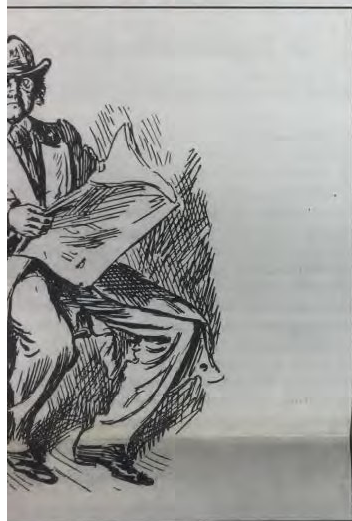


March 15, 1994

Free

CULTURE KLASH!



by Kenneth Lee

In the politically correct climate of modern academia, Western culture has weathered invidious attacks. In response to this recent onslaught of criticisms, many universities have dismantled their core Western curriculums in favor of a multicultural education instead. Although Cornell has not undergone the radical changes of other major universities, it nevertheless has succumbed to this politically correct mentality.

The College of Arts and Sciences' distribution requirements reflect this sentiment. In addition to the nine required classes in four broadly defined academic distribution groups, students starting from the class of 1996 must complete at least one "non-Western" course.

Professor Isaac Kramnick, the architect of this policy, explained that although politics have tainted the curriculum reform in other universities, it did not play such a role at Cornell.

"We didn't change [the curriculum] because we believed other cultures were any better than Western or because Western culture is evil," he said. "We did it because the faculty believed that the students in a major university in the late twentieth century should be exposed to other cultures."

But the main problem stems from the lack of any core requirements. While Cornellians are required to enroll in a non-Western course (as well as a class on pre-20th century), they are not required to take a single class on Western civilization.

The four distributive groups (social science, humanities, physical science and logic/reasoning) are so broadly defined that a student can easily circumvent Western classes and graduate without ever taking a course in standard Western culture track.

Cornellians can enroll in "Spirit Possession, Shamanism Curing and Witchcraft" to fulfill their social sciences requirement. Or they can take "Lesbian Writing and Theory" and study contemporary writers such as Cherrie Moraga, Diana Fuss and Mab Segrest instead of the intensely reviled Dead White

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can take to fulfill their distribution

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Males.

Although most professors have acquiesced to this recent tide of non-Western emphasis, Professor L. Pearce Williams remains a staunch opponent of this requirement.

"It's a stupid requirement that doesn't do what it wants to do. Students are required to study supposedly 'non-western' cultures, but the requirements cover [countries other than the United States, Western Europe, and Canada]," he said.

"So if we have a class on Australia, it would be [considered non-Western]. This is not multi-cultural," he added.

Professor Jeremy Rabkin elaborated this point further by pointing out that Latin America is often not considered Western, yet their history is distinctly Western with Christian influences.

This flaw allows Cornell students to fulfill the non-Western course requirement by taking Latin America history, despite its obvious "Westernness." But students will not receive credit for taking Professor Margaret Washington's class on the progress and tribulations of African-American women.

Furthermore, Arts and Science Dean Don Raudel had no knowledge of the requirement's efficacy. He was unaware what courses students take most to fulfill the non-Western requirement because he said there are "too many courses" to keep track of. It seems confounding that the University would not keep track of this datum, considering that the non-Western course is a requirement.

Arts and Science associate dean Lynne Abel justified this policy by claiming ignorance on the part of the student body. "We realized there were students who never took non-Western classes," she said. "It was an attempt to confront and understand cultures that we aren't familiar with."

Granted many students remain ignorant of other cultures, but even worse, students are oblivious to their

own culture the Western tradition and history.

A recent poll of over 3,000 Ivy League students revealed that 18 percent of the students failed to name even one Supreme Court Justice. Another 44 percent did not know that Thomas Foley was the Speaker of the House. And a whopping 75 percent could not attribute "A government of the people, by the people and for the people" to Abraham Lincoln. Another survey of college seniors showed that a majority of them confused Marx's ideas with the U.S. Constitution's and Stalin's words with Churchill's.

