

INTRODUCTION BY STEFAN KOLEV

# The Humane Economist

A WILHELM RÖPKE READER

PAPERBACK

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EDITED BY  
DANIEL J. HUGGER

## THE HUMANE ECONOMIST: A WILHELM RÖPKE READER

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DANIEL J. HUGGER

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STEFAN KOLEV

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*"This volume is a great place for students of society to start to learn about the humane economy and its relevance for the twenty-first century."*

*— Peter Boettke, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY*

Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek once warned that "the economist who is only an economist is likely to become a nuisance if not a positive danger." As an economist and theorist of liberalism, Wilhelm Röpke was acutely aware of this danger. His combined commitments to sound economic analysis, the importance of social institutions, and

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# Religion & Liberty

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## Political violence, Left and Right

The solution to  
political violence?

Is Critical Race Theory  
un-American?

The 'Ecocide' movement:  
a crime against humanity



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Rev. Ben Johnson EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Politics divides; commerce and goodwill unite. That truth has been driven home as waves of politically motivated violence have swept the nation.

Ismael Hernandez observes that the underlying ideology driving much of our division “is not drawn from the perspective of black Americans as they collectively reflected on the American experience; this view is derived from applying the radical, socialist analysis of America to black citizens.” He writes, “With such theories spreading like wildfire in academic, cultural, political, legal, theological, and judicial circles,” it becomes difficult to “oppose violence by the ‘oppressed’ against the ‘oppressive’ system without being accused of abetting the oppressors.”

I focus on a few of the programs designed to end our cycle of recriminations. “According to researchers, the solution is *solutions* – specifically, focusing on solving national problems together,” I note, drawing attention to exciting psychological research that can decrease polarization and open the door for our nation to begin healing.

Wesley J. Smith of the Discovery Institute presents a well-researched and compelling portrait of the latest strategy to degrade human exceptionalism, property rights, and economic development: investing nature with legal “rights.”

Samuel Kronen and Nate Hochman survey Critical Race Theory. Their article makes an excellent supplement to “Critical Theory, critiqued” by Noah Warren Kelley in the Fall 2020 issue of *R&L*.

Dustin Siggins outlines commonsense healthcare reforms. Rev. Richard Turnbull previews the UK’s future outside the EU.

And Acton Institute President Rev. Robert Sirico argues the answer to our polarization lies in a Bible verse that Eastern Orthodox Christians sing every Sunday: “Put not your trust in princes, in a sons of men, in whom there is no salvation.”

As violence metastasizes across our political spectrum, it has never been more imperative for us to commit ourselves to principles, not princes, affirming that no earthly figure can command our ultimate loyalty.

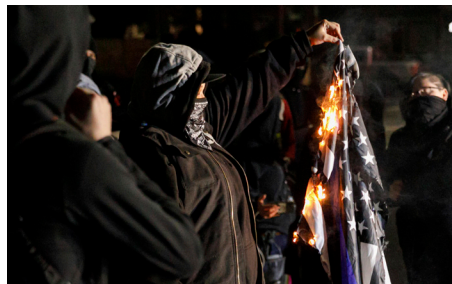
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(Cover Photo: Left photo: A BLM/Anita rioter in Portland in August, 2020. Photo credit: byprocker / Shutterstock.com; Right photo: Jolie Angeli inside the U.S. Capitol. AP Photo/Monnie Boke Cernia, File.)

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## Acton Institute ranks as a global think tank leader in 2020 report

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

The Acton Institute is not only one of the world's most influential thought leaders but, according to a new report, our annual Acton University ranks as the best conference globally of any presented by think tanks which consistently support a free economy.

The University of Pennsylvania's "2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report" feted Acton with awards in five separate categories.

In "Top Social Policy Think Tanks," the category Acton values most dearly, the report rated the Acton Institute among the world's elite institutions. In 2020, the Acton Institute ranked fifth among organizations that defend the free economy, or 18th globally – behind the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute but ahead of the Manhattan Institute.

Acton finished first among market-oriented think tanks for "Best Think Tank Conference" and in the top 25 globally, ahead of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The report ranked the Acton Institute ninth in the world for "Best Advocacy Campaign" – third among free-market think tanks.

Despite competing with think tanks of much greater size, and funding, the Acton Institute rated in the top third of all "Top U.S. Think Tanks" in 2020 and seventh out of groups that defend free enterprise.

Top free-market think tanks outside the United States include the Fraser Institute (Canada, 14), Transparency International (Germany, 53), the Adam Smith Institute (UK, 56), and the Institute of Economic Affairs (UK, 66).

The U.S. has more think tanks than any other single country, with 2,203 – nearly as many as all of Europe (2,932). China ranks second with 1,413.

The report reflects the Acton Institute's growing recognition as the world's premier think tank addressing the relationship between markets and morality within an ecumenical religious context. Your kind donation helps us improve our impact and efficacy this year and in the years to come.

## Religion adds billions to the economy, study finds

Joseph Sunde

ACTON INSTITUTE

As church attendance and religious affiliation continue to decline across the West, many have lamented the spiritual and social side effects, including a weakening of civil society and the fragmentation of community life. But the economic impact of such a shift is less discussed.

In a new report, *The Hidden Economy: How Faith Helps Fuel Canada's GDP*, researchers Brian and Melissa Grimm estimate the socioeconomic value of faith and religion to society. The report, which is published by Cardus and focuses on Canada, concludes that religious activity contributes an estimated \$67.5 billion to the larger economy, making religion "the country's ninth-largest enterprise, just behind TC Energy and ahead of Bank of Montreal."

Drawing from a diverse mix of prior research, the authors stitch together a range of contributions from religious organizations and institutions, leading to three distinct estimates.

**Estimate 1: Revenues of faith-based organizations (\$30.9 billion).** The most conservative estimate includes only the revenues of faith-based educational institutions, healthcare providers, congregations, media, and charities.

