

Athens and Jerusalem: Classical Education and the Culture Wars

SUSAN HEGEMAN

Abstract This article examines the rise of “classical education” (CE) as an educational model in the context of contemporary educational culture wars in the United States. A traditionalist educational model especially favored by Christian schools and universities, CE builds upon the prestige of learning in the texts of the ancient Mediterranean. It is increasingly promoted by educators and politicians on the right as a tool for instilling “civic virtue” and for wresting American education from the grip of secularism and left-liberal ideology. This paper explores CE’s actors, its history, its pedagogical content, and its ideological underpinnings, to show that for its champions, CE is not simply a way to return to time-honored “classics,” but to instill a conservative cultural hegemony rooted in Christian nationalism.

Keywords: classical education, culture wars, history of education, religion in America, political conservatism

While culture wars are now a familiar feature of American politics, explanations for their origin and significance vary widely.¹ Some dismiss culture wars as mere political tactics to exploit grievances and distract voters from focusing on “real” political issues and social needs (see Frank). Others contend that they are authentic popular expressions of frustration over changing social attitudes, especially regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Against these more populist (and popular) accounts of culture wars, I suggest that such disputes emerge in the context of failures of institutional authority; or more specifically, when institutions are perceived as no longer able ideologically to mediate conflicts over values and social goods. This helps to explain why schools and universities are currently such key sites of culture wars in the United States: they have become especially vulnerable to culture war attacks in a moment when they are no longer seen as managing the contradictions inherent in a society that promises, but manifestly does not deliver

on, meritocratic paths to social prestige and economic stability (see Sandel). This failure must be understood in the context of neoliberalism, which has enabled the disinvestment in and privatization of public education, exacerbated disparities in wealth and opportunity, and eroded democratic forms of government in the US and globally.

Into this theater enter any number of actors seeking to take advantage of this institutional weakness for their own political ends. In public protests and increasingly contentious school board meetings, we see “astroturf” groups like Moms for Liberty, who fomented some of the most sensational culture war battles over school and library book bans and educational gag orders, sparking moral panics over children’s exposure to “gender ideology” and “critical race theory.”² We also see provocateurs like Christopher Rufo, an adherent of a strategy with origins in the post-1968 French New Right that seeks to obliterate the traces of the “cultural revolution” of the 1960s liberation movements (Bar-On; Rufo, “Laying Siege”; Rufo, “Harvard and Hegemony”). Building, paradoxically, on the ideas of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, Rufo advocates “laying siege to the institutions,” including the courts, government bureaucracies, and even corporations, as a way to attack the entrenched social order and its elites. As for schools and universities, the plan is nothing less than to “reconquer” them from the “iron grip” of the left (Yenor; Rufo, *America’s*).

Despite the bellicose language of some of these strategists, one prominent plan for the radical remaking of America’s educational system goes by a seemingly anodyne and uncontroversial name: “classical education.” Often referred to simply as CE (or CCE for “Classical Christian Education”) among its adherents—a usage I will also adopt for the sake of brevity—classical education pays deference to texts of the ancient Mediterranean and sometimes still emphasizes instruction in Latin and ancient Greek in the service of an explicitly traditionalist educational vision. It is also strongly indebted to the educational idea of the “Great Books,” an educational philosophy developed in the 1920s at Columbia and Chicago Universities. Like the Great Books, CE draws upon widely held views about the value and prestige of “classic” cultural objects and a liberal arts education. Proponents of both share a ratio-

nale that connects the encounter with the great ideas of the “Western tradition” and essential training for citizenship. Where it differs, however, is in relation to the question of what the content of that training for citizenship entails. As I will show, CE is deeply implicated in Christian education and indeed in Christian nationalist conceptions of America as founded upon and enacting scriptural truth.

While CE can be seen as an accretion of centuries of conservative complaints about education in America—over, among other things, the value of foreign language instruction, the proper way to teach literacy, vocational training versus liberal arts instruction, the composition of the literary canon, the representation of cultural diversity—it is particularly connected to a reaction to the secularism of modern education. CE has been deployed for decades in educational settings separate and apart from public schools, especially in religious private colleges, academies, and home schools. But in the current culture wars to “reconquer” public schools, the goal now seems to be to remake public education via the CE model.

CE is increasingly being brought into public education, especially via the promotion of CE charter schools, which are technically public schools in that they receive government funding but are run without as much oversight or regulation as conventional public schools. Given the strong link between CE and religious education, it is reasonable to see this encroachment as serving a long-sought conservative goal of bringing religious instruction and observance back into American public schools—something largely banned since the 1960s, when the Supreme Court determined that Constitutional provisions prohibiting the establishment of religion extended to state-funded schools (Kauper). Recent Supreme Court decisions, however, may signal the weakening of this separation of church and state, potentially clearing the way for publicly funded religious charter schools (Garnett).

