and human nature. Subsequently adopted by Columbia University in 1919 as the Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course and further expanded through the University of Chicago’s “Chicago Plan,” which emphasized interdisciplinary study based on the Great Books, the Western Civ curriculum quickly spread to liberal arts colleges across the country, where it remained ensconced for decades.

Also in 1919, an obscure Midwestern Jewish newspaper editor named Emanuel Haldeman-Julius—a committed socialist, freethinker, and early feminist—launched a series of cheaply printed pamphlets that came to be known as the Little Blue Books. His first batch included *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and the *Soviet Constitution*. The initial offerings sold surprisingly well,

and over the next 20 years, he published some 2,000 more. The series was a cornucopia of history, philosophy, classic literature and poetry, humor, practical advice, how-to, and, of course, sex.

Altogether they sold more than 100 million copies via mail order, newsstands, and vending machines. At a nickel apiece, meant to be read and discarded, they did particularly well in rural areas without access to bookstores or libraries. They were in effect a popular university course for farmers, mechanics, and tradesmen. It was also Haldeman-Julius who, after hearing Will Durant lecture on philosophy, began publishing the young historian. He also advised the Jewish owners of Simon & Schuster to collect Durant's lectures in *The Story of Philosophy*, the bestselling book that launched S&S as a publishing powerhouse. S&S later published the aforementioned *Story of Civilization*, which sold more than 2 million copies.

Other publishers also saw a market for classic books, with Jewish publishers taking the lead. In 1917, Albert Boni and Horace Liveright spun up the Modern Library and stocked it with European and American classics. In 1925, a pair of Jewish businessmen, Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, acquired the franchise and expanded it still more, going on to launch Random House two years later, initially as an imprint. Then, during World War II, Harold Guinzburg, co-founder of Viking Press, launched the Viking Portables, which introduced the work of classic American authors to a general audience.

These and other companies founded by New York Jews who couldn't get jobs in stuffy WASP-run houses formed a constellation that quickly turned American publishing into a globally dominant enterprise. While they mostly eschewed Jewish books in favor of promoting highbrow culture, they had a lot in common that could be traced to their Jewish origins. They were also frequently larger-than-life impresarios, projecting their infectious love of books

through sheer force of personality. Mortimer Adler, the philosopher who turned the Chicago Plan into something approaching a global franchise, was a template of this Jewish entrepreneurial type, which included not only dedicated book men such as Alfred Knopf and Cerf but Leonard Bernstein, with his Young People's Concerts, and theatrical producer Joe Papp, who brought Shakespeare to Central Park. Today we would call them "cultural influencers."

Why Jews should have been so enamored of the Western classics is a topic for a book in itself. But we can suggest one reason for the prominence of Jews in popularizing the Western tradition: its support for liberal values, which fostered tolerance for vulnerable minorities, freedom of speech, due process, civil rights, and other important protections. Affirming the Judeo-Christian roots of that civilization had particular value to Jews, giving them a claim to be included in American society and the American story more broadly.

It therefore seems appropriate, especially now when the liberal tradition is under assault from both ideological extremes, for Jewish publishers to take the lead in reminding modern liberals what liberalism originally meant.



Today there is a new battle of the books going on, and in case you haven't noticed, the Ancients are losing again. But here is the good news: By all available evidence, books remain extremely consequential. They have authority, longevity, and inherent prestige, and they drive other aspects of popular culture. Put simply, if bad books can hollow out a civilization, better books may be able to restore it.

The agenda for publishers committed to this fight should have five main components.

First: Deconstruct the anti-Western canon.

In a remarkably short time, the founders of what we may call the pedagogy of the oppressed—critical race theory, DEI, intersectionality, anticolonialism, cultural Marxism, and related disciplines—have moved from being dissident intellectuals to the leaders of a prevailing academic school, a cultural movement, and finally a priesthood whose dicta carry the authority of revealed truth. In their wake, a flood of anti-capitalist and antiracist books have reshaped the assumptions of a generation. Anyone who doubts that books change minds should note that a single volume published in 2020 called *In Defense of Looting* helped make this kind of antisocial behavior an acceptable form of social protest on the Left within a matter of months.

These books should not be banned or suppressed. They should be read, taught, and then criticized with the same combative energy that they brought to deconstructing everything they inherited. The anti-Western canon was built by argument; it can be challenged by argument. We must meet it on its own terms.

Second: Restore the philosophical foundations of the liberal tradition.

