

# EDUCATION AND THE RACIST ROAD TO BARBARISM

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*by*

George Reisman



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**M**ajor changes are taking place in the philosophy of American education, changes which are potentially capable of having enormous impact on all aspects of American life. The changes are inspired by what *The New York Times* refers to as the “Eurocentrism critique.” According to the *Times*, “Eurocentrism” is a pejorative term supposed to describe “a provincial outlook that focuses overwhelmingly on European and Western culture while giving short shrift to Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”

A typical manifestation of “Eurocentrism,” according to its critics, is the statement that Columbus discovered America. This statement, which most children in America may have learned as their very first fact of history, is now regarded as controversial. Indeed, it is held to be positively offensive because it implies that “there had been no other people on the continent” before Columbus arrived. Traditional American education in general is denounced for seeing non-Western civilization and the rest of the world “only through a Western lens.” Only through that “lens,” it is held, can, for example, African art be regarded as primitive.

In an effort to eliminate such alleged Western and European “bias,” schools are altering the way in which history, literature, and the arts are being taught. Recent changes at Stanford University, where a course on Western civilization was replaced by one in which non-Western ideas had to be included, are only one case in point. The revisions in the history curriculum in California’s public school system, to emphasize Indian and African cultures, are another. Curricula and textbooks are being widely rewritten, and, as evidence of the depth of the changes, the *Times* reports that efforts are underway “to reconstruct the history of African tribes, going beyond relying on accounts of Western travelers to examining indigenous sources, often oral, and adapting anthropological approaches.”

The implications of these changes are enormous. The acceptance of the “Eurocentrism” critique and its denial of such propositions as Columbus discovered America speaks volumes about the state of the educational establishment in the United States and the intellectual establishment in general.

In order to understand the implications, it is first necessary to remind oneself what Western civilization is. From a historical perspective, Western civilization embraces two main periods: the era of Greco-Roman civilization and the era of modern Western civilization, which latter encompasses the

rediscovery of Greco-Roman civilization in the late Middle Ages, and the periods of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Modern Western civilization continues down to the present moment, of course, as the dominant force in the culture of the countries of Western Europe and the United States and the other countries settled by the descendants of West Europeans. It is an increasingly powerful force in the rapidly progressing countries of the Far East, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, whose economies rest on “Western” foundations in every essential respect.

From the perspective of intellectual and cultural content, Western civilization represents an understanding and acceptance of the following: the laws of logic; the concept of causality and, consequently, of a universe ruled by natural laws intelligible to man; on these foundations, the whole known corpus of the laws of mathematics and science; the individual’s self-responsibility based on his free will to choose between good and evil; the value of man above all other species on the basis of his unique possession of the power of reason; the value and competence of the individual human being and his corollary possession of individual rights, among them the right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness; the need for limited government and for the individual’s freedom from the state; on this entire preceding foundation, the validity of capitalism, with its unprecedented and continuing economic development in terms of division of labor, technological progress, capital accumulation, and rising living standards; in addition, the importance of visual arts and literature depicting man as capable of facing the world with confidence in his power to succeed, and music featuring harmony and melody.

Once one recalls what Western civilization is, the most important thing to realize about it is that *it is open to everyone*. Indeed, important elements of “Western” civilization did not even originate in the West. The civilization of the Greeks and Romans incorporated significant aspects of science that were handed down from Egypt and Babylon. Modern “Western” civilization includes contributions from people living in the Middle East and in China during the Dark Ages, when Western Europe had reverted to virtual barbarism. Indeed, during the Dark Ages, “Western” civilization resided much more in the Middle East than in Western Europe. (It is conceivable that if present trends continue, in another century it might reside more in the Far East than in the West.)

The truth is that just as one does not have to be from France to like French-fried potatoes or from New York to like a New York steak, one does not have to have been born in Western Europe or be of West European descent to admire Western civilization, or, indeed, even to help build it. Western civilization is not a product of geography. *It is a body of knowledge and values.*

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Any individual, any society, is potentially capable of adopting it and thereby becoming “Westernized.” The rapidly progressing economies of the Far East are all “Western” insofar as they rest on a foundation of logic, mathematics, science, technology, and capitalism—exactly the same logic, mathematics, science, technology, and capitalism that are essential features of “Western” civilization.

For the case of a Westernized individual, I must think of myself. I am not of West European descent. All four of my grandparents came to the United States from Russia, about a century ago. Modern Western civilization did not originate in Russia and hardly touched it. The only connection my more remote ancestors had with the civilization of Greece and Rome was probably to help in looting and plundering it. Nevertheless, I am thoroughly a Westerner. I am a Westerner because of *the ideas and values* I hold. I have thoroughly internalized all of the leading features of Western civilization. They are now *my* ideas and *my* values. Holding these ideas and values as I do, I would be a Westerner wherever I lived and whenever I was born. I identify with Greece and Rome, and not with my ancestors of that time, because I share the ideas and values of Greece and Rome, not those of my ancestors. To put it bluntly, my ancestors were savages—certainly up to about a thousand years ago, and, for all practical purposes, probably as recently as four or five generations ago.

I know nothing for certain about my great grandparents, but if they lived in rural Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, they were almost certainly totally illiterate, highly superstitious, and primitive in every way. On winter nights, they probably slept with farm animals in their hut to keep warm, as was once a common practice in Northern Europe, and were personally filthy and lice infested. I see absolutely nothing of value in their “way of life,” if it can be called a way of life, and I am immeasurably grateful that my grandparents had the good sense to abandon it and come to America, so that I could have the opportunity of becoming a “Westerner” and, better still, an American “Westerner,” because, in most respects, since colonial times, the United States has always been, intellectually and culturally, the *most* Western of the Western countries.

Thus, I am a descendant of savages who dwelt in Eastern Europe—and before that probably the steppes of Asia—who has been Westernized and now sees the world entirely through a Western “lens,” to use the term of the critics of “Eurocentrism.” Of course, it is not really a lens through which I see the world. It is much more fundamental than that. I have developed a Western *mind*, a mind enlightened and thoroughly transformed by the enormous body of knowledge that represents the substance of Western civilization, and I now see the world entirely on the basis of that knowledge. For example, I see the world on the foundation of the laws of logic, mathematics, and science that I