In what follows, I will describe the way that “classical education” is being used by a variety of actors, including politicians, academics, and others, in reactionary efforts to reform American education. I will then offer some context for understanding its historical and ideological roots as an educational philosophy in order to help explain its appeal. This is toward the goal

of helping to elucidate the stakes of this particular front in the educational culture wars, which certainly exceed the limited questions of educational philosophy or curricula, and point to a struggle for nothing less than cultural hegemony.

The Classical Education Ecosystem

Classical Education is more than a pedagogy, curriculum, and educational philosophy. It is also a “K-20 ecosystem”³ consisting of schools, colleges, universities, students, parents, teachers, professors, testing, certification and service organizations, social networks, think tanks, presses, and politicians engaged with formal education from the early years through college. As such, it mirrors what conservative critics see as the educational “pipeline” of the “progressive Left,” in which allegedly leftist colleges of education produce similarly biased teachers, who then pass on their ideologies to their students (Hegseth 4).

Though a mere fraction of the nearly 50 million students enrolled in public schools, the biggest constituency in the CE ecosystem is children and adolescents enrolled in school grades from kindergarten through to the last year of high school (“Fast Facts: Back-to-School Statistics”). Advocates for CE estimate that there are over 400,000 students in more than 1500 CE schools across the United States, two-thirds of which are private evangelical Christian schools. The remainder are split evenly between private Catholic schools and publicly supported charter schools. Add to this a growing population of more than 261,000 home-schoolers, many of whom are doubtless also religious, who also follow a CE curriculum (Arcadia Education). This constituency is also the central preoccupation of CE’s educational culture warriors. Right-wing television personality Pete Hegseth states it bluntly: “The real battlefield isn’t colleges; it’s kindergartens” (Hegseth 8; Cooper and Haberman).

Nevertheless, CE colleges are of central importance to the ecosystem as intellectual hubs and training grounds for its theorists, potential teachers, and other CE facilitators. At the college level, institutions that tout their CE curricula such as Patrick Henry College in Virginia, Thomas Aquinas College

in California, New Saint Andrews College in Idaho and Hillsdale College in Michigan, are typically small, private, culturally conservative, and religious. In terms of instruction, they diverge from other liberal arts colleges in that they minimize students' choice of courses and foci in favor of a largely fixed reading list and curriculum. They favor small seminar-style classes and the use of primary texts, which, depending on the college, students may read in Latin or ancient Greek.

This model is in many respects indebted to the Great Books curriculum first implemented by Columbia University's professor John Erskine and most famously practiced at St. John's College in Maryland and New Mexico, with some important differences. Mortimer J. Adler, one of the Great Books concept's most prominent popularizers and Erskine's mentee at Columbia, argued that reading Great Books offered a way for students to engage in a pursuit of truth that was "dialectical" rather than "doctrinal," and ultimately not limited to a specific reading list or set of ideas (Adler xx, xxxii-xxxiii). Indeed, the concept has persisted in many American colleges and universities for a century largely because it has been adaptable to social changes and student demand. For example, after student protests, the culturally liberal Reed College in Oregon revised its mandatory Great Books humanities course to focus not just on Athens and the ancient Mediterranean, but also on Mexico City and Harlem, New York ("Faculty").

Where the CE colleges most differentiate themselves from Great Books, then, is in the particular claims they make for how their focus on the masterpieces of the "Western tradition" is foundational to their religious and political mission and ideology. For example, Hillsdale College "considers itself a trustee of our Western philosophical and theological inheritance tracing to Athens and Jerusalem, a heritage finding its clearest expression in the American experiment of self-government under law" ("Mission"). Implicit here is an exceptionalist and nationalist conception of the United States as both founded on, and an apotheosis of, "Western" and Christian philosophical and theological traditions.

The colleges also serve an important symbolic function in the CE ecosystem. Higher education represents for most students a massive economic investment and yet, especially in larger institutions, instruction takes place online or in large, impersonal lecture halls. In this context, the “high-touch” small college, with its seminars and small student-faculty ratios, ideally wrapped up in a park-like setting filled with historical architecture, can represent a nostalgic, if elitist, educational ideal. CE thrives on these kinds of associations. In this sense, it partakes of some of the same structure of feeling as “dark academia,” the gothic-tinged youth subculture whose aesthetics harken back to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge during the inter-war years, and which has plausibly been described as a nostalgic response to the alienation and exploitation of neoliberal higher education (Horgan). It’s an ideal that motivates parents to pay significant amounts of money to send their children to private preparatory schools. It also helps address the cultural anxieties of some conservative Christians. As Molly Worthen writes in her profile of New Saint Andrews College, “N.S.A. aims to turn on its head the historian Richard Hofstadter’s old stereotype of the resentful evangelical bumpkin who equates intellectual life and high culture with privilege and social status he doesn’t have” (Worthen).

