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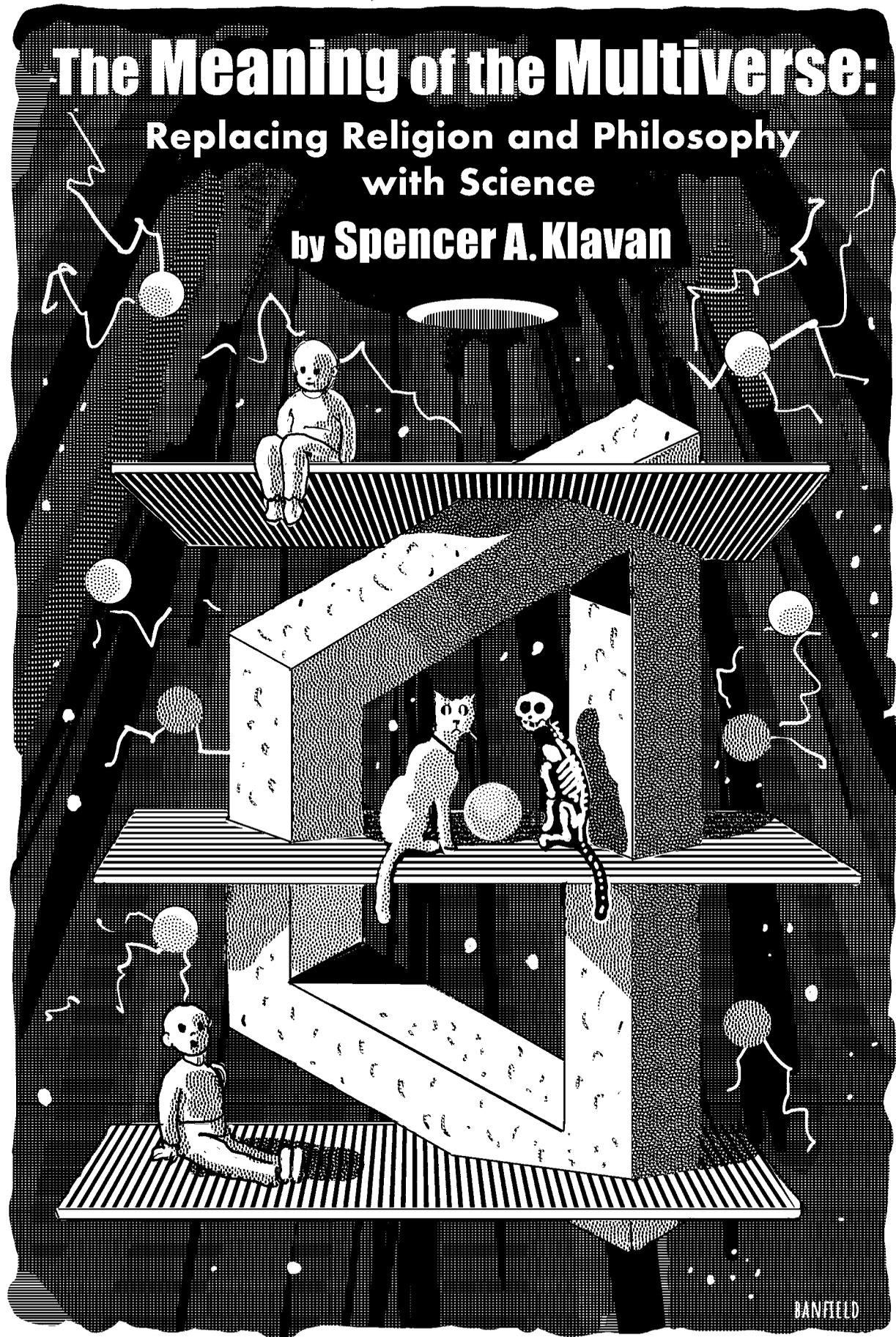
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Essay by Mark Bauerlein

FURNISHING THE MIND

E.D. Hirsch's long crusade.



CONSERVATIVES WITH LONG EXPERIENCE remember 1987 as the year *The Closing of the American Mind* was published. A sensation that sat atop the *New York Times* bestseller list for months, the book landed Allan Bloom on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and inspired a generation of young Reaganites. But the volume most supportive of conservative thinking during the “Canon Wars” was slightly lower on that year’s bestseller lists: *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* by University of Virginia professor E.D. Hirsch, a literary theorist and staunch liberal Democrat interested in improving grade-schoolers’ lagging achievement. Hirsch had no interest in assisting the Reagan Revolution, but his book gave conservatives a better weapon against progressivism than did any other published at the time.