**Estimate 2: Adding the "halo effect" of congregational social services (\$67.5 billion).** The "more reasonable estimate" includes "the broader impact of faith-based charity work beyond its direct finances, the economic activities of faith-related food businesses, and the economic value of congregation-based substance-abuse recovery support groups." This comes to \$36.6 billion – which, when added with estimate 1, totals \$67.5 billion.

**Estimate 3: Revenues of religiously affiliated Canadians (\$689.5 billion).** The authors are quick to emphasize that this is not a "preferred estimate"; but they recognize that "people of faith conduct their affairs to some extent (however imperfectly) inspired and guided by their faith ideals."

"The data are clear," the authors conclude. "Religion is a highly significant sector of Canada's economy. Religion provides purpose-driven institutional and economic contributions to health, education, social cohesion, social services, media, food, and business itself."

## Paying all employees the same salary caused therapists trauma

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

A psychotherapy practice's year-long experiment with paying every employee an equal salary has disproved the central economic thesis of socialism.

Calvin Benton co-founded Spill, a British firm that offers psychological counseling via online platforms like Zoom. As Benton and his four co-workers got Spill off the ground, they opted to take part in a revolutionary trial: Each one of them would receive the same annual pay of £36,000 (approximately \$49,240 U.S.). At first, "there were five people, and everyone was pretty much contributing the same," Benton told the BBC.

The initial returns were promising. Even as the 2020 pandemic closed thousands of small shops, Benton's business boomed. COVID-19 demanded remote work, which caused burnout among some employees. For others, the lockdown orders themselves created unbearable stress.

Spill's cup runneth over. Soon, it had to add more staff. That's when things began to fall apart.

The young startup had a hard time retaining staff members whose expertise yielded greater productivity (like software developers, who make far more than £36,000 annually in London). On the other hand, it received a glut of applications for clerical positions (which pay an average of £10.71 an hour, or £22,276 annually). Salespeople also wanted a more traditional commission based on the percentage of their sales, which rewards their efforts and ingenuity.

"We started to have some people who contributed more than others," said Benton. "The question started to arise: Should this person be paid the same amount as me? That caused a conflict in the team and a conversation in the team about whether this experiment was right to continue."

After a year, Calvin's staff revolted, and he instituted a more typical pay scale based on value creation and seniority.

Ultimately, Benton and his colleagues verified a well-known fact of human nature: People reject socialism, because it is inherently unfair.



# Commonsense healthcare policies can solve our crisis of legitimacy

Dustin Siggins

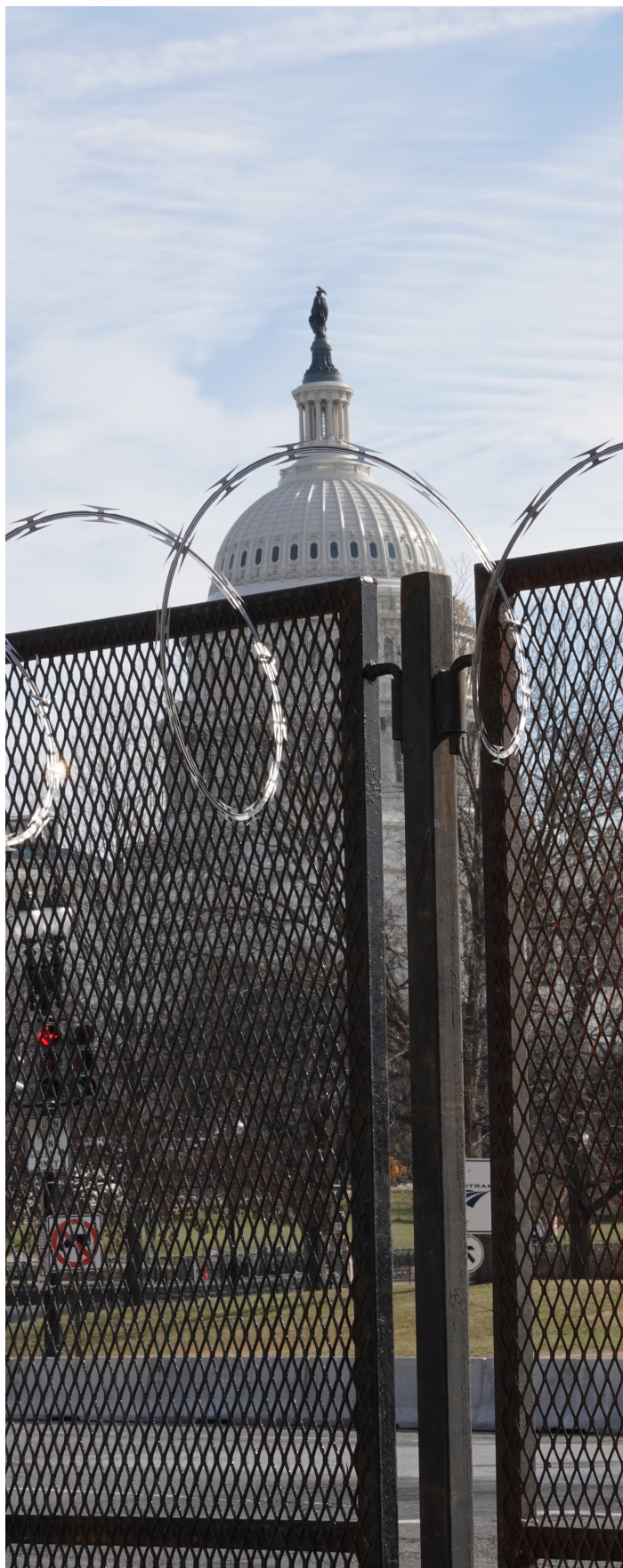
Every day that the partisan rancor over the 2020 presidential election drags on, it poses a challenge to our nation's well-being. As the candidates and pundits escalate their rhetoric, more Americans lose faith in our political process. Many get angry. Others check out entirely. Even though 2021 is not an election year, it threatens to become the year more voters than ever become disappointed in their elected representatives and disenchanted with the political process.