Among these small colleges, two stand out for their outsized political prominence and their aggressive efforts to expand the CE curriculum nationwide. One is New Saint Andrews College itself, founded in 1994 by avowed Christian nationalist Pastor Doug Wilson. Wilson, a theocrat who supports removing women from the franchise and criminalizing LGBTQ+ people, is also the founder of the international Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches. In addition to New Saint Andrews College, Wilson is involved in CE via his Association of Classical Christian Schools and a publishing house, Canon Press. Pete Hegseth, who recently rose to prominence as the Secretary of Defense in Donald Trump’s second-term administration, is closely associated with Wilson and his organizations (Druzin).

Hillsdale, the other politically prominent CE college, proudly advertises that it does not accept public funding of any kind, a policy that exempts it from adhering to federal regulations around issues including gender equity and

protections for sexual minorities. To make up for this lack of federal funding (including government-backed loans to students to help pay for tuition), the college is supported by a lucrative network of donors, which in turn is cultivated via Hillsdale's visibility in the halls of power. The college's influential president, Larry P. Arnn, is connected to important activist conservative think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation and the Claremont Institute ("Larry P. Arnn, PhD"). With a satellite campus in Washington D.C. that serves as both a training ground and a social and intellectual hub for Washington conservatives, Hillsdale boasts of its success in placing alumni in positions near prominent conservative politicians and power centers (Lloyd).

In 2020, Hillsdale's President Arnn became a central figure in the "history wars" when he was selected to chair President Trump's Advisory 1776 Commission, a body tasked with responding to the *New York Times's* 1619 Project, a journalistic-historical commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in British North America. While some scholars criticized the 1619 Project for historical inaccuracies, it was especially condemned by conservatives who saw it as an unpatriotic and biased attack on the story of the founding of the United States. The 1776 Commission's rejoinder, the "1776 Report," was equally controversial on both historical and ideological grounds. The American Historical Association denounced the report as "a screed against a half-century of historical scholarship," and asserted: "The authors call for a form of government indoctrination of American students, and in the process elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue" ("AHA Statement"). This "indoctrination" would soon be available, pre-packaged and downloadable from the Hillsdale College website, as the "Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum" for K-12 education ("K-12 History and Civics Curriculum").

Political access and direct engagement in these kinds of educational culture wars have been especially important to Hillsdale's project for developing and promoting the CE curriculum in public charter schools throughout the United States. Its Barney Charter School Initiative boasts a growing network of about thirty "Member Schools" that adhere to its educational model and many more that use their CE curriculum and support services ("Barney"). In 2022, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, a "Christian-values" conserva-

tive, announced an extraordinarily ambitious “partnership” with Hillsdale to create fifty new CE charter schools across his state in an effort to combat “woke” perspectives on American history (Lee). However, Lee’s and Hillsdale’s ambitious charter school plan soon met some headwinds. Lee would be forced to distance himself from Hillsdale when disparaging comments made by Arnn about public education came to light, including his view that teachers were “trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country” (Olmstead). After a firestorm of negative press, especially from teachers and their defenders, but also regarding Hillsdale and the governor’s collaboration with an explicitly religious institution, plans for the partnership were scrapped. There is currently only one Hillsdale Member charter school in Tennessee.

The Tennessee episode is instructive on some of the inherent limits to the growth of the CE model in the schools. The controversy that Lee and Arnn provoked highlights the importance of teachers, who are not only generally well-liked community members and crucial to the success of schools and students (Olmstead), but also in short supply. Across states like Tennessee, the pandemic, low pay, and political attacks have driven qualified teachers out of the profession, leading to widespread shortages. If, as Arnn clearly believes, current teacher training programs are inadequate indoctrination factories, then there aren’t nearly enough proto-Hillsdale Colleges to provide training alternatives and certainly not enough to fill the need. This is, perhaps, the structural logic behind a new kind of initiative in conservative higher education. No longer content with creating alternative educational institutions, CE advocates are also seeking footholds in mass higher education institutions. Thus, in recent years, we have seen in largely conservative states like Tennessee, Arizona, Texas, and North Carolina the establishment of institutes, centers, and colleges, all housed within established public universities, that take as their mission the teaching and dissemination of the CE curriculum and the related project of “civic education” to the lower grades.

