

All That Tearing and Pulling: A Student's View of C.C.

by Alan Lessoff '81



—“You must have noticed how young men, after their first taste of philosophy, are always contradicting people for the sake of it; they imitate those whom they see cross-examining each other and they themselves cross-examine other people like puppies who love to tear and pull at anyone within reach.”

—“They like nothing better,” he said.

[Plato: *The Republic*, Book Seven]

My Penguin copy of Plato's Republic is probably the only one in the world bearing the autograph of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of the Philosopher-King party. Unfortunately, the book is in tattered condition, and I'm afraid the cover may soon fall off, taking the precious autograph with it.

The cover of my mind may never fall off, but the experience of Contemporary Civilization has left it somewhat tattered, like the book; for, as Plato would agree, all that tearing and pulling was not without effect.

Given the promise of the course, I should by now have a fairly comprehensive understanding of the social, political and intellectual development of Western civilization. There are perhaps some sophomores who claim to possess this knowledge, but they're lying. We may have some grasp of what it was like to be a well-to-do Parisian in the early 19th century; but as for living in present-day New York, I suspect that the kids in imitation leather jackets I saw hanging around a betting parlor in Queens the other day probably know more than I. They receive their philosophic training from Bruce Springsteen and Budweiser, profound stuff, while I have to rely on Kant and Nietzsche, of whom one apparently died a virgin and the other was mad. An isolated man, for whom an afternoon constitutional could

become a significant journey, might have known a great deal about pure reason, but was perhaps deficient when it came to Life.

My CC class, which I assume was typical, was taught by a history preceptor from South Carolina who believed open discussion to be more stimulating and creative than mere lecture. “Open discussion” sometimes meant anarchy or total war, since in the class, we had a Relativist, a few Positivists, some neo-Platonists, a couple of pseudo-Epicurean Stoics, a confirmed Pragmatist, and one or two Reformed Zen Buddhists thrown in for interest. We also had some who didn't know what was going on, some who never did the reading, and some who were too tired at 9 a.m. to know where they were anyway.

Sometimes we'd all gang up on one person, which was cruel, unless that person happened to be the teacher. I tended to fluctuate among all categories, except on one day, when I was on an Absolutist binge, and our instructor pitted me against the Relativist. I still have the scars. Often what we had to say was absolute drivel, but once in a while somebody would say something that made me cry to be that smart.

To a freshman, the interplay of CC and the City is a powerful thing. The Broadway Local conspires with David Hume and John Stuart Mill to make us look around as well as inward. When I sought refuge from the City, I couldn't find it in the books we were reading, as I had done in high school. The books scolded me and sent me back into the streets. In the same way, when the ideas in the books made me uneasy and I went outside to reassure myself, I would be surrounded, not by tranquil countryside, but by the streets with their endless concrete and infinite variety of people.

The written assignments offered their own perils. The first paper I handed in, concerning “The Purpose of Education,” was returned to me with the comment that the style was fine but I hadn't said very much of substance. Assigned a take-home final on what I had learned in the course, I wrote a despairing piece about how all the CC in the world might not help me communicate with the youths who had tried to rob me in a downtown Burger King. Disturbed by a young Ethiopian revolutionary, who had told a

Times reporter that it did not matter how many innocent people died for the Revolution, as long as it was successful, I compared a book by Hegel to an account of the French Revolution, and, by analogy, tried to prove that a dialectic cannot justify murder. The preceptor called my paper presumptuous and undisciplined, but gave me a good grade, for, he said, ambition.

The biggest drawback of the course is that too much material is covered too quickly for a thorough understanding of any single idea or personality. This is perhaps not as much of a problem for humanities majors, who in their further studies will discover how little they actually know about Aristotle or Lenin. But one sympathizes with others who have formed an opinion based on their CC readings, and may never have a chance to revise their mistaken impression.

Around Thanksgiving, it becomes fashionable to say how much one despises Descartes and how much of a cretin he was, when in fact the *Meditations* is one of the most well-conceived and well-constructed books ever written. Descartes would have assaulted a contemporary if he heard him say: “Read the *Meditations* over the week-

“During Freud Week, no one said anything, for fear it might be taken the wrong way.”

end; they're short, so we should get through them on Monday,” but that sort of thing goes on every day in CC. Perhaps if fewer authors were studied in greater detail and if a more standardized curriculum were used, as in Humanities A, this would not be such a problem. In one week during the second semester, I was assigned half of Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution*, all of Mill's *On Liberty*, and selections from Adam Smith, Malthus and Ricardo. This is not too much in terms of pages, but one should not determine the worth of an author by how fat his books are. Some people said a surprising amount in very little space.

At times, the moods of Contemporary Civilization pervade the entire campus. At any given moment, about a fourth of the College converges on the same author. One would think we then composed either a convention or a lunatic asylum, especially during Marx Week, when the sons of the Proletariat trembled for their chance to become bourgeois, while the young Bourgeoisie, soon to be junior partners in Daddy's firm, planned the revolution. During Freud Week, no one said anything, for fear it might be taken the wrong way. During Hobbes Week, everyone was unusually curt and defensive, because Man is a beast in the State of Nature, which is to say, the State of War.

But by now, after all that tearing and pulling, we should know better.