Why would a study of what youths learn in the fifth grade be a bestseller for six months and a topic discussed in faculty lounges, the U.S. Department of Education, and *People* magazine? The obvious answer was the appendix that Hirsch attached to the book, a list of several thousand names, titles, dates, places, ideas, and idioms familiar, more or less, to the culturally literate citizen. The most discussed part of the book, it infuriated leftists, feminists, and multiculturalists because of its Dead White Male, Eurocentric focus. In their eyes, the list implied that a responsible American must absorb the legacy of the pa-

triarchal, Caucasian West, its ideas, religions, science, art, and politics. “Jimmy Stewart but not Sidney Poitier?” detractors huffed. “Mozart and operetta but not Charlie Parker or the blues? The Alamo but not Seneca Falls?” This shouldn’t happen a mere two decades after the Civil Rights Act and *The Feminine Mystique*, they grumbled, and the book’s popularity only aggravated the injury.

Meanwhile, conservatives such as William Bennett cheered Hirsch’s affirmation of traditional knowledge from the Roman Empire to Richard the Lionheart to Rodgers and Hammerstein. While the most selective colleges were dropping courses in Western civilization and feminists were deploring the crummy American male—Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise* appeared in 1991—*Cultural Literacy* affirmed the Vikings, Venus de Milo, and Valley Forge. Hirsch spoke favorably of national language and culture just as educators were pushing bilingualism, even “Ebonics,” in classrooms: “Encouragement of multilingualism is contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic.”

Key to Uplift

SO HOW COULD HIRSCH CALL HIMSELF A liberal Democrat? By following the facts. Hirsch saw that class mobility, a cornerstone of liberalism, depended on a youth’s abil-

ity to get good grades, earn high test scores, go to college, and graduate. The economy in the late 20th century prized cognitive skills and does so even more today. The better your reading comprehension, the farther you’ll go.

This is where traditional knowledge comes in. Because so many things a student and test-taker reads contain nuggets of facts, sayings, characters, etc., the more general knowledge the youth possesses, the easier the reading task. It’s not just the overt content of the prose that can stall him, such as the actual facts described in a passage on Galileo’s trial that the student must recount accurately. There is buried content in that passage, too—the Catholic Church, the rise of modern science, trial processes, Italy, etc. Those realities are not explained in the passage, only assumed.

The parlance of the accomplished is replete with such implicit meanings, Hirsch says, and it screens out the incognizant ones, silently and subtly, reinforcing class divisions. A quick reference to “a house divided” does two things: it uses a loaded figure of speech to make a point, and it discourages readers who don’t get it. The youth with cultural literacy doesn’t stumble over “Achilles heel,” “the Ides of March,” or “Appomattox” when these appear in an op-ed or SAT passage.

General knowledge, then, is useful for more than winning at Trivial Pursuit. Facts count; they’re a key to uplift. Upper-income kids get that cultural literacy at home, where



books and good media seep into their lives because their parents possess cultural literacy themselves and pass it on. Poor kids don't, and that burdens schools with providing them knowledge-rich instruction—and not just any knowledge, but the knowledge presumed by test-developers and *New York Times* editors and professional people at dinner parties.

The problem is that the historical situation of the United States singles out as essential the very Eurocentric knowledge that is anathema to multiculturalists. However mortifying they find it, we speak the language of Alexander Pope and William Blake, the founders were fascinated by Rome, and science measures physical phenomena by newtons, watts, and ohms. If that knowledge leans toward white-male content, progressivist teachers may gripe, but if they don't teach it, they only set their students up for failure at the next level.

Nobody pressed the point more forcefully than Hirsch. The income/class deficit is explained in *The Knowledge Deficit*, the title of his 2006 book that sharpened his earlier argument. Throughout the 1990s, the education establishment ignored *Cultural Literacy* despite its prominence, pushing instead such progressivist notions as letting kids choose their own books, "culturally relevant" curricula such as Afrocentric models, and boring, ineffectual skills training (find the main idea, etc.). In 2003, Hirsch notes, the National Council of Teachers of English reaffirmed its 1974 resolution on "Students' Right to Their Own Language," which upheld "the dialects of their nurture and whatever dialects in which they find their identity and style." In other words, forget background knowledge. When Hirsch taught a class in UVA's ed school, only two students showed up, one telling him that other professors had directed students to stay away.