Perhaps most noteworthy in its attempt to wholly remake public education via CE is the State of Florida. There are seven Hillsdale member charter schools in Florida, more than in any other state, as well as a handful of other

private and charter schools that adhere to the CE model to one degree or another. The state's governor, Ron DeSantis, is closely connected to the Heritage Foundation (Slattery), and by extension to Hillsdale. This was particularly evident in his 2023 presidential campaign, where he attempted to run on his record of waging aggressive educational culture wars in favor of "parents' rights," and against "woke indoctrination," and the like. Most sensational of DeSantis's salvos was the wholesale takeover of the New College of Florida, a unique LGBTQ+-friendly liberal arts college that offered its tiny body of 700 students the opportunity to design their own courses of study. DeSantis appointed six new members to the Board of Trustees, the college's governing body, who then quickly fired the college president and installed in her place Richard Corcoran—a former Florida Commissioner of Education and a political ally of DeSantis. Among the controversial appointments to the Board of Trustees was Matthew Spalding, the Dean of Hillsdale's Washington, D.C. campus, and Christopher Rufo, the reactionary provocateur who has claimed credit for fomenting the moral panic over critical race theory and for orchestrating the ousting of Harvard President Claudine Gay (Ward). DeSantis made it clear that "it is our hope that New College of Florida will become Florida's classical college, more along the lines of a Hillsdale of the South" (Moody, "DeSantis"). If New College represents an experiment in using CE to "reconquer" higher education, its prospects for success are currently unclear. While there has been rapid progress on a new and outsized sports program and a new general education curriculum has been outlined around the terms "techne" and "logos," most of the curricular reform appears to consist of eliminating courses from the general education offerings and replacing them with one required course on the *Odyssey* (Alonso; Moody, "A Clash").

While this violent dismantling of New College is both alarming and dispiriting, especially for many of its students, faculty, and alumni, ultimately far more consequential is the broad effort of the conservative Florida legislature to incorporate CE into the state's entire public education system. In 2023, the same year as the New College takeover, DeSantis also signed into law a sweeping piece of conservative higher education legislation that banned funding for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in Florida's college

and university system; enacted an educational gag order over instruction in topics related to race, sexuality, and gender; restricted the content of general education courses; and weakened faculty tenure protections. It also created a new Hamilton College for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida, whose legally defined purpose was not only to instruct to university students in CE and civics, but to “provide programming and training” for Florida’s entire “K-20 system” (“SB 266”). In this mission, the Hamilton College joins the Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at University of Central Florida, the Florida Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University, and the Adam Smith Center for the Study of Economic Freedom at Florida International University—the latter two of which are also tasked with implementing the state-mandated “Portraits in Patriotism” curriculum, designed to expose students to “victims of other nations’ governing philosophies” (Dailey).

Finally, to facilitate movement between students in CE schools and higher education, Florida’s State University System became the first public system in the United States to give students the option to use scores on the controversial Classical Learning Test (CLT) for college admission. The relatively new CLT has been criticized by its much larger and established testing competitors that administer the SAT and ACT admission tests for having no track record in predicting student success and for failing to adequately assess pre-college level math skills (“Higher Education Brief”). It is, however, a popular option among students from religious schools and home schools. In 2024, still more legislation was passed to facilitate the creation of public CE charter schools, make it easier for students in CE private schools to transfer to public charters, and establish a special credential for teachers to work in CE charter schools (“HB 1285”).

Classical Education in Practice: Pedagogy and Curriculum

This same legislation also included a definition of a “classical school” as one “that implements a classical education model that emphasizes the development of students in the principles of moral character and civic virtue through a well-rounded education in the liberal arts and sciences which is

based on the classical trivium stages of grammar, logic, and rhetoric” (“HB 1285” 18–19). But what exactly does a classical education entail, and how, beyond the invocation of the conspicuously Latin word *trivium*, is it “classical”? To answer this question, I surveyed literature from CE school and college websites, manuals for CE homeschooling, and the CLT’s “author bank”: a list of authors whose works are used in their test. What I found was a curriculum with deep roots in a traditional, elite education. While limited in terms of historical and cultural scope, its content seems both familiar and indeed in many respects attractive to anyone receptive to the educational value of close textual analysis, reasoned debate and discussion, and immersion in foreign languages. Not unrelatedly, it holds obvious appeal to anyone nostalgic for a moment when a liberal arts education strongly based in the humanities served as a stable signifier of cultural capital. What is more scandalous is the way this educational approach is being packaged as part of a political and cultural project that is supposed to correct the ills of a secular and modern society.

