

THE CASE FOR CULTURE IN AN AGE OF DECONSTRUCTIVISM

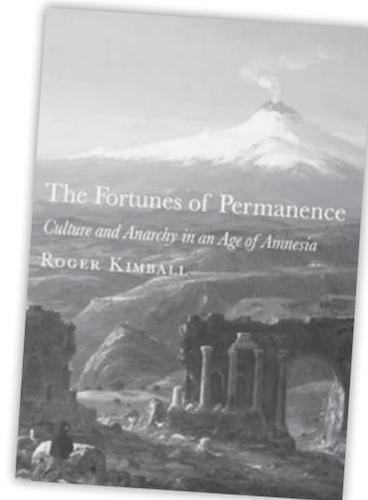
**The Fortunes of Permanence:
Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia**

By Roger Kimball

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Intelligence is a moral duty and a spiritual quest—culture is defined by it; civilisations rise and fall on its merits. Nowhere in the great books of religion or philosophy is ignorance deified as a virtue because the destructive animus of an unenlightened citizenry is history’s most notorious lesson. Yet, at the dawn of a new century, ignorance has been elevated to regency in universities and Western culture. Roger Kimball is setting out to dethrone the king.

Some years ago, Kimball entered the revolution against cultural illiteracy as a rebel captain of the *culture wars*. His 1990 book, *Tenured Radicals*, took aim at the superstars holding court in the destruction of Western civilisation across America’s universities. His newest tome, *The Fortunes of Permanence*, seeks nothing less than a renaissance of culture, wresting it from the death throes of critical theorists and cultural relativists who buried the Western canon’s greatest thinkers so they themselves might appear worthy of canonical devotion.

Like many opponents of the culture war’s idiot regent, postmodernism, Kimball’s rebellion was sustained not only by a rage against the dying of the light, but by an irrepressible urge to lampoon the regency’s decrees. High culture is where he found its finest.

An exhibition ‘Deconstructivist Architecture’ gifted Kimball with a perfect opportunity for satire, pricking the author’s characteristically conservative gravitas with wit. The exhibition’s associate curator, Mark Wigley, had, in true deconstructivist style, decided to interrogate the meaning of an exhibit featuring a big elevated bar, concluding that it ‘subverts the logic of the wall ... By dismembering the wall, traditional thinking about structure is also broken down.’ Kimball mused:

In what sense is traditional thinking about structure ‘broken down’ by the eccentricities of this project? How is the ‘logic of the wall’ ‘subverted’? (What indeed is the ‘logic’ of a wall?).

Imbuing inanimate objects with human



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attributes, or anthropomorphism, is a key project of deconstructivists and their allies, who became known collectively as postmodernists during the 1980s. Walls, books, words and ideas were divested of their intrinsic meaning and stuffed with fantastical qualities plucked from the postmodern imagination whose paranoid reaction to freedom and form was pathology seeking a scapegoat. By championing the form of freedom, Western civilisation was cast in the shadowy figure of a poltergeist haunting university campuses across America, Europe and Australia; a malevolent ghost of past culture to be excised through mass criticism. The postmodern ethic is captured best by the father of deconstructivism, Michel Foucault, who said: 'Knowledge is not for knowing: knowledge is for cutting.'

Truth, virtue, freedom balanced with responsibility, and the exercise of sound judgment are the values to which Kimball ascribes his vision of the good life.

And cut they did. Western civilisation has been almost eliminated as a continuous historical fact and teachable field of study in Western universities. The National Association of Scholars' recent report *The Vanishing West* surveyed the decline of Western civilisation programs in North American public universities from 1964 to 2010. In 1964, 82% of public universities sampled offered Western civilisation as a sequence. By 2010, it was 10%.

There are glimmers of hope. In October, the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization opened at Texas Tech University, which aims to revive academic interest in its integrated study. Australia's Champion College teaches Western civilisation as a continuous historical fact on the undergraduate curriculum. And philosopher A.C. Grayling's New College of the Humanities, established in 2012, features a curriculum guided by some of the West's best thinkers, past and present.

But the revival of Western civilisation and culture has its detractors. Writing in the puff-

chested prose perfected by postmodernists, former assistant director of the interfaith organisation State of Formation, Ian Burzynski, complains that Grayling's New College of the Humanities is elitist because it charges tuition fees and teaches humanism:

A.C. Grayling ... recently announced plans to set up a private college in London called the New College of the Humanities ... this privatized (read: classist) model of university and the hegemonic and exclusionary 'humanism' of Grayling and friends ... is little more than the shameless use of wealth and privilege to insulate a dominant ideology from critique ... [with its] predominantly white, secular, European population, a particular worldview and reading of history can be propagated without contest by those who are marginalized by it ... We can reasonably expect that Britain's largest minority group, South Asians who are predominantly Muslim, to be conspicuously absent ... doubly excluded on the basis of ideology and social class ... The model of privatized pedagogy ensures that a moat of privilege will protect this sterilized fortress of Reason, keeping barbarian Others at bay.

'Hegemonic,' 'white,' 'European,' 'marginalised,' 'privilege' and the ubiquitous scare quotes kettling humanism—it's as though the culture wars had never ended. Burzynski's trope written only a few months ago is simply another paean to the postmodern routine in which the technique of mass criticism supplants the canon of classical humanism and crusades fanned by base ignorance pass for scholarly wisdom.

