

The Return of Civilization

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"Triumphant Achilles" by Franz von Matsch in 1892, from a panoramic fresco on the upper level of the main hall of the Achilleion Palace on Corfu, Greece. Achilles is dragging Hector's lifeless body in front of the Gates of Troy. Public domain



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Commentary

One of the most famous events of the Culture Wars of the 1980s took place at Stanford University in 1987. Jesse Jackson delivered a speech there as part of a possible presidential run in 1988, a repeat of the

campaign of 1984, which went under the name “[Rainbow Coalition](#).” Jackson was the leading political figurehead of that era’s multiculturalism; to speak on college campuses was a natural move, given that multiculturalist ideas had their birth and growth in higher education starting a few decades before.

At Stanford [that day](#), many student activists were in the crowd, most importantly the leaders of Black, Hispanic, and Native American groups. When Jackson finished, they led a 500-person march across the campus to the rhythm of a now infamous [chant](#): “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Civ has got to go!”

The chant has become a prime marker of the long project of the academic left to discredit the European heritage and undermine patriotism among young Americans. But there’s a problem with the story: That’s not exactly what the student militants said. I’ve seen many recitations of the story that misquote the students in just that way. In truth, what the students declaimed was this: “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Culture’s got to go!” (See [here](#) for the best account of the Western civilization debate and how it played out at Stanford and elsewhere.)

“Western Culture” was the name of a course at Stanford that all students had to take as a general education requirement. The minority activists didn’t like it because it was too Eurocentric, too many Dead White Males on the syllabus, and so they demanded that it be dropped from the curriculum. (The Stanford faculty did, in fact, end up scrapping the course.) In olden days, Stanford did have a “Western Civilization” requirement that lasted a full year, but it had ended nearly 20 years earlier. A few years after that, Stanford revived it in modified form but gave it the different label, namely, “Western Culture.”

That people often say “Western Civ” instead of “Western Culture” when recounting the 1987 incident may strike readers today as an insignificant error. Whether “culture” or “civilization,” it’s still an attack on the Western heritage, right? But “culture” and “civilization” don’t mean the same thing. Indeed, the substitution of the former for the latter many years before the late ’80s culture wars erupted paved

the way for the takedown of the Western lineage that until that time students were asked to appreciate. The policy of a Western culture requirement was doomed from the start.

Here's why: Civilization is a hierarchical term, culture is not. When we think of civilization, great books, noble conceptions, masterpieces of art, civic ideals, and architectural monuments come to mind. We imagine Notre Dame Cathedral, the Pyramids, ancient Greek plays, the King James Bible, ideas of democracy in Locke, and the Declaration of Independence. Civilization is made up of the best and the highest. It is a rarefied body of creations.

You can see how this troubles individuals of egalitarian belief. Not only does it rank some creations over others, for instance, classical music over popular songs. Worse, it says some peoples are better than others, the ones that have produced more works that count as brilliant, beautiful, and monumental. We end up privileging this group and slighting that one, and that's not right.

This is where "culture" comes in. It's a leveling term. Every people has a culture, unique to the sharers of it and inherently equal to every other culture. Renaissance Florence had its culture and Gen X Seattle had its culture (grunge). In any location in which people have congregated, a culture develops. Culture includes daily routines, too, ordinary dress, cooking, and gardening. Yes, such mundane elements are part of a civilization, but only as minor parts except when an element is refined to an extraordinary degree, such as the wine list at [Tour d'Argent](#) in Paris. Otherwise, civilization rates them well down the list of qualifications. Thousands of cultures have existed over time, but only a handful of civilizations.

This is why, over the course of the 1980s, the term civilization disappeared from elite and mainstream colleges. Culture took its place, doing the work of "de-privileging" the dominant heritage, that is, Western Civ. Hence, the term "Western culture" could not last, not as a required object of study. Once we took culture as the framework, an obvious question arose: If culture is culture, why stick to the West? If all cultures have equal status, then Western culture has no special

claim upon us. Now that we're not caught up in things of greatness, we can recognize every culture as interesting and edifying. College catalogs are filled with courses on cultural practices that have no civilizational dimension.

Last summer, my son and I spent a week in Rome touring its Renaissance and Baroque marvels, lots of Michelangelo, Bernini, and Borromini. Thousands lined up to stroll through St. Peter's and absorb the overwhelming genius and sublime. It convinces me that the egalitarians have been fighting a losing battle. They have flattened the curriculum, yes, but they have not killed the thirst for beauty, and a meaningful past lurks in every human heart. People want to encounter brilliance and talent. They are drawn to works that belong to the ages.

Back in the '80s, when the Stanford student newspaper polled the student body to get their opinion of the Western Culture course, they expected their peers to be as hostile to it as were the activists. The results showed the opposite: Students found it worthy and satisfying.

I'm not surprised. They show the same attitude toward sports. I expect to see civilization make a comeback in the near future.

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