Though some accounts of CE schools will insist that the origins of the curriculum are with the ancient Greeks and the Romans, it is probably more accurate to see this movement as a product of a much more recent cultural context: that of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American “antimodernism” (Lears). Nowhere is this clearer than in the frequent citation in CE circles of a 1948 essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” by Dorothy L. Sayers, which serves as something of a mission statement for CE, especially her principle that “the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves” (Sayers 30; and see Berquist 1). Sayers’s intervention was directed at an increasingly professionalized modern educational system that she saw as excessively organized around instruction in discrete academic subjects and oriented toward vocational training. Her statement continues to be taken up by CE advocates as an indictment of the failures of modern education as a whole.

For all its critique of modern education, Sayers’s maxim about teaching students how to learn actually agrees in many respects with what was being taught in mid-century schools of education. In particular, it is relatively con-

sistent with post-war cognitivist educational theory, which also de-emphasized teaching content in favor of a focus on learning, conceptualized as a set of stages from the mastery of basic facts and concepts to the application of facts and the production of original work (see for example Bloom). While Sayers explicitly distanced herself from this kind of professional educational psychology, somewhat misleadingly downplaying her experience working for several years as a teacher and identifying herself with educational “amateurs,” she nevertheless offered her own theory of childhood development, in which she proposed that young children learned best through rote memorization and recitation (of works of literature and prayers, historical dates and events, facts in geography, Latin, natural history, and mathematics); children in the middle years be taught something like application of knowledge (reasoned debate on historical, philosophical, and theological topics, as well as mathematics as a form of logic); and finally older adolescents would be encouraged to engage in literary appreciation and self-expression and creativity. Her real contribution here, besides offering a permission structure for “amateurs” to jump into curriculum design, was to connect this educational psychology to medieval education in the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. While for Sayers the *quadrivium* would represent the subjects suitable for college study, the *trivium*’s structure of “grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric” would organize educational stages of the pre-collegiate years, where grammar names the stage given to memorization, dialectic to application, and self-expression to rhetoric (Sayers 8).

Sayers was a Christian apologist with strong ties to C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and T. S. Eliot. Her anti-modern sentiments are especially evident in her antipathy to contemporary mass culture. Perhaps surprisingly for one who was herself so steeped in pre-war mass culture—Sayers was the author of the popular Lord Peter Wimsey murder mysteries and also had a career in advertising—she writes, “Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that to-day, when the proportion of literacy throughout Western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass-propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard-of and unimagined?” (3). While one might pause on the whiff of elitism emanating from her dismissal of mass literacy, Sayers argues

for her “neo-medieval curriculum” on the grounds that it arms its students not only against propaganda of both the political and commercial sorts, but also against “slipshod syntax,” poor research skills, and faulty argumentation—particularly with regard to rebutting the poor reasoning of atheists (3–7, 16).

Perhaps because of its purported emphasis on learning over subject matter, CE has become amenable to educational views that don’t necessarily have anything to do with classical education or certainly the classics, but that often reflect the traditionalist and anti-professional biases of the CE movement. A notable example of this is in prescriptions in CE literature regarding instruction in literacy, which tend to emphasize phonics, or the decoding of words by connecting sounds to the letters of the alphabet (see for example Berquist 11; Bauer and Wise 4–5). Teaching reading through phonics was standard practice through the early part of the twentieth century until the effectiveness of this method began to be challenged by research-based “whole word” and “whole language” approaches to teaching reading. Though sounding out words never entirely left the educational toolbox, its seeming displacement alarmed many who recalled their own experiences learning to read. The subject of the mid-twentieth century “reading wars,” the question of the place of phonics instruction in literacy education continues to be surprisingly controversial (Kim 91–95; Blinkoff et al.).

Mostly, however, what one sees is a wholesale rejection of “progressive education,” commonly associated with the work of the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), who argued for practical, experiential, and socially informed learning in the context of educating citizens of an industrialized democratic society. Dewey’s own relationship to progressive education is complex, and he was often a sharp critic of some of the more experimental practices that went under this label. However, in the interwar period he became embroiled in a public defense of his work, especially from proponents of Great Books curricula who regarded his emphasis on experiential learning as antithetical to learning from great texts of the past (Martin 449–59). Though he and many proponents of Great Books shared a common interest in education for democracy (see Adler xxiv–xxvi), it is probably this

public controversy over Great Books, more than his actual educational philosophy, that has made Dewey a special villain for the proponents of CE. It is Dewey whom the advocates of CE most commonly blame for doing away with Latin language instruction, rote memorization, and phonics, replacing them with “fun” hands-on activities, student self-expression, and “a multicultural approach that downplayed European and even American history and presented instead a smattering of world history”—all of which has ultimately led to the evils of philosophical and moral relativism, “egalitarianism,” and an erosion of academic standards (Perrin 16–18).

