

**"Feeling History: Reflections  
On the Western Culture  
Controversy"**

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## FEELING HISTORY:

### REFLECTIONS ON THE WESTERN CULTURE CONTROVERSY

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This paper grows out of my experiences as an anthropologist doing fieldwork among humanists. My investigations began with work as a participant-observer in the Western Culture Controversy at Stanford. The period of field research at Stanford extended from a forum in which I was a speaker ("Western Culture: Education or Miseducation?") in May 1986 through a lengthy debate in the faculty senate during the spring of 1988 to the occupation of the university president's office in May of 1989. This three-year period of intensive field research was supplemented by comparative notes made during a number of brief site visits of one to three days at other campuses in the United States.

What most struck me during these investigations was the intensity of passions aroused by the conflict. One would have thought that the future of Western Civilization itself was at stake in the curricular controversy. In any case, for an anthropologist the displays of humanistic rage punctuated by bursts of oratorical eloquence seemed thoroughly exotic. Once again, I discovered that one need not go to Papua New Guinea in order to encounter the so-called Other. As Paul Ricoeur once said in a related context, "We ourselves are the 'other' among others." (1) The Western Culture controversy thus poses analytical questions about self/other relations and the role of feelings in social analysis.

Feeling history involves both historicizing feelings and exploring feelings in history. Feelings at once require explanation and can be used in the explanation of historical events. Perhaps one could begin by noticing that feelings have trajectories. They rise, fall, spread, weaken, intensify, blur, focus, and otherwise change in fundamental ways. Historicizing feelings could, perhaps, be justified by invoking the common saying that nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Or consider how a woman's experience of depression during the 1960s could be understood retrospectively a decade later as anger misrecognized, repressed, and inwardly directed. Arguably, one should attend to feelings in history simply because they were there and because they mattered to people. More significantly, however, they can have an explanatory role because they influence the character, the intensity, and the duration of historical events.

Before speaking about the Western Culture controversy at Stanford let me affirm a truism. Courses change. Readings change, pedagogy changes, issues change, students change, and (perhaps slowest of all) the faculty changes. Such

observations probably go without saying, except that a number of people, alumni and faculty alike, involved in the Stanford debate insisted that the first-year culture course remain as it was in 1933 or so. The anthropologist was struck at the cultural peculiarity of this insistence.(2) Imagine the response had members of the medical school said that their introductory core course changed very little over the past half century. Sceptics could argue that science and technology drive changes in medicine and related fields, but great books are different. Suppose then that the introductory mathematics course remained more or less as it was some five decades ago. Surely mathematics and the canonical classics are more or less equally divorced from (or attached to) the changing world around them. Yet a number of faculty members insisted that the traditional great books should endure untouched by the wear and tear of history. For certain people the classics appear to be like monuments--reassuring points of stability in an otherwise constantly changing world.(3)

Such required introductory culture courses often have two related purposes. On the one hand, they emphasize training in critical thought. The assumption in part is that an extended acquaintance with the supposed greatest minds of Western Culture makes undergraduates smarter and more cultivated. In addition, the concepts and ideas of the great books are said to be the intellectual capital of past, present, and future generations of thinkers. On the other hand, such courses stress preparation for citizenship. For example, a prescient introductory lecture to a Stanford Western Civilization course of the early 1930s told students that in order to be effective citizens of the future they must learn to think about totalitarianism, a major theme of the course. The broad goal, then, is that students will be capable citizens in a democracy, able to think critically and committed to building a better society for future generations.

The Stanford Western Culture course was organized into some seven or eight tracks (full-year required courses). Each track spent one quarter on the ancient world, one quarter on the medieval and renaissance period, and one quarter on the modern world. With a view to creating a shared experience for first-year students, a committee drew up a core list of fifteen books which would be required across all the tracks. The tracks could then select as they felt appropriate from a "B" list of optional books. In retrospect, a number of faculty members described the core-list selection process as a horse-trading session where certain people would consent to include, say, Aquinas if their group could have Luther. Intended to be flexible and changing from one year to the next, the core list instead became increasingly rigid. Indeed, a committee appointed by the faculty senate to study the Western Culture course in 1986-87 identified the core list's rigidity and restrictiveness as the main problem with the course.