These figures become even more perturbing when we consider that the survey did not poll unenlightened students from dilapidated high schools, but from students from the nation's elite universities.

Professor Kramnick convincingly argued, Western-class requirements were unnecessary because eighty-five percent of Cornell students already take Western history classes. Dean Raudel agrees with Prof. Kramnick. "I don't think [the lack of Western requirements] is a flaw. By being at Cornell, Western culture infuses itself into the student and the institution," he said.

Although many students make take Western classes regardless of requirements (or lack thereof), it is apparent that ignorance still flourishes regarding their own culture as evident by the perturbing statistics mentioned above.

Contrary to popular belief, Cornell has never had a de facto Western-history requirement, but many people, including Prof. Williams, believe it is time to establish one. In the past, Cornellians may not have had a core curriculum, but they did not have the same latitude as students today have in class selection: the past Cornellians could not take lesbian studies in place of Plato.

This is not to say that lesbian studies or other seemingly arcane subjects have no basis in a university. As long as the class is aimed at education and

not politicization, they may have their place. But we must also remember that Western philosophers (mostly white males, regardless of one's opinion) have had the most impact in shaping history, and therefore have higher educational merit than some obscure feminist as a general educational requirement.

This phenomena of multiculturalism is not exclusive to Cornell. This malodorous sickness has seeped into the hallowed halls of other universities. Brown and Stanford have garnered national attention in the past few years for their radical curriculum change.

Stanford implemented their highly controversial Cultures, Ideas and Values (CIV) in the fall of 1989. The CIV replaced many Western writers and thinkers (AKA Dead White Males) with other multicultural writers such as Pablo Neruda and Guaman Poma. One of the more controversial books focused around a lesbian, feminist Marxist.

Two thousand miles across from Palo Alto, students at Harvard University have similar non-Western requirements as in Cornell. Their course catalog denies the existence of any set of canons: "[The Harvard education] does not define intellectual breadth as mastery of a set of Great Books."

Other Ivy League schools, such as Princeton and Yale, do not have any

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non-Western course requirements, but they have had a core curriculum. Only small liberal arts college that primarily focus on undergraduate education, and not grandiose research or jejune graduate studies, firmly adheres to Western requirements.

Hillsdale College in Michigan is "convinced that [Western curriculum] is the best preparation for meeting the

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challenges of modern life and that it offers to all people of all backgrounds not only an important body of knowledge, but also timeless truths about the human condition."

Prof. Williams has remained a staunch defender of the Western tradition. "Of course, Western culture is evil, but so is every other culture," he said. "But Western culture is the only culture...that has systematically tried to end slavery. In other parts of the world, people are still enslaved and imprisoned. Most people would die to be where we are now."

Another impetus for studying Western culture is practicality. Regardless of its moral value, Western culture's influence is pervasive across the globe. From Japan's current constitution to popularity of Michael Jackson in the Far East, Western culture has played an integral role in world history.

And as the entire world slowly inches towards Western-style capitalist democracies, the importance of an education rooted in the Western tradition becomes more important daily. "We live in a Western culture," Williams said. "If you are going to be intelligent in actions and criticisms, then you must know Western culture. This is not propaganda."

Even Professor N. Gregson Davis, chairman of the Comparative Literature Department concurs with Prof. Williams. Prof. Davis, who was raised in the West Indies and is by no means a conservative, was quoted as,

"Like it or not, we have a Western tradition. [Western] literature is of fundamental value, even students of other tradition."

Cornell's non-Western policy fortunately is not as oppressive and intellectually stifling as other school's. And Cornell's non-Western requirement is lax and obviously has good intentions. But in today's Beavis and Buttthead mentality (in which the world is separated into things that suck or things that are cool), a core curriculum based on the Great Works of Western culture is desperately needed before we embark on a multicultural journey.

Kenneth Lee is a freshman in the College of Arts and Science and is a Contributing Editor of the Cornell Review.

"the malodorous sickness of multiculturalism"



Ken Kesel