With this salvo against progressive education, CE’s elitism is once again on full view. Indeed, much of its self-justification is in replicating the educational background of great men of the past—including America’s “founding fathers” (Perrin 8). Though it doesn’t wholly escape making utilitarian arguments for CE (Latin instruction, for example, is frequently justified as helpful for learning English vocabulary and grammar and as a good starting point for learning other languages; Berquist 7; Perrin 24–26), it seems that much of its appeal is made in terms of cultural capital, via CE’s proximity to traditional forms of elite education. Correspondingly, CE advocates are also clear about their role in upholding traditional forms of authority—an issue that, in conservative political discourse, falls under the concept of “parents’ rights.” While progressive education encouraged dialogue and debate for the purposes of preparing students to participate in a democracy, the CE model not only emphasizes discipline and self-disciplining through memorization, but also that CE schools are merely extensions of parents, who are understood as the proper authority over their children’s education (Perrin 35).

While it’s all well and good to say that a classical education is about learning and not about content, this is rather obviously contradicted in the convergence between CE and the idea of instruction in the “Western tradition” and the “Great Books.” Christopher A. Perrin’s *An Introduction to Classical Education* makes this emphasis explicit, connecting the canon of “Great Books” to absolute standards of taste and evaluation: “Believing that there are real standards of beauty, goodness and truth, [classical educators] dared to pronounce some books good and some poor; they even went so far (over time)

as to conclude some books the very best” (Perrin 27). He even offers an etymology that connects the word “classic,” from *classicus*, the “highest class of Roman citizens,” to the superiority of great works of literature (28). But rather than conclude on this basis that such works derived their elevated status due to their relationship to some elite class, he resorts to that most familiar of axiological clichés: they were “proven by positive assessment over time” (Perrin 28).

Any canon or reading list is, of course, an exercise in identifying and organizing cultural capital (see Guillory). A peculiar document in this process is the “CLT Author Bank,” curated by the Classical Learning Test (CLT), a list of authors whose works comprise two thirds of the reading and writing questions on the CLT exam. The Author Bank loosely outlines a comprehensive survey of major figures in history, literature, philosophy, religion, and the history of science, starting with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and ending with Toni Morrison. The list of 162 entries is divided into four parts: “Ancients” (33), “Medievals” (31), “Early Moderns” (39), and “Late Moderns” (59). Twenty-three of the authors are women, seven are African American. East Asia is represented by one name: Confucius. Africa is represented by Augustine and Terence; India by Mahatma Gandhi; and Latin America by Bartolomé de las Casas and Jorge Luis Borges. Figures associated with Christianity are heavily represented, including fifteen Catholic saints and quite a few more religious mystics, philosophers, and reformers. Chesterton, Lewis, Tolkien, and Dorothy Sayers all make the cut.

The Author Bank is a strange sort of canon in that it comprises names of authors, not texts (with a few exceptions for texts of unknown authorship, like *Beowulf* and the *Magna Carta*). One is therefore left only to surmise, based on the accompanying short biographical profiles, that, say, Sayers’ “The Lost Tools of Learning” features more prominently on the test than her murder mysteries (Blanchard, “Sayers”). But ultimately, there is very little need for the student test-takers to have any in-depth knowledge of particular texts: works by these authors are simply used as sources of passages for the test’s multiple-choice questions on reading comprehension, grammar, and punctuation. However, the list does fulfill its function in creating and

marking cultural capital, and as such serves as advertising for the test and for CE in general. Indeed, a good number of the authors (again, for example, Sayers) are featured for their role in serving in one way or another to justify the CE project.

