

Western history; Mexican-American students, it has even been suggested, ought to study Mayan math, the Mayan calendar, and Mayan astronomy.

What is being advocated, Ravitch continues, is not merely an extension of such things as Black History Month, which teach that dignity and success can be achieved by all. The idea is to teach children that "their identity is determined by 'cultural genes.'" More pernicious still, the particularist vision implies that "American culture belongs only to those who are white and European," and that all others can belong only to the culture of their ancestors. Aiming to foster self-esteem among minority youth, the particularists wind up telling them instead that their choices and prospects are limited by birth. Aiming to stir racial or ethnic pride, they fan ancient animosities by reducing everyone to a victim or an oppressor.

Ravitch warns that the particularists are no mere fringe group. The school districts of Atlanta, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., are already developing an Afrocentric curriculum. Last February, New York's Board of Regents endorsed a proposal to revise the state history curriculum, based

Debating the Canon

Allan Bloom, the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, from an essay on "Western Civ—and Me" in *Commentary* (Aug. 1990):

The fact that I am doubtful about the non-Western craze suggests automatically, even to sympathetic critics, that I am promoting Western Civ or the like. Yet the very language used reveals how enslaved we have become to the historicist assertion that all thought is decisively culture-bound. When Averroes and Thomas Aquinas read Aristotle they did not think of him as Greek and put him into his historical context. They had no interest in Greek Civ but treated him as a wise man, hence a contemporary at all times.

We smile at this naiveté, but they understood Aristotle better than do our scholars, as one can see simply by perusing their commentaries. Plato and Kant claim that they speak to all men everywhere and forever, and I see no reason to reject those claims a priori. But that is precisely what is done when they are taken to be parts of Western Civ. To the extent they are merely that, the appeals against them are justified, for Western Civ is clearly partial, demanding the supplement of all the other Civs

The serious scholars in non-Western thought should bring us the powerful texts they know of to help us. For the true canon aggregates around the most urgent questions we face. That is the only ground for the study of books Nietzsche reflected on Buddha when he wanted to test the principle of contradiction. That is a model of the way things should be. The last thing we need is a sort of philosophic UN run by bureaucrats for the sake of representation for all peoples.

in part on a report that lambasted the three-year-old pluralist curriculum as a legacy of centuries of "intellectual and educational oppression" of minorities.

Unfortunately, Ravitch concludes, particularism appeals to many in the education establishment precisely because it promises a simple solution—inflating the racial pride of children—to the crisis of American education.

PRESS & TELEVISION

The End of Debate?

"Journalism, Publicity, and the Lost Art of Argument" by Christopher Lasch, in *Gannett Center Journal* (Spring 1990), 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

The ignorance of the American people has reached astonishing proportions. Millions of Americans would be stumped if asked

what the Bill of Rights contains. A majority recently assured pollsters that Israel is an Arab state.

Lasch, a historian at the University of Rochester, is one of the few authorities who refuse to blame the schools for this depressing state of affairs. The fault, he asserts, lies squarely with the American press. Once the great inciter of public debate, it has settled into the role of mere purveyor of information. "When we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention," Lasch writes, "we become avid seekers of relevant information. Otherwise we take in information passively—if we take it in at all."

Lasch identifies 1830–1900 as the golden age of the press, the period when famed editors such as Horace Greeley and E. L. Godkin launched newspapers that were unabashedly opinionated without, like their predecessors, following a party line. Politics during this era was high drama, with public debates, torchlight parades, and massive voter turnouts (80 percent) for presidential elections.

After the turn of the century, however, press and politics alike succumbed to the Progressive impulse, with its emphasis on "scientific management" in public affairs. During the 1920s, journalist Walter Lippmann published several important books

arguing that public debate was not democracy's great virtue but its great defect, a disagreeable necessity to be allowed only when "exact knowledge" did not allow for scientific resolution of public questions. Arguments, Lasch notes, "were what took place in the absence of reliable information." The role of the press, in Lippmann's view, was to circulate neutral information in order to preclude argument.

The rise of a disinterested press, Lasch says, was encouraged by the emergence of the advertising and public relations industries. They put their money where the well-heeled readers were, in the "responsible" newspapers. Ever since, Lasch adds, information and publicity have become harder and harder to distinguish.

Increasingly, he writes, "information is generated by those who wish to promote something or someone . . . without arguing their case on its merits or explicitly advertising it as self-interested material either. Much of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit of the equivalent of junk mail. [I]t now delivers an abundance of useless, indigestible information that nobody wants, most of which ends up as unread waste."

Puritan Journalism?

"Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630–1730" by David Paul Nord, in *The Journal of American History* (June 1990), 112 N. Bryan St., Bloomington, Ind. 47408.

It was big news in Boston when Mary Dyer delivered a hideously deformed stillborn child on October 17, 1637. John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts, conducted an investigation. The Dyers were followers of the heretical Anne Hutchinson, recalls Nord, who teaches journalism at Indiana University, and Winthrop was certain that he saw in this strange birth "the designing hand of God and a message for the commonwealth of Massachusetts."

The event may now seem only like fodder for the *National Enquirer*, Nord says, but it contains a clue to the nature of contemporary mainstream journalism. News, he notes, is simply "the reporting of current public occurrences." But how does

one "report"? What is a newsworthy "occurrence"? What is "public"? The Puritans were the first Americans to confront such questions, and some of their answers are still with us, Nord believes.

To Winthrop and his Puritan contemporaries, all of the defining elements of the news "were shaped by the belief that everything happened according to God's perfect plan." News was teleological, so that with proper reporting and minimal interpretation its meaning ought to be accessible to all. Thus, says Nord, "New England generated a kind of news that was oriented to current events, yet conventional, patterned, and recurrent in subject matter." There was an emphasis on getting the facts

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