Unfortunately, our elected leaders' legislative agenda thus far has not focused on the issues that voters named as their top concerns this election: essentials like healthcare and the economy. If lawmakers fail to help our citizens improve their families' lot in life, they risk erasing the remaining shreds of trust voters place in them.

What are a few simple, nonpartisan healthcare policies that Congress could accomplish to get people better and cheaper access to healthcare?

One lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that doctors need to be able to provide some care remotely, taking advantage of video communications to help patients who cannot or should not show up in crowded hospitals and doctors' offices. Some of these patients will continue to benefit from telehealth after the pandemic subsides. It will save rural families long trips to their healthcare provider and help struggling, working families save valuable time on visits to a healthcare facility.

Last spring, 18 states and the District of Columbia implemented some sort of emergency policy to expand access to telemedicine, and 23 states along with D.C. made it easier for doctors to provide remote care from outside the state. An announcement by then-Vice President Mike Pence that the Department of Health and Human Services would allow all doctors to practice telehealth across state lines caused confusion and raised questions about federal authority, but the underlying idea was a step in the right direction. Rather than waiting on the vice president and the federal bureaucracy to act, Congress could – and should – take the initiative on this issue. Legislators should look at best practices and additional needs that remote healthcare providers have identified. Then, they should do everything in their power to remove regulatory burdens from telemedicine and make it as accessible as possible. By doing this, lawmakers would improve many people's



lives and demonstrate that they're putting their constituents first, even in divisive and uncertain times.

Another area where Congress outsourced its job to the executive branch is drug price reform – and in this case, the result may cause actual damage, not just confusion. In September, President Donald Trump signed an executive order imposing the “most favored nations” drug price control scheme, stating that Medicare will not pay any more for medications than they cost in other developed countries. While a court later enjoined it, President Joe Biden also supports price controls. This sounds good in theory, given that the United States spends twice the average among OECD nations on prescription medications. It might also please voters who are angry at unscrupulous pharmaceutical companies. However, there is good reason to expect that this policy will do more harm than good.

Supporters of price controls often point out other countries where drug prices are lower. In reality, America's free-market system enables other countries to get away with price controls in the first place. Those countries effectively transfer the costs of research, development, and testing new drugs to the United States – something that is not good for us or them in the long run. The health research society ISPOR reports that price controls slow down the development of new drugs by removing the profit incentive for drug developers. Additionally, the American Consumer Institute reports that patients in price-controlling countries can only access about half of the medications that Americans can. Losing our advantages in innovation and access would be doing a disservice to patients in our country.

Instead of waiting to see if price controls will work, Congress should tackle the real cause of high drug prices: excessive Food and Drug Administration regulations. A recent report by the President's Council of Economic Advisors outlined several potential solutions. Legislators should take care to avoid compromising the safety of the testing process – but the FDA's requirements add an average of 16 months to the years of clinical trials that new medications already undergo. Congress needs to identify ways to streamline this process.

That's not to say that the FDA has done nothing to address the problem.

The agency approved an unprecedented number of generic drugs and made more drugs available over the counter under the Trump administration. This is a great sign. The FDA has reported that having just two generic drugs compete against one another reduces prices by more than half, and having six competitors leads to a massive 95% drop in prices. Congress should see what it can do on its end to expand access to medications even further.

Ultimately, the biggest healthcare fight in Congress will concern the Affordable Care Act and the private insurance industry. But instead of expanding costly government programs, lawmakers could help empower a care option that allows people to bypass private insurers entirely. Direct primary care is not insurance; it's a system where a patient pays a doctor a fixed monthly fee for a defined set of services.

DPC has enormous potential: A study by the Society of Actuaries found that DPC patients schedule appointments quicker, spend less time in the waiting room, and have more face-to-face time with their doctors than non-DPC patients. Best of all, these improvements did not increase the burden on our healthcare system. The study showed that DPC patients went to the emergency room 40% less often and used 12% less care overall. Regrettably, an Internal Revenue Service rule intended to help DPC users deduct their fees as medical care ended up treating DPC as insurance – which could lead to the same red-tape issues that plague the health insurance industry. Lawmakers should rectify this and do all they can to protect DPC as an affordable, innovative alternative to traditional insurance.

In the next four years, there will be plenty of bitter fights and partisan stand-offs in Congress, especially over healthcare. But before they take on Obamacare, the insurance industry, and other intractable issues, our legislators can do a few simple things that demonstrably improve their constituents' lives – and convince the American people that Congress is still responsive to their needs.

*Dustin Siggins is CEO of Proven Media Solutions. A practicing Catholic, he was previously a political journalist covering the federal budget, abortion, and other issues on and off Capitol Hill. [R&L](#)*



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**INTERVIEW**

# Is Critical Race Theory un-American?

Samuel Kronen and Nate Hochman

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When President Trump signed an executive order banning Critical Race Theory from being taught in the federal bureaucracy, it provoked an outraged response from the ideology's defenders in academia and the mainstream press. In the flurry of articles, editorials, and news segments that followed the September 22 ban, CRT was regularly, and dishonestly, described as “diversity” or “racial sensitivity” training. Then-President Donald Trump strongly denounced the ideology as “divisive, un-American propaganda,” a harmful view propagated by a jaundiced “ideology ... rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans.”

The media reported his objections as yet another example of the White House's reactionary chauvinism. This controversy, and the media's mishandling of it, came to a head at the first presidential debate, when Chris Wallace – echoing the talking points of progressive activists and Democratic Party functionaries – asked President Trump:

This month, your administration directed federal agencies to end racial sensitivity training that addresses white privilege or critical race theory. Why did you decide to do that, to end racial sensitivity training? ... What is radical about racial sensitivity training?

What *is* so radical about it, indeed? Most Americans deplore racism, believe in the fundamental human equality upon which our republic was founded, and see racial diversity as an unobjectionable phenomenon – indeed, as an unalloyed good. To the



untrained eye, then, the idea of “racial sensitivity training” is entirely reasonable.