Interestingly, there are about as many African American authors' names on the list as those from non-European or Anglo-American countries. While this emphasis may reflect the CLT's context within the United States, it also helps to deflect any accusations of racial bias in the CE celebration of the "Western tradition." Here, W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the listed authors, plays a noteworthy role. The CLT author profile explicitly distances itself from Du Bois's secularism and certainly avoids any mention of the Marxist turn of Du Bois's later work, while celebrating his early writing on education and African American "uplift" (Blanchard, "Du Bois"). Of particular significance to CE's proponents is Du Bois's famous rebuttal to Booker T. Washington (not included in the Author Bank) on the topic of industrial versus liberal arts education. In *The Souls of Black Folk* and "The Talented Tenth" (both 1903), Du Bois argues that while training in skills may be right for the black masses, the cohort of the "Best," "who, judged by any standard have reached the full measure of the best type of European culture," must receive a broad liberal arts college education (Du Bois 33, 44). Du Bois's frank elitism was in the service of a radical proposition in the context of Jim Crow America: namely, that black people be considered the equals of whites in terms of talent and that they therefore be afforded the same educational opportunities. Currently, however, this view comports with the meritocratic "colorblind" approach to questions of racial equality favored by many contemporary American conservatives. And, of course, numerous commentators have indicted the idea of the Western tradition as racist, not only in its exclusion of the cultural accomplishments of those outside of Europe and Anglo-America, but also in its complicity with conceptions of humanity that enabled racial slavery and genocide (see Wynter). Nevertheless, the CE model is clearly attractive to some African American educators, several of whom have founded CE schools, perhaps for the way it invokes a traditional idea of excellence and erudition embodied in figures like Du Bois (Prather). Cornel West, a well-known African American philosopher and theologian, and recent indepen-

dent candidate for US president, is a member of the CLT Advisory Board, along with Rufo, multiple affiliates of Hillsdale College, and Kevin Roberts, the President of the Heritage Foundation (“Meet the Board”).

Virtue Signaling: Classical Education and/as Ideology

So far, I have provided a specific picture of CE as elitist, Eurocentric, traditionalist, and intimately tied to conservative Christian education. The latter element helps explain its emphasis on “moral education,” but more must be said about its self-professed connection to education in “civic virtue.” It is here where the CE curriculum is its most “classical,” with historical reference points that explicitly include ancient Greece and Rome, and also where it is most revealing in terms of its ideological connection to reactionary politics.

There is widespread consensus across the political spectrum that American students need more and better civic literacy. Proponents of civic education point to poor knowledge of basic facts regarding American law and governance; lack of training in civic dispositions such as public spiritedness, cooperativeness, and critical thinking; and low participation in voting and volunteer and community activities, especially among young people. The solutions to these problems, however, are decidedly partisan. The civil rights organization Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, seeks to address the civics literacy problem with a pedagogy in, among other things, social justice, media literacy, and voter suppression (Bell). In the conservative Florida Legislature, however, its 2021 “Civic Education Curriculum” bill framed civic education in terms of chauvinistic patriotism, with an explicit requirement to teach “a comparative discussion of political ideologies, such as communism and totalitarianism, that conflict with the principles of freedom and democracy essential to the founding principles of the United States” (“SB 1450” 1). It also requires “an understanding of the civic-minded expectations...of an upright and desirable citizenry that recognizes and accepts responsibility for preserving and defending the blessings of liberty inherited from prior generations and secured by the United States Constitution” (“SB 1450” 2).

In accordance with this law and with the participation of Hillsdale College, the State of Florida established new civic education standards that included knowledge of the Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek and Roman origins of American political thought (Ceballos and Brugal). For example, a seventh-grade student is expected to know that the ideas of a written constitution and citizen enfranchisement came from the Greeks, the organization of American governance (bicameral legislature, three branches of government) came from the Roman Republic, and obedience to law and the idea of the inalienable rights of persons came from the Judeo-Christian tradition (“Ancient”).

Historians of the American Republic may be surprised to see the Judeo-Christian tradition superseding secular Enlightenment sources like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the sources of ideas like “inalienable rights” (“Founders’ Influences”). Yet this rewriting of intellectual history is entirely in keeping with convictions long held in conservative religious circles that the United States was founded as, and therefore continues to be, a fundamentally Christian nation. In this, too, CE’s engagement with civic education can be seen to serve the long-standing conservative goal of breaking down the separation of church and state and bringing Christian religious practice and education back into the public schools. CE education in “civic virtue” could itself be viewed as a way to smuggle religious pedagogy into public schools via the cover of teaching about the intellectual contexts of the formation of American government. And of course, CE’s claims to answer the call for more civic education with clearly conservative bona fides, thanks to the participation of Hillsdale and others, bolster political arguments for public funding for CE charter schools. But the deployment of the signifiers of ancient Greece and Rome represents something even more than the endorsement of a religious agenda; it also indicates a reactionary philosophy of governance and a pedagogy designed to limit students’ understanding of American history and ultimately who counts as a citizen.

Proponents of CE highlight that the Founding Fathers of the United States had a classical education, displayed both in their copious Latin references and in their framing of the U.S. Constitution and system of government (see

Perrin 8). One of the main arguments, then, for connecting CE to “civic virtue” is that students need an exposure to similar intellectual contexts to understand the philosophical underpinnings of their government and implicitly their country’s very identity. “Civic virtue” rests, in the CE context, with an explicitly eighteenth-century understanding of the term common among its ruling elite. In a way, it parallels the conservative legal theory of originalism, which holds that laws, and especially the Constitution, must be interpreted in the narrow context of their original adoption.