As is probably apparent, mine is an insider, partisan account. Since I have yet to read a non-partisan account and doubt that any is possible, I make no apologies for having a point of view.(4) It is best, however, to make such matters explicit. I was one among a large group of faculty and students who felt strongly that the first-year culture course needed reform. Although the following indulges in satire (which I trust the reader will not take more literally than intended), my account aims for a certain fairness based on notions of knowing and respecting the opposition.

Since this was a partisan struggle, the two sides require characterization in broad strokes. Let me add, parenthetically, that the situation was more complex than the two-sides-to-any-question approach would suggest. People had a broad range of positions based on diverse arguments and differing assessments of the kind and degree of change needed, if any. Nonetheless, the debate (or at any rate the vote) eventually did come down to change or no change, with a series of parliamentary maneuvers and amendments along the way. With these caveats in mind, I should like to say a few words about the two sides and the interests that animated the passions they displayed so intensely and eloquently in the debate.

Certain members of the pro-Western Culture group appeared to profit from the status quo. Majors greatly increased in the departments of English, History, and Classics after the Western Culture requirement was introduced. Faculty positions dramatically increased in Classics because one-third of every track dealt with the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Let us call this explanation in terms of profit (majors and faculty positions) a vulgar Marxist view.

The passions aroused among the humanitists seemed to derive from the threat of losing a monopoly on authority. Being unwilling to share authority and sensing a loss of absolute control (particularly in a major research university whose center of gravity resides, not in the humanities, but in Engineering, the hard sciences, and the professional schools) produced a sense of panic and impending loss. As they saw it, the only major arena granted to the humanists was threatened with dilution from an infusion of lesser works from minor(ity) cultures. Let us call this explanation in terms of authority (absolute and not compatible) a psycho-Marxist view.

Finally, members of this group felt that they were teaching the best thoughts ever produced by humankind. Any change could only be a step down--hamburger and coke where caviar and fine wines once reigned. Writer Saul Bellow expressed a related view when he announced that if New Guinea produced a Tolstoy he would read him (or her, one supposes). (The anthropologist imagines a Zuni response: When you Anglos produce a shalako ceremony, we'll come dance.) A related assumption was that, rather than being the beginning of a life-long habit of reading and critical thought, the course stood as a complete unit, a microcosmic liberal education. Thus the substitution of even a few books dismantled a coherent totality and overburdened the course. Let us call this explanation in terms of rationalization (the great books are the best of all possible books) a theory of mystification.

The pro-reform group, on the other hand, wanted its fair share of the spoils. Because the required culture course for first-year undergraduates was the only prime-time show in the curriculum they wanted their place in the limelight. Not to have any place whatsoever in the course was more than the hams in this group could stand. Let us call this explanation in terms of envy ("I want one too.") a psycho-historical view.

Although the preceding views have their grains of truth, they did not enter the debate in the faculty senate. Instead the debate was conducted on a higher plane. By this time U.S. Secretary of William Bennett had entered the fray, making a federal case out of a local dispute. At the same time faculty members began to whisper in the corridors: Take the high road; don't be

emotional; appeal to reason above all. Something vital was lost at this moment, as I will try to make clear shortly.

The senate debate included a number of five-minute statements by members and guests which were published in their entirety by the faculty-staff newspaper. The pro-reform group made arguments for the centrality of learning to think critically about interactions between cultures. Increasing global interdependency, the changing demography of the United States (especially California), and shifting definitions of culture across the disciplines were invoked to support the general argument. Not unlike the professor of the 1930s who argued for the urgency of thinking about totalitarianism, faculty members addressed the need to think creatively about the diversity all students would encounter over the course of their adult lives.

The pro-Western Culture group argued that the great books were the foundation of all knowledge. Were students not to know the classics they would be culturally and intellectually disadvantaged as adults. In a related vein, they argued that we should study our heritage first, and then we could go on to study other cultures. In either case, the argument resulted in the traditional great books coming first and then allowing the student to choose freely whether or not to pursue the study of other non-Western and North American minority cultures.