The problem is that the attempts by Wallace and his counterparts in the media to describe the program, which is based in critical theory, as a benign diversity training were profoundly deceptive. Its ideology is, in fact, every bit as radical as the Trump administration had argued. It is in tension with the fundamental tenets of American constitutional democracy.

The recent executive order's use of the term “anti-American” was met with predictable outrage. “Want to fight racism? That makes you ‘un-American’ in Trump’s book,” read the headline of a widely circulated *Seattle Times* editorial. But critical race theory's foremost proponents have, in their own words, said as much.

(Photo credit: John Rudolf/Sipa USA/Sipa via AP Images)



In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write, “Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order; including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.”

Critical race theory is a legal theory and academic discipline concerned with the relationship between race, law, and power. It was developed in the 1970s as both a continuation of and a correction to the social and political gains of the civil rights movement. Spearheaded by a group of scholars and activists such as American lawyers Kimberl e Crenshaw and Derek Bell, and drawing from disciplines including radical feminism and critical legal

studies, CRT emerged as a response to the persistence of racial gaps between whites and blacks as measured against the apparent decline of overt racism since the 1960s.

To account for this asymmetry, CRT developed a “structural” analysis of racial inequality that attempts to account for the less obvious ways that racism takes place in American society – implicit racial biases in our institutions, the intergenerational socioeconomic impacts of past racism, the exclusion of blacks from important social networks that yield upward mobility, and the cultural and psychological damage of historical stigmas and stereotypes. Critical race theory argues that, by eliminating the lingering effects of racism, we can create a society in which race does not predict or determine one’s outcomes in life.

Its core claims are that racism, whether overt or systemic, lies at the root of all racial disparities; that race and racism shape our political and personal lives; and that the dominant group in society – in this case whites – have a hidden psychological, political, and economic investment in maintaining their privilege at the expense of minorities. Some other principles include *intersectionality*, the idea that human beings are composed of a multitude of intersecting group identities, some of which are considered victims and others oppressors; *standpoint epistemology*, the notion that our racial identity informs our worldview in ways that are less accessible to those of other backgrounds; and *differential racialization*, the attempt to grapple with the different ways that a group has been “racialized” at different times in history to the benefit of the majority culture.

In essence, critical race theorists look at two indisputable facts – that the United States of America was historically racist and that racial gaps between whites and blacks persist – and then seek to unearth the connection between these two realities by deconstructing the complex interplay between privilege, identity, and structural oppression. The question is not whether these facts are related, but *how* they are related.

Although the specific tenets of CRT are rarely discussed in depth outside the gilded halls of academia, its underlying framework has come to shape virtually all conversations around race issues in our institutions over the past few decades. It has even begun to seep into high school classrooms in the form of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, which explicitly sets out to “re-frame the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the center of our national narrative.”

At first glance, the claims of CRT are not necessarily unreasonable, and many of them are so obvious as to be banal. For example, historical racism clearly plays some role in some of the racial outcome gaps that we see in America today. Moreover, the principle of color blindness, and civil rights traditionalism more broadly, can sometimes neglect the less overt forms that racial bias takes in our culture. It should also go without saying that, at the very least, being black makes a person more likely on average to better understand the specific impacts of anti-black racism.

But the question is, how do we get from here to, say, the mind-reading polemics of bestselling author Robin DiAngelo and her Kafkaesque book, *White Fragility*, which views the denial of racism as evidence of racism and argues that “white identity is inherently racist”? Or this past summer’s “racial reckoning,” which saw “mostly peaceful” rioting and looting across the country in response to inflated claims of racism in policing? Or the wide-



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spread belief among younger progressives that America is so irredeemably racist and evil that we would be better off scrapping the Constitution, getting rid of the flag, and changing the name of the country to reflect greater diversity and inclusion?

It's not just idealistic young activists who feel this way. The assertion that racism is a fundamental feature of every institution or social arrangement in this country – and as a result we “should work toward abolishing the Constitution ... either for a new document or a new democratic order,” as the prominent progressive writer Osita Nwannevu wrote in a recent essay for *The New Republic* – has bled into mainstream commentary on the Left.

These excesses are not tangential to critical theory but stem directly from its analysis. For one, CRT scholarship presumes a direct causal relationship between historical racism and present inequalities, allowing a form of historical determinism to distort the demands of the present by looking at them through the lens of the past. Similarly, the presumption that racial outcome gaps are necessarily evidence of racism – as opposed to a result of the complex tangle of demographic, cultural, geographical, historical, and socioeconomic forces – fosters interracial strife, foments ethnic tribalism, and promotes a dynamic of majority guilt and minority victimology. Moreover, the obsession with unearned and identity-based advantages erases an important category distinction between rights and privileges, between what we owe to each other as citizens and what our own group deserves in relation to other groups.

More fundamentally, the conceptual expansion of the term “racism” that CRT scholarship has facilitated – from an interpersonal behavior to a structural or systemic force, from overt to implicit, discrimination to disparity, political to personal, past to present – collapses our sense of time and proportion. This is how we get to the point where progressive activists and scholars can genuinely believe that racism is worse now than it was before the civil rights movement.

Finally, and most perniciously, sterile and reactionary categories of race are injected with a whole new social, moral, and political meaning in the name of identifying and fighting racism, ultimately committing to the same ethical blunder as white supremacists of the pre-civil rights era: the use of race as a means to power or abolition. These are not bugs but features of critical theory.

Maybe the best example of illiberal ideas gaining momentum on the mainstream Left is with the rise of historian and author Ibram X. Kendi. In his 2019 memoir *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, Kendi argues there is no such thing as not being racist; there are only anti-racists and racists. Under this binary, racist policies and ideas generate racial disparities, and anti-racist policies and ideas generate equal outcomes between groups. Kendi writes:

One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of “not racist.” The claim of “not racist” neutrality is a mask for racism.

Discrimination itself is not racist in Kendi's view but a necessary means of ensuring racial equity:

The only remedy to racist discrimination is anti-racist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.