The CE version of “civic virtue” is sometimes personified in the figure of George Washington, who, in turn, was often portrayed in Roman garb and associated with the Roman general Cincinnatus. Both Washington and Cincinnatus resigned at the height of their power, thereby preserving their respective republics. For some, these figures also demonstrate the virtuous self-restraint of the powerful, and by extension, the virtue inherent in limited government (see *Ben Sasse*). Unquestionably, such a model of civic virtue has new relevance in the aftermath of Trump’s attempted autocoup in January 2021. Yet Roman-American models such as these also invite questions about the limitations of the historical focus of CE’s version of civic virtue.

A more conventional model of civic virtue and a staple in American schools for decades is the heroism of Rosa Parks, whose act of civil disobedience helped precipitate the Montgomery bus boycott, a key struggle in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Hers is, of course, a more complicated example of self-sacrifice for the common good than that of George Washington, in that Parks’s refusal to sit in the seats at the back of the bus entailed deliberate lawbreaking and coordinated mass activism. It also teaches a decidedly different lesson, about the virtue of the disenfranchised to claim their power to change government to represent their needs and interests.

I have no evidence that Rosa Parks in particular is omitted from CE curricula on civic virtue.⁴ Rather, my comparison is intended to highlight the flaws in the common claim in CE materials that it is a pedagogy of *how* to think and not what to think, and that therefore a student’s encounter with texts of the ancient world, or a version of eighteenth-century thought, will somehow convey skills and ideas in most ways comparable to, or better than,

those of more recent vintage. Insofar as any curriculum involves choices and emphases, one must wonder what kinds of messages about civic virtue are, and are not, being conveyed. One must additionally wonder what kinds of actors and acts are represented as exemplifying civic virtue, and in turn who is represented as legitimately participating in the civic life of the United States. It need hardly be added that the Florida educational reforms that elevated CE coincided with DeSantis's "anti-WOKE" agenda, which imposed gag orders on educational content addressing topics like slavery and racial discrimination, *and* with repressive measures against protesters in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Conclusion: Classical Education and the Culture Wars

If culture wars emerge in the context of ideological crisis over the social role of institutions, then presumably they must end when that crisis is resolved. Proponents of CE are indeed advancing a solution to the crisis in American education on several simultaneous fronts. First, by reinscribing a traditional canon of texts and cultural touchpoints in a "Western tradition," they promise to stabilize ideological contestation over issues of cultural value. They propose to resolve conflicts over the meaning of American identity by connecting it to this same Western tradition, and explicitly or explicitly to Christian religion. Secondly, by purporting to offer an education that instills "civic virtue," they promise to resolve the erosion of confidence in governing institutions by fetishizing a revisionist historical point of origin in the eighteenth century and minimizing the historical points of failure, crisis, and struggle such as the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, they suggest a resolution to the problem of access to social mobility through a nostalgic evocation of the liberal arts education of the previous century, and with it the seemingly stable social hierarchies that form of education supported.

Currently, big political forces are in play to position CE as more than just a counter-model to standard public education practices and to fully remake American education in its mold. It remains to be seen, however, whether students, parents, and other constituents of American education also see CE as

a compelling resolution to the crises besetting education. Its success also depends on the extent to which the radical reactionaries get their way, and destroy existing American educational institutions as we know them.

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Notes

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2. “Educational Gag Orders”; Butler; Henry et al. The term “astroturf” refers to well-funded and politically connected groups that present themselves as emerging spontaneously from the popular political “grassroots.” For an account of Moms for Liberty’s substantial political and financial connections, see Cunningham.
3. Hess. “K-20” is a shorthand reference to the entire American educational system from the earliest years through post-college (graduate) education. K refers to “kindergarten,” comparable to “reception” in the UK; grades 1–12 represent primary and secondary school levels. “K-12” is a common shorthand expression for pre-college education.
4. Books about Rosa Parks have, however, been subjected to recent book bans, and, in accordance with Florida’s new anti-DEI laws, educational materials for the early grades about Parks were edited to omit the key fact that her civil disobedience was an act of coordinated protest against racial segregation (Gamble).

About the author

Susan Hegeman is a Professor of English at the University of Florida. Her research addresses the intersections of culture and fields including education, anthropology, politics, and the law. She has written two books on the concept of culture: *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton, 1999) and *The Cultural Return* (California, 2012). She is an associate editor of the two-volume *Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Novel*.