Although they were silenced in the official debate, the passions resurfaced in more private arenas at this point. People began to ask: Who's the "we" in the phrase our heritage? The core list of great books included no Americans, no women, and no authors of non-European origin. Yet it purportedly represented our heritage to an undergraduate student body that was virtually all American, half women, and one-third of non-European origin. When predominantly European American male faculty members addressed their classes and indicated that they would study our heritage first who did they imagine they were speaking to? Did they have any idea of the impact of their words?

This issue--how it felt to be rendered invisible--was central, but repressed. Perhaps a passage from poet Adrienne Rich's essay, "Invisibility in Academe," can help clarify the nature of the feelings in question. "But invisibility," she says, "is a dangerous and painful condition, and lesbians are not the only people to know it. When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect that theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard ( Rich 1986: 199)." Looking into a mirror and seeing nothing--that was the experience of many students who took the Western Culture course.

Feelings are notoriously difficult to describe in the abstract because they are situated in human relations. There is, for example, all the difference in the world between speaking of bodies and my body. Or consider the difference in how one might feel when noting that a boy was run over by a car versus learning that my son was just run over by a car. Feelings are embedded in

relationships whose histories are intertwined with the kind and qualities of emotions we experience.

Thus I recall that the morning before I was to speak to the faculty senate I found myself, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, sobbing and trembling uncontrollably. Later I realized that I had been touched in a spot of pride and oppression. The pride was in my Mexican heritage. The oppression brought back memories of the annihilation I felt after the predicted passage of the English-only initiative passed in California; the swats Chicano students believed we would receive in a Tucson junior high school if we spoke Spanish on the playground; the humiliation I felt in kindergarten when a well-meaning teacher responded to my complaint about how she pronounced the words in a song by asking me to stand in front of the class and say mango and tango over and over. Why, I asked, do I have to explain myself to the faculty senate? If I stand up and demand to be heard will anybody listen?

My views on these matters contest a notion often found in social analysis that human beings experience a movement from the solar plexus to the cerebellum, from feeling to thought. In a democratic society that relies on rational discourse to adjudicate complex issues feelings are deemed too disruptive and inchoate (and womanly?) for discussion. Reason and emotion appear as opposed spheres; they don't mix. Thus faculty members said that we should take the high road in debate. Perhaps one can call this a hydraulic view of feelings: if they become articulate, they are no longer felt; if they are felt, they are no longer articulate.

Consider even one of the better statements on this issue, the essay entitled "Structures of Feeling" by British social critic Raymond Williams (1977). Williams argues that feelings are social and that feeling and thought should not be separated. He speaks of a "particular quality of social experience and relationship (p. 131)" and he means "not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating community (p.132)." Thus far I am in full agreement. Yet as one reads on it becomes apparent that the structures of feeling comprise a distant early warning system that enables the social analyst to anticipate the emergence of phenomena that have not yet become fully formed. When fully formed they will be more cerebral, cognitive, and recognizably social.

Williams correctly argues in this context against social analysts who reduce the social to the past tense, the already formed, and thus ignore processes of formation in favor of official institutionalized culture. His astute analysis, however, goes on to posit an only partially explicit view of historical evolution. He says that at early stages social experiences tend to be (mis)recognized as private and idiosyncratic, but they "are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations (p. 132)." Despite his words to the contrary, Williams's view regularities in social processes posits a hydraulic relation between thought and feeling. As one rises the other falls. At first feeling dominates articulate thought and then (as the process matures) formal thought dominates feeling.

Williams fails to imagine the institutional repression of feeling found in the faculty senate debate. Nor does he consider the possibility of matters becoming both more articulate and more felt. Williams instead assumes that social processes follow a model, not unlike Max Weber's institutionalization of charisma, that goes from spontaneous movements to the institutional formalization of official culture. What about social processes with other trajectories? Could one speak, for example, about the history of informal practices, including those classified as structures of feeling? What if they retain their so-called emergent character and remain felt but not formally institutionalized?