Further, he argues that all cultures are equal and cultural differences cannot explain why a given group achieves more on average than another. “To be an anti-racist is to reject cultural standards and level cultural differences,” he writes. The logical conclusion is that being a moral, anti-racist person means riding society of any standard or metric that perpetuates racial inequity, such as standardized testing, which Kendi admonishes as “one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade black minds and legally exclude black bodies.” Likewise, Kendi proposes instituting an anti-racist amendment to the Constitution and employing a Department of Anti-Racism armed with “disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.”

Among the problems with Kendi's approach, beyond its sheer absurdity, is that guaranteeing equal outcomes between different groups is in conflict with America's constitutional order and with liberalism itself. By striving for equality of result in the name of group rights, we ultimately sacrifice equality of process and individual rights. As the renowned economist Thomas Sowell unpacks in his classic book *The Quest For Cosmic Justice*, there is an unavoidable tension between the urge to “mitigate the undeserved misfortunes arising from the cosmos” preventing perfect equality between groups, and traditional notions of justice that compel individuals to abide by the same set of social, political, and economic standards.

The question is not why there are still racial disparities between whites and blacks half a century after the civil rights movement but why we still presume there is a causal relationship between the amount of racism in society and the extent of racial disparities – as though disparities between groups have not been the norm in every multi-ethnic society we know of, regardless of whatever level of discrimination may have existed. Indeed, virtually no two ethnic groups in history have ever achieved equal outcomes on all metrics, anywhere, ever. Racism, racial inequality, and historical racism, although reflexively equated in public discourse with “structural racism,” are entirely different things.

CRT holds that the United States is a fundamentally racist country to its core and across time, in ways that are historically and morally unique. But there is plenty of reason to doubt this story. For starters, any measure of how racist America is must account for the sheer size of its population and its unique cultural and ethnic diversity, which comes with challenges that smaller and more homogenous countries are less likely to face. If the country were as racist as progressives imagine, then we might expect white Americans to predominate every sphere of society, but that's not the case. Contrary to the popular concept of white privilege, Asian-Americans outearn, outlearn, and outlive whites by a wide margin. White Americans' average income has been eclipsed by about a dozen nonwhite ethnic groups, including Indian Americans (who top the list), Taiwanese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Chinese Americans. Moreover, despite the alleged intractability of anti-black bias in American culture, a number of black immigrant groups achieve remarkable success here: Ghanaian Americans make more than the national average income, while Nigerian Americans are one of the most educated ethnic groups in the country.

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We also might expect in an allegedly white supremacist society that whites would cling to their majority status to keep hold of power, but the opposite has occurred: Due to high rates of immigration and intermarriage, whites are on track to become a minority in the next few decades, as we see the rise of a mixed ethnic majority. Whites also make up the majority of those who live in poverty, largely because of their higher representation in the population, and harbor the highest suicide rate of any other group except for American Indians. Hispanics are on track to have the same average income as whites.

Finally, if any doubts remain about Americans' commitment to stamp out racism, the fact that virtually every mainstream institution and major corporation came out in explicit support of the Black Lives Matter movement – in the middle of a global pandemic no less – should put them to rest.

The massive leap in public acceptance of racial intermarriage in America – from 5% in 1958 to 87% in 2013 – speaks for itself. Furthermore, America's system of slavery, although brutal, was by no means a novelty in the broader scope of human history: Slavery has been practiced in almost every major civilization throughout history.

Ultimately, the question is not whether America has ever expressed racism but whether present-day America is racist relative to other places, to its own history, and to basic moral standards. On that front, we're doing exceptionally well.

Taken in historical context, modern America's commitment to remedying the racial injustices of its past is actually quite staggering: Beginning in the 1960s, for example, trillions of dollars were spent on President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, explicitly intended to eliminate "poverty and racial injustice." Indeed, one could make a compelling argument that America is a structurally *anti-racist* society.

In the face of CRT's growing influence, the challenge for defenders of the American tradition and the principles of our founding is to distinguish its useful insights from its radical ideological claims. When examined in global and historical contexts, there is no contradiction between the belief that America is a fundamentally good nation and the fact that our history – and even aspects of our present – possess serious flaws and injustices.

To love America is not to deny its flaws nor the dark periods of its past. Rather, it is to recognize America's greatness *despite* them, understanding that perfection is no standard against which to measure human societies. Patriotic gratitude derives from a recognition of the fundamental brokenness of human nature, understanding that the violent injustices for which CRT attacks America are universal features of the human condition, present in all places and all times. Our capacity to collectively transcend the nasty, brutish, and short lives that people experienced for most of the human race's existence – despite our enormous ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity – is reason enough to believe that this remains the last, best hope of men on Earth.

Ideologues like Kendi have no use for these nuances. In their view, conventional expressions of American patriotism

are little more than racial chauvinism. "Some of the nation's proudest patriots have also been the nation's most virulent racists," Kendi writes. "The organizing principle of the Ku Klux Klan has always been allegiance to the red, white and blue flag." It follows, then, that patriotism "whitewashes history," glossing over the less savory aspects of our past in order to present a facade of faultlessness.

But if American patriotism – expressed through an attachment to the flag, the national anthem, or other patriotic traditions – is marred by an ignorance of history, critical theory embodies the same fault to a greater magnitude. The historical illiteracy of prominent endeavors like the 1619 Project has been well-documented, and the *New York Times*' persistent unwillingness to acknowledge the qualms of fact-checkers who criticized its inaccuracies is an example of the ideologically tainted historical understanding that characterizes CRT's worldview. Furthermore, the frenzied toppling of statues and monuments – including those of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and a number of prominent abolitionists – is a testament to the radically *anti-historical* tendency in the larger ideology.

America's genius does not lie in its ability to conform to an insular class of disgruntled intellectuals' unobtainable standard of justice or equality; rather, it is in our ability to be a *good*, noble, and just nation, founded on noble and just ideals, striving continuously to further embody our founding principles while recognizing that the constraints of history and human nature make them impossible to realize perfectly. The fact that we have not entirely eradicated the racism and

injustice that have always been features of human civilization is not an argument against the significant achievements of the American experiment.