Christopher Hitchens once remarked, 'The Postmodernists' tyranny wears people down by boredom and semi-literate prose.' *The Fortunes of Permanence* is an antidote to postmodernism's tyranny of boredom. Comprising twenty-one essays, it spans political

polemic to biographical narratives that breathe life into the memory of eccentric writers such as James Burnham. One is left with the impression that Kimball's originality lies not in the ability to apprehend new arguments but to perceive what ideas are vital for our age and why.

It is chiefly Western culture and civilisation that Kimball has in mind when he describes the purpose of permanence. Truth, virtue, freedom balanced with responsibility, and the exercise of sound judgment are the values to which Kimball ascribes his vision of the good life. Skilful debate and democracy govern the public sphere, with Christianity as the sanctuary of the soul. The rule of law, religious freedom, and the separation of church and state are positive values that strengthen liberal society while cultural relativism, deconstructivism, and moral neutrality enervate it.

Kimball's chief complaint with early twenty-first century liberal society is that it does not recognise its own limits, chiefly because such recognition requires humility and implies a constriction of personal freedom. Moreover, to delimit freedom without destroying it requires a deep knowledge of Western civilisation, which has sculpted liberty as a philosophy and form of government for more than 2,000 years. Those who do not know Western culture do not experience freedom as a relation of the citizen to the state. And citizens of the West, no longer offered an education in Western civilisation, are left ill-equipped to manage freedom, believing from the vantage point of ignorance that it means either unlimited hedonism or Eurocentric oppression.

There can be little doubt that Australia's youth have been educated into broad ignorance about their own culture. Western civilisation does not appear on the new national curriculum for schools except in negation of itself. The result is, as Kimball and Orwell before him predicted, a generation reared on a history of omission who display a prodigious talent for totalitarian chic.

In *Brave New World* style, young Aussies have decided democracy doesn't matter. To be fair, 61% of under 30s polled by the Lowy Institute think democracy is, like, whatever.

Among those 60 or older, 74% prefer democracy to other forms of government. And if you are not convinced that ignorance is fuelling democratic decline, consider that 95% of the Australians polled also believe in fair trials, 90% want the right to vote (i.e. universal suffrage), and 84% value freedom of expression. Multiple choice: Which form of government supports fair trials, universal suffrage, and freedom of expression? A. Communism. B. Fascism. C. Sharia D. Democracy.

The proliferation of writers trying to save democracy from its twenty-first century citizens are facing challenges from moral vacuity and cultural relativism at home, to the international

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relations of China's economic rise. Politicians maintain Cheshire-grin diplomacy while the Islamic-Sinic bloc suppresses the development of democracy in their own countries, often violently, and stalls international efforts to promulgate it at the United Nations.

Samuel Huntington predicted the clash of civilisations, while the New York intellectual Daniel Bell foresaw the coming apart of Western life in the fissures between culture, economics and society. But perhaps the most telling difference between contemporary conservative and progressive cultural tracts is that conservatives offer solutions, however tentative, to cultural decline. Conversely, one can read progressive treatises such as Tony Judt's *Ill Fares the Land* and find nothing but complaint whose sole remedy is to expand the culture of complaint. With rare exception (such as a rather splendid new book by *The Australian's* Luke Slattery on Epicurus), the literary Left has become a madhouse swarming with Foucault's compulsive cutters.

The moment the West lost its mind is illuminated in Bertrand Russell's essay

'Philosophical Liberalism'. Early liberalism was individualist in intellectual and economic matters, and Galileo's assertion that Earth was round established an important link between the individualist mind and the scientific method. But liberalism did not extend to emotions or ethics. The new movement, beginning with Rousseau and inspired by Romanticism, extends individualism from the intellectual sphere to the passions, animating the anarchic aspects of individualism.

Rousseau's modern-day descendants can be

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found across the spectrum of Left and Right politics, from the Green Romantics to Allan de Benoist's New Right movement in Europe. Russell and Kimball concur that movements inspired by Rousseau gradually develop into the antithesis of liberalism.

Kimball proposes that to liberate liberalism from the memory of Rousseau and Nietzsche, we must begin with an understanding that human freedom is inextricably tied to a recognition of limits, which invites regard for the sacred. Understanding the sacred requires a cultural commitment to substantive values. In *Coming Apart: The State of White America*, Charles Murray echoes Kimball's sentiments, warning that Western culture's substantive values and social sensibilities must be understood and promulgated by its political and intellectual elites if our civilisation is to survive the century.

A marvellous scene in Kenneth Clark's series *Civilisation* reveals the sacred as sensibility, reconciling the divine and the material plane as the order of human being. It is the creation of

the Gothic church. Like Europe's great cities, the church was designed in reverence to God, and constructed with exacting labour and expense over centuries because Europeans were confident their civilisation would reach into eternity. The Duomo di Milano, Milan's great cathedral, took almost six centuries to complete.

This act of creative transcendence reveals a humility so lacking from contemporary efforts to supplant Western civilisation with the latest educational fad, to spin it out of history on the heels popular appeal. It is the simple recognition that each of us is mortal, but culture endures. Kimball's book opens with this acknowledgement. At heart, it is dedicated to the promise of 'youth, innocence and wonder,' and a civilisation that will cultivate them.

Among the gifts of cultural permanence is the wisdom of the ages. One does not have to credit every word of *The Fortunes of Permanence*, or indeed every work of Western civilisation, to know that much of it is honest and right. So it can be said of another good book that foretold our current predicament long before our age was conceived:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; on the top of the walls she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

Give heed to my reproof; behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.

Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,

...

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me.

Because they hated knowledge.'

— *Proverbs 1:20–29*