A year after the debate in the faculty senate students occupied the president's office. In my view, their action was an instance of the return of the repressed. About a week after the occupation they met with the president and told him that they wanted the right to be different and belong too. They wanted a Stanford education, but one in which they had a place; they did not want to look into the curricular mirror and see nothing. One group of students said that they had spoken with the history department about getting an Asian American historian. They were told that Asian Americans had not been in the United States long enough to have a history. The Asian American students felt depths of pain and rage that their interlocutor probably could not have anticipated. Other students told related stories of wounding exclusion and marginalization. They insisted that the institution be responsive to their presence. After all, they were not uninvited guests. In so speaking, the students articulated widespread feelings that had gone unexpressed and informally repressed during the official debate. They aspired to be full citizens of the Republic of Stanford.

In this case, as in a number of others, the people excluded felt and saw issues differently from those who developed a consensus about how to view matters. The fact that they were able to articulate the issues, however, did not mean that they felt them any less. If anything, the reverse was true. In this case, becoming articulate about feelings brought them more into focus, making them more felt and more capable of being socially acted upon. In becoming more articulate and more felt they also became, not more institutionalized, but more social and political.

The issues addressed concern what I and others have come to call cultural citizenship. The term cultural refers to an identity or identities and the rights of such people to determine their destinies. The term citizenship here is a matter of degrees, as in full citizenship or second class citizenship, rather than an either/or matter, as in formal legal definitions. The issues raised revolve around the right to be different and belong in a participatory democratic sense. Being different as a social label by definition involves a certain marginalization. Yet many people both retain their distinctiveness and influence their worlds through struggle. The broad concern is with communities that do not hold state power and are denied certain rights, whether consciously or not. The issues of cultural citizenship overlap with those of empowerment but are broader in scope. They range from questions of belonging and membership to participation and entitlement; they include dignity and respect as well as political influence and claims to goods and services.

Arguably, the western culture controversy most centrally concerns questions of cultural citizenship for students of color who have entered

institutions of higher learning in significant numbers over the last two decades. Can this nation enjoy diversity within its major institutions? Can we benefit from the intellectual and cultural resources brought by divergent cultural perspectives? Can our institutions prove responsive enough to change in ways that allow diverse communities to live as full citizens without having to give up their identities?

The questions that face our universities also face our nation in a period of rapid demographic change and increasing global interdependency. The intense media attention devoted to the Western Culture controversy has not been misplaced. Seemingly parochial academic debates concern matters of diversity and citizenship that we all face as the melting pot no longer melt and indeed the pot itself no longer contains. States include more than one ethnic nation and nations inhabit more than one state. Who is the we?

#### NOTES

1. "When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an "other" among others (Ricoeur 1965: 278; cited in Mudimbe 1988; see also Rosaldo 1990)."

2. A number of faculty members from the professional schools and the less humanistic fields of Humanities and Sciences spoke as if they were nostalgic for the great books course they never took as undergraduates. A further irony was that the required freshman culture course taught from the 1930s to the early 1970s was called Western Civilization. With its center of gravity in the history department, the course often read texts as documents and emphasized historical context. After a hiatus of over five years, during which there was no first-year culture requirement, the Western Culture course was introduced in the late 1970s. With its center of gravity in the literary humanities and philosophy, the course often read texts as self-contained great works and placed a lesser emphasis on historical context. A number of alumni groups with whom I spoke did not realize that the course had changed. They had wanted instead for the earlier Western Civilization course to remain as it was when they took it.

3. Drawing on the work of Gilbert Allardyce et al. (1982), Literary theorist Herbert Lindenberger has noted that the ancestral Columbia University great books course of 1919 derives from an earlier precedent. "It seems," he says, "of no small interest, for example, to find that Columbia's course derives from a special course created in 1918, a year before its founding, to educate recently conscripted American soldiers about to fight in France. This course, called the War Issues course and offered at the time in a number of universities besides Columbia, sought to introduce Americans to the European heritage in whose defence they were soon to risk their lives (1990: 153)."

4. For a related account of the conflict see Pratt 1990; for an account from the other side see Barchas 1990.

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