American citizens should take reasonable criticisms of America's present into account, acknowledging the ways in which racial injustice persists today and seeking to teach our history honestly, without sacrificing proper context which compares U.S. history to other nations' actions in the same era. While the Trump administration's impulse to confront the insidious influence of CRT in our institutions may have laudable goals and intentions, the former president's inability to articulate nuances deserves critique. Those who would defend our national character against its critics are not well served by giving credence to the accusation that they "whitewash history." Acknowledging that we still have work to do in the never-ending quest for a more perfect union should not negate our deep gratitude for the unlikely miracle that is America.

*Samuel Kronen is an independent writer interested in American culture, identity, and race politics. Nate Hochman is a senior at Colorado College and an associate contributor for Young Voices. [R&L](#)*

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**Virtually no two ethnic groups in history have ever achieved equal outcomes on all metrics, anywhere, ever.**



# Political violence, Left and Right

Ismael Hernandez

In the past year, many American cities experienced violent outbursts during and after protests led by groups such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Antifa's united front. Their attacks still continue in some areas. On January 6, we also witnessed violence at the U.S. Capitol during protests led by supporters of President Donald Trump over the legitimacy of the 2020 election.

Comparing these two deadly outbreaks has become controversial. Some point out disparate responses to the outbreaks, with political and media figures being accused of treating the Capitol mayhem with a contempt absent from their treatment of BLM looting. What should we make of this?

There is certainly merit to the accusation of hypocrisy against those who respond to violence based on the political or ideological alignment of its perpetrators. This accusation, however, works both ways, as employing an ideologically motivated smokescreen to minimize the disorder coming from friendly quarters is common to the Left and the Right alike. Claims of disenfranchisement and victimization by insidious forces have radicalized elements across the political spectrum.

However, the justifications for opposing our governmental system are treated differently by people on either side of this controversy. The main difference is that only on the Left do we see an organized ideological movement that justifies antagonism against the present order of things – an attitude also seemingly embraced by corporate America, the educational establishment, the media, and various politicians. The second major difference is that the violence associated with racial protests has been consistently repeated and yet gained mainstream indifference or, at times, outright support.

Organized right-wing extremism, on the other hand, is a fringe phenomenon that is almost universally shunned.

Take, for example, self-described agitator Vicky Osterweil, who released *In Defense of Looting*. The book defends looting as an ideological statement against an allegedly immoral and racist capitalist system and its unequal distribution of wealth. Osterweil's defense of looting is based on a Marxist economic analysis that renders the entire economic system illegitimate. Looting "attacks the idea of property, and it attacks the idea that in order for someone to have a roof over their head or have a meal ticket, they have to work for a boss, in order to buy things that people just like them somewhere else in the world had to make under the same conditions," Osterweil told NPR. "It points to the way in which that's unjust." Robbery, the book claims, harms only the oppressive system of free enterprise and the oppressive concept of "law and order" that perpetuates the status quo.

Notice how the author leverages a generalized assumption of oppression to glorify BLM's offenses against the present constitutional order. In the case of the Capitol rioters, however, the offenders are not celebrated but castigated for rebelling against the same constitutional order. It seems as if the political and ideological aims are what is important, and "the system" is instrumentalized on account of that aim.

Osterweil's book is not an isolated example. The idea that America is systematically racist, and the constitutional order is oppressive and invalid, is the very foundation of Critical Race Theory. The Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project asserts that "the very basis of property in the U.S. is derived through whiteness and through [b]lack oppression, through the history of slavery and settler domination

of the country." The 1619 Project's narrative calls for the dismissal of the American constitutional system – not merely its reform but a radical rejection of the entire political, social, and economic structure of American life.

This narrative is not drawn from the perspective of black Americans as they collectively reflected on the American experience; this view is derived from applying the radical, socialist analysis of America to black citizens. The black experience is filtered through the radical beliefs that American ideals were a lie from the beginning and that the institutional framework upon which America was built is illegitimate, intrinsically racist, and irreformable; thus, it must be rejected. These ideas are not a mere emotional reaction to recent electoral events but a systematic analysis pervasive among the elite which has filtered down to the masses, thereby forming what political philosopher Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* calls a "terrifying negative solidarity." Solidarity forms around a narrative of victimization, which feeds on an authentic historical experience that is totalized. This totalization creates a closed system of thought, which indicts the body politic as a whole in the name of group cohesion. Love for the group demands the acceptance of the narrative and condemns the constitutional framework that sustains an entire society invested in racism. (For an examination of the totalitarian impulse in general, see Rod Dreher's *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*.)

Worse yet, this view's proponents have fashioned a public school curriculum around the 1619 Project, and any criticism of the project is countered by accusations of racial animosity. The filtering of the general question of race through a radical explanatory system is conflated with

(Left photo: A BLM/antifa rioter in Portland in August, 2020. Photo credit: bogrodner / Shutterstock.com; Right photo, Luke Angeli inside the U.S. Capitol. AP Photo/Monica Baker, Getty, File)



a concern for racial justice, which justifies a rejection of the constitutional order. This analysis seems to condone the mob's imposition of its views of justice "by any means necessary" – but only with regard to the question of race. This is how an attack on the constitutional order can be seen as so detrimental when it comes from one quarter but so justified when it comes from another, even when the latter attempt is in fact more systematic, entrenched, and destructive.

It is as if the taxonomical category of *victimized group* confers a sort of epistemic privilege granting it immunity for its actions, which is not granted to those whose identity is more aligned with a purported racial transgressor. We are told we must accept this grant of immunity by creating a different set of rules for analyzing the aims and activities of these victims of history. (For a good analysis of identity politics, see Joshua Mitchell, "The Identity Politics Critique of the American Republic," in Gerald McDermott's *Race and Covenant: Recovering the Religious Roots for American Reconciliation*, pp. 79–97.)

Far from a necessary ingredient of an ideology that upholds violence, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. soberly referred to rioting as a "temper tantrum" by people losing hope. In other words, it was not ideologically motivated. As he stated, "Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn't murder hate. It may increase hate. It is always a descending spiral leading nowhere."