As Allan Bloom famously argued, the abandonment of philosophical seriousness and the embrace of value-relativity lead inexorably to nihilism, the inversion of civilized values, and the glorification of revolutionary violence. The remedy is a recovery of Enlightenment fundamentals—among them truth, objectivity, the idea of human nature, and the priority of individual rights over the claims of the state. It also means restoring basic concepts that have been systematically vandalized: the idea of the West, the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and the legacy of Greece and Rome.

This philosophical recovery must be practical as well as theoretical. We need books that teach basic economics, civics, the sociology of mass movements, and so on. We need books that restore the accurate understanding of words such as *fascism*, *socialism*, *capitalism*, and *democracy*—words that ideological usage has rendered nearly meaningless. We also need books that explain the difference between logical argument and motivated reasoning, since, as the resurgence of antisemitism amply demonstrates, people cannot be argued out of convictions that reason did not get them into in the first place.

Third: Retell the American story.

This is the year of America's 250th anniversary, and American exceptionalism—the proposition that this country is uniquely founded not on blood and soil but on a set of ideas available to all who freely embrace them—has never been more embattled or more worth defending. The academic Left has spent decades poisoning the wells of Western and American history, to the point where generations of students have been formed entirely by its distortions. We need a revised and updated account of Western and American civilization—warts and all, incorporating what is legitimate in the anti-Western critique—that shows the positive arc of this tradition and its unique contribution to human freedom and prosperity without inducing the cultural despair that has become the academy's default product. In short, we need a new American story—one we can all fall in love with again.

Fourth: Reform the cultural feeder system.

American culture today reflects the worldview and prejudices of those who make it—people who for the most part attended the

same schools, inhabit the same elite milieu, and share a similar left-liberal outlook. The result is a uniformity of taste that propagates itself through M.F.A. programs, fellowship committees, literary-prize juries, publishing choices, and a book-review culture now dominated, since the collapse of regional and local reviewing, by a single New York newspaper with a pronounced coastal perspective. To break this self-reinforcing cycle, we should insist that literary merit, not political alignment, determines what gets published, reviewed, and rewarded. Prize committees should evaluate work blind, without knowledge of the author's identity.

We should also actively promote the revival of America's regional cultures — those diverse traditions that produced some of our greatest native talents and that have since been paved over by an ersatz national culture promulgated by coastal elites. A new WPA-style project to recover and publish the forgotten ephemeral substrate of American culture — the Little Blue Books model, in print and digital form — could cultivate genuine awareness of this country's cultural richness and variety.

Fifth: Promote literacy and critical thinking.

None of the above will accomplish anything if Americans stop reading and forget how to think. Film and digital media have their place in the transmission of culture, but they are not sufficient to form the mental habits on which critical thinking depends. Only the sustained attention required to read difficult books — books that challenge preconceptions, demand argument, and refuse to resolve easily — can build the capacity for the kind of independent thought that a free society requires.

This was understood by the original advocates of liberal education — including the U.S. Army, which wanted not mindless automa-

tons but thinking individuals who understood what they were fighting for. We as a society must promote habits of reading beginning in early childhood and then sustain them through an adult culture that treats serious books as a civic resource rather than a luxury. This is not only in our interest as publishers. It is our obligation as citizens.

The position of Jewish publishers in this effort is a special one. After a century of full and productive participation in American literary life, Jews are being actively forced out of the profession. More and more often, Jewish books are not being published, reviewed, or distributed. In their place, a wall of anti-Zionist books now greets the astonished bookstore browser. And anti-Zionism, as demonstrated with painful clarity since October 7, is not merely a political position about a distant conflict. It is a knife in the heart of the liberal tradition itself—the reemergence, in progressive dress, of the oldest and deadliest prejudice in Western history.

The defense of Israel is therefore inseparable from the defense of the West, and Jewish publishers who understand this have both a particular stake in the enterprise and a responsibility to advance it. The story of Jews in Europe, America, the Middle East, and Israel urgently needs to be told, and told accurately, against the systematic campaign to demonize it.



Is all of this achievable?

The level of indoctrination in our schools and universities has reached a depth that will require a generation, perhaps more, to reverse. It is possible that we are entering a new dark age in which the culture of literacy itself is the first casualty.

But the power of books never did lie in their ability to impose correct ideas. It lies in their tendency to challenge entrenched ortho-

doxies by presenting alternatives that require us to think for ourselves. That capacity—for challenge, for self-revision, for genuine argument—is what we are ultimately defending.

Above all, it is the vocation of publishers to fall in love with books and to transmit that enthusiasm to others. That is what (Jewish) publishers did for the Western classics, and they must do it again today for the American cultural heritage. Win or lose, the time to begin is now. *

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