But Hirsch didn't retreat one step. While theorists framed standard English as the language of power, *The Knowledge Deficit* decried the ways that "many schools and textbooks have deemphasized teaching these standard forms of grammar and pronunciation intensively...a misfortune for many children." As academics shouted ever louder for diversity, Hirsch stated that "research has shown a body of specific background knowledge to be necessary for reading proficiency and therefore it should be taught in school." That specific knowledge was laid out in Hirsch's list, which educators dismissed as "rote learning" and "mere facts," a sorry come-down from such "metacognitive" skills as critical thinking, which learning theory prized. Hirsch coolly pointed out that the evidence of student achievement undermined all such claims. As

he put it, "A reading test is really a knowledge test." Critical thinking doesn't work if you know little about the object of your thoughts.

To be sure, this was not an argument for the inherent value of tradition. The goal was the liberal one of equal opportunity, not the conservative one of preservation. The paradox is that progressive goals for society require conservative practices in school. Knowledge of the past is necessary for advancement in the present, even if people regard much of that past as unjust. Progressive visions triumph only on top of a conservative base, when we have a core knowledge handed down in the form of curriculum learned by all.

Still another book, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools* (2009),

ican Founding, Enlightenment ideas and science, the classics and King James. Traditions had to be sustained, because "anti-traditional school reforms...had the unintended consequence of depressing equality of educational opportunity."

Impregnable Fortress

THE RESISTANCE OF EDUCATORS TO these commonsense points was astonishing to see. Several years ago, I shared a podium at the American Enterprise Institute with an award-winning teacher whose high school's students spoke more than a dozen different languages in their various homes. At one moment, she boasted of how she trained the kids to understand "proper English" as the "master's language," and her blithe expression revealed an enviable moral certainty. When my turn came to speak, I didn't dispute her characterization. I followed Hirsch's reasoning, saying something like this: "You want your students to go to college, and whether it's fair or not, Standard English is the language of higher education, and an adversarial attitude toward it isn't going to help them survive freshman year, when a whole lot of unprepared and poorly-adjusted youths drop out." My comment made no impression. Her acculturation was too strong, the ed school orthodoxy too deeply internalized.

This is another thing Hirsch's career exposed: how impervious to criticism the education establishment has proven, especially when it comes to ideas. After witnessing the dismissal of *Cultural Literacy*, he wrote *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1996), which goes straight at this pretense of objective research. It called the education system an "Impregnable Fortress," "Intellectual Monopoly," and "Thoughtworld," where dissent comes off as ignorance and unprofessionalism. The ranking members are the proud and sure professionals running renowned programs at Harvard and Columbia. Bennett, Bloom, Lynne Cheney—they belong in the bin of ideologues, people who operate on bias instead of science, laughably unaware of the latest findings of the American Educational Research Association. (Its journal, *Education Researcher*, published an 8,000-word takedown of Hirsch in 1997 that included statements of this sort: "Hirsch's work serves to wash out sex, as well as race, as explanatory factors in educational or income achievement.")

The Schools We Need devotes several pages to the mainstream's complacency, citing phrases such as "strong consensus definition of Best Practice," "what research is telling us

Books by E.D. Hirsch mentioned in this essay:

Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (updated and expanded edition). Vintage, 272 pages, \$16.95 (paper)

The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children. Houghton Mifflin, 169 pages, \$22

The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools. Yale University Press, 288 pages, \$25 (cloth), \$17 (paper)

The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them. Anchor Books, 336 pages, \$25.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper)

American Ethnicity: A Sense of Commonality. Core Knowledge, 269 pages, \$19.99

opens with a chapter on "The Inspiring Idea of the Common School," which cited Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Rush advocating this very universal instruction in the ways of American citizenship. The early grades in this system "were to have a common core curriculum that would foster patriotism, solidarity, and civic peace as well as enable effective commerce, law, and politics in the public sphere." The schools would mix rich and poor, Lutheran and Methodist, German-American and Scottish-American, all of whom would learn the same basics. And that core was not to be the invention of educators. It existed already in the contents of the Amer-



about how students learn,” and “our most trusted and powerful ideas about schooling,” which educators mouth as if questions are settled and closed. But the science is not set. Indeed, the evidence actually explodes prevailing notions of self-esteem, diversity, and learning in general. Because “higher-order thinking skills” are dependent on knowledge, a mind cannot be trained without storing it with facts. Memorization is crucial to effective analysis and reflection. The “cutting-edge” model is refuted by rigorous empirical studies.