The 1619 Project, on the other hand, is informed by the assumptions of Critical Race Theory. CRT is first and foremost a proposed explanation of origins that focuses on what it proclaims is the intrinsically racist nature of our society's legal framework. It sees the problem of race as a systemic (as opposed to systematic) one and the law as its most powerful instrument. It starts with the *a priori* assumption that the United States is rooted in white supremacy. From there, the theory concludes that white supremacy is written into the law, even if not overtly stated. Disparate outcomes in economic, legal, and social areas of life are explained by the given of intrinsic racism. Critical Race Theory is mostly a cataloguing of examples that admits no challenging of premises. When CRT speaks of the "oppressed" or the "marginalized," it is not referring to present states of affairs affecting given groups but to a class of people who are marginalized by definition.

With such theories spreading like wildfire in academic, cultural, political, legal, theological, and judicial circles, it is to be expected that one cannot oppose violence by the "oppressed" against the "oppressive" system without being accused of abetting the oppressors. This is why a limited, violent action by political opponents against the very system CRT considers illegitimate (like the attack on the U.S. Capitol) is utilized as a reason to delegitimize the opposition. How can the rejection of our nation's constitutional

framework receive accolades, while a similar rejection coming from the other side of the political spectrum – and one that is a completely out-of-the-mainstream minority view – be rejected with moralistic zeal?

What at face value seems contradictory makes perfect sense within the framework I have outlined. The question at hand is not whether the system is illegitimate; the question is what tactic can advance the ideological aims of those intent on destroying the system from the side of the "oppressed."

While we should indeed avoid drawing facile distinctions in an attempt to justify acts of political violence that suit our political alignment – and them alone – fear of this kind of hypocrisy should not prevent us from making a valid examination of the ideological background that explains the inconsistency in mainstream assessments of these two expressions of violence. Otherwise, substantive analysis will give way to the weak comparisons that spring from a politicized context.

No contemporary issue demands greater clarity of thought. Alas, no issue is getting less of it.

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ESSAY

# The solution to political violence

Rev. Ben Johnson

The defining political moments of the last 12 months came not from the lackluster presidential campaign, but from months of explosive violence. Riots and looting associated with Black Lives Matter protests engulfed 140 cities and triggered between \$1 billion to \$2 billion of insurance claims, becoming the most expensive civil disturbances in U.S. history. The untreated wound in our body politic soon bled into 2021, as a cadre of pro-Trump extremists broke into the poorly defended U.S. Capitol building in a protest over election fraud. While the *New York Times* reported the “[d]amage to the interior of the building was largely limited to broken glass, busted doors and graffiti,” the psychological impact of assaulting a national symbol of governance strikes deep.

As businesses flee decimated inner cities and a razor wire-topped fence shuts U.S. citizens out of their own government, both inexcusable eruptions threaten to deform our nation for decades to come. We now long for recent days past when Arthur Brooks could say, “We don’t have an anger

problem in American politics. We have a contempt problem.” America now undeniably has a political violence problem.

In some ways, these latest outbursts are the natural progression of a substance-free presidential race which saw its first debate devolve into name-calling, and which itself followed years of political pettiness at every level of society. However, dangerously high levels of partisan animosity predate this election, or the last presidency.

The Founding Fathers charged public officials with calming, rather than inflaming, passions – alas, hardly the only aspect of original intent that politicians have ignored. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist No. 10*, elected representatives in a republic have the duty “to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” Instead, politicians stoke anger for political gain.

To paraphrase the former president, Washington isn’t sending its best – and their example has successfully filtered down to the grassroots level. Simmering political rhetoric divides the entire nation. This author has warned in these pages of such polarization (see “Repairing the breach: bringing peace to politically fractured families and communities” in the Fall 2020 issue), particularly highlighting the research of Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, who found that prejudice against members of another political party long ago surpassed the intensity of racism. Conditions worsen daily, as traditional and

social media center their business models around spoon-feeding viewers their regular dose of outrage porn.

In this environment, what could undo the damage?

Business unites. “The great virtue of a free market system is that it does not care what color people are; it does not care what their religion is; it only cares whether they can produce something you want to buy,” wrote Milton Friedman. “It is the most effective system we have discovered to enable people who hate one another to deal with one another and help one another.” Unfortunately, if politicians get their way, Americans will have fewer opportunities to engage in commerce with people of differing viewpoints. Some in Congress have pressured banks to stop offering rudimentary services to disfavored industries like gun manufacturers, reviving the strategy behind the Obama-era’s Operation Choke Point. They have also raised the possibility of employers instituting a political blacklist in hiring decisions – although, if elite institutions truly believe Americans are an insurrectionary force, the last thing they should want is for this group to find itself unemployable, aggrieved, and awash in free time.

The last great surge of national unity came after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At this point, even a sudden, foreign terrorist onslaught seems incapable of patching the chasm between Americans. That unity proved short-lived, and some Americans at the time described the assault as America’s chickens coming home to roost, or called for *jihads* to perpetrate “a million Mogadishus” against U.S. soldiers. After two decades of ingrained critical

Photo: (Photo credit: SFO CRACHO / Shutterstock.com)

theory, could an act of catastrophic barbarism unite the country, even as Americans fervently perpetrate acts of violence against one another?

Too much relies on our solving our national disintegration to ignore the problem. “We can – we must – choose to bridge divides peacefully and empathetically so the American experiment can continue,” wrote Kurt Gray, the director of the Center for the Science of Moral Understanding at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. The pure of heart say the answer is simple: Americans must love each other. While ultimately the theological virtue of charity is the answer, their exhortation has a tantalizing lack of specificity. What is necessary is for us to put that into practice in a targeted way.

The good news is there’s a path out of our vicious circle of violence that is less destructive than war and more concrete than vague and amorphous calls for positive feelings. What works? According to researchers, the solution is *solutions* – specifically, focusing on solving national problems together.