For example, in *Cultural Literacy* Hirsch pointed to chess experiments by a psychologist who gathered three groups—grand masters, masters, and regular players—and showed them for ten seconds an actual game at the point where 25 pieces were left, then asked them to reproduce the arrangement from memory. Grand masters were 100% accurate, masters 90%, and weaker players able to place only six or so pieces correctly. That’s not surprising. But when shown a board not from an actual game, with pieces arranged randomly, the performance of masters and novices evened out. Why? Because when masters saw an actual game situation, they recognized patterns and positions from traditional chess strategy, certain offenses and defenses at work with a few variations. Instead of having to remember each piece separately, they could draw upon schema that arranged pieces for them. Because they possessed the background knowledge of chess that leisure players lack, the difference showed up in performance.

Hirsch has relied on such controlled experiments again and again. His later career—he started as a scholar of Romantic poetry—marks a 35-year record of scientific inquiry against a field captive to progressivist myths. This, not his Eurocentric list, is the real threat Hirsch posed to the progressive educational project: dismantling claims of improvement, expertise, and accreditation. You’re not so smart and you’re not open-minded, he told the reformers, nor so sensitive to the plight

of the under-privileged. You’re more loyal to an idea than to real people. You’re not helping, you’re hurting, and the data prove it.

Year Zero

NOW 94, HIRSCH REMAINS ACTIVE in the Core Knowledge Foundation he established in 1986 and which produces knowledge-heavy curricular materials for K-8. (Full disclosure: I’m a board member.) His new book, *American Ethnicity: A Sense of Commonality*, endorses again but more urgently national allegiances and shared knowledge. Citing Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., on how the “cult of ethnicity” undermines American unity, Hirsch accuses the states of shirking their constitutional re-

The past lingers in powerful and often hidden ways, sorting out young people’s life prospects.

sponsibility to create strong curricula; urges parents to monitor classroom content all the time, not just when sex and race come up; and blames child-centered learning for perpetuating the black-white achievement gap. Familiar embarrassments are updated with data on declining scores and bogus theories. Parents want their kindergarteners to get a little literacy and numeracy, but teachers put “positive self-esteem” as the highest imperative. Educators stick with evidence-free notions of “learning by doing,” create standards that are empty of content (“Identify a speaker in a text”), and ignore the importance of a teen “adopt[ing] a nation’s values and allegiances.” Against hackneyed progressivism, Hirsch invokes the continued correlation of early verbal scores and adult income, lays out the strong record of Core Knowledge schools,

and interviews successful anti-progressive teachers. “Kindergarten,” he notes, means “the place where you garden children.”

These are familiar points, but they must be repeated when the institution rejects them despite incontrovertible evidence. The root contentions of *Cultural Literacy* hold up as well today as they did in 1987. The corpus is worth every conservative’s attention. Hirsch singled out a devastating flaw in progressive thinking, one overcome only by a return to conservative practice. If you want class mobility, teach the classics. If you want to close the achievement gap, honor Shakespeare and the American Founding. The traditional past lingers in powerful and often hidden ways, sorting out young people’s life prospects.

What Hirsch describes reveals exactly why progressives act ever more radical, seeking a thorough transformation of the United States rather than a mere reform here or there. As long as Western tradition predominates in the culture, youths not acculturated to it will struggle. Efforts to eliminate “cultural bias” from standardized tests will not succeed until bias disappears from society at large. This is a utopian project, of course. We prepare young people in a particular time for life in a particular nation with a particular heritage, not for one in a generic society that never has existed and never will.

But that doesn’t stop progressives. They like the grandiosity. The goal is not to replace the Western past with a multicultural past, for no multicultural formation can capture all identities and cultures. Some will always be left out. Hence, progressives must undo every tradition, all pasts. The statues must come down. Progressive education is reeducation; its learning is unlearning. Today is Year Zero. Hirsch proves that the workings of cultural literacy should be in the arsenal of every serious individual and institution in the land.

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