In North Carolina, Gray leads an alliance of social scientists administering what is known as the “Decision Point Method”: They pose real-life decision-making scenarios to people across the political spectrum. For instance: A crisis has had a disparate impact on the states; how much authority would you defer to local authorities? Or another scenario: Suppose a state passed a law you disagree with; would you strike it down? If so, how would you avoid preempting every other state decision? “Psychological research shows that thinking through issues and problems creates bonds between people, whereas visceral and emotional debates create enemies,” wrote Manu Meel, the CEO of BridgeUSA, a partner in Decision Point’s research.

Some 300 miles north, the Well-Being Laboratory at George Mason University is studying “how to enhance civility and reduce animosity in a politically polarized world,” with a \$1.09 million grant from the Charles Koch Foundation. “We are fine-tuning strategies to become intellectually humble and sufficiently curious to consider ideas that emerge from members of other groups,” said team leader Todd Kashdan, a psychology professor. They emphasize civil, personal debates that reveal most Americans want the same things.

The first step to overcoming our outrage addiction is not acknowledging that you have a problem; it’s seeking a solution. Research shows the answer to a fractious nation is federalism, subsidiarity, and concrete problem-solving. Politicians will continue to stir the pot until we deny them, and ourselves, the sugar high of self-righteousness.

This means that we must recognize the common humanity and decency of others. We must free ourselves from the shackles of ideological mania. We can accomplish this task only with great care and deliberation, as it upends the status quo of our dominant political, media, and culture-making institutions.

The Acton Institute has never been, nor will it ever be, a political organization. Our mission is too precious to entrust to politicians. Acton recognizes that our problems, and their solutions, originate mostly outside politics. We remain committed to our principles regardless of who holds office, praying for the well-being of all civil authorities, certain in the knowledge that obstructing our goal of creating a free and virtuous society remains the most successful bipartisan policy in history.

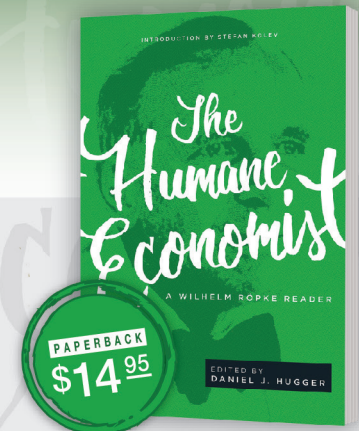
The disappointing results produced by members of both parties reinforce our need to rise up and fulfill our responsibilities, one citizen at a time. Seeking solutions together proves that we wish the best for all people, not merely our sliver of society. Engaging in thoughtful dialogue shows that we care for one another during the deliberation process. And that opens the door to the greatest need we have: that naïve injunction for us to truly love one another.

“Only love and goodness save both people and the whole world,” said one of the greatest spiritual teachers of modern times, Elder Thaddeus of Serbia. “Nothing is ever obtained through violence. Force merely provokes rejection and hatred.” Honest parties know too well that heartfelt love for our enemies does not come easily; it is a supernatural gift. Repairing the breach we have allowed to develop between ourselves and others requires greater faith in – and by – humanity. Healing our national contusions demands that we seek mutual recourse to the Great Physician.

Rev. Ben Johnson is Executive Editor of the Acton Institute’s flagship journal, *Religion & Liberty*. **R&L**

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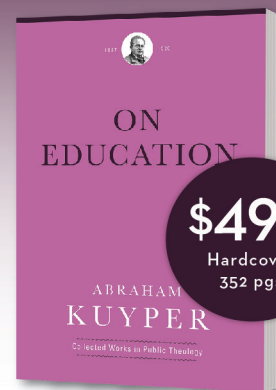


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ESSAY

# The 'Ecocide' movement: a crime against humanity

Wesley J. Smith

Radical environmentalists plan to criminalize large-scale industrial enterprise. To be more precise, they plan to categorize wealth-producing and job-creating activities as a crime known as "ecocide," which activists want legislated internationally as "the fifth international crime against peace." Ecocide would equate large-scale development activities with genocide, ethnic cleansing, wars of aggression, and crimes against humanity — actions that could land their perpetrators in the dock at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The "ecocide" movement pretends it aims to prevent pollution, but it is really a spear aimed at the heart of capitalism, intended to throttle human thriving in the name of "saving the planet." Indeed, it is important to note that ecocide would not be limited to punishing polluters. Rather, practically any large-scale human enterprise that makes use of the fruits of the Earth would qualify as a potentially heinous "crime against peace." The Stop Ecocide webpage includes such polluting and non-polluting industries as:

- industrial fishing;
- deep sea mining;
- cattle ranching;
- large-scale agriculture;
- mining;
- oil extraction;
- fracking; and
- cement manufacturing.

Some environmentalists even include electricity-generating windmills, because they kill millions of birds each year.

Extinction Rebellion holds a "Stop Ecocide" protest outside Barclays bank. (Photo credit: Andrew Matthews/PA Wire UBN5533914. (Press Association via AP Images))

The general working definition of ecocide, a proposed global felony, is as follows: Ecocide is the extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or other causes, to such an extent that *peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants* of that territory has been severely diminished. (Emphasis added.)

Note that “peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants” is a broad term that includes everything from grass, fish, and insects to mice, snakes, and people. Diminishment of “peaceful enjoyment” would not require actual pollution but could mean a declining supply of forage or a loss of foliage caused by almost any use of the land, perhaps even urban growth.

Dig deeper into ecocide advocacy, and the typical anti-free market ideology that drives too much of environmentalism today comes clearly into focus. Thus, a YouTube video titled “Ecocide: A Crime Against Peace” states:

We have come to accept that extraction of natural resources is normal. Just because it is normal does not mean that it is right. 200 years ago companies plundered for profit. Then it was called colonization. Today it is called business. Back then, extraction often led to conflict. Sometimes it led to war. Now a century of “resource wars” is predicted. The battle to control oil and water has already started. Now natural resources are becoming the reason for war. Unless we change. Do you see what is happening here?

The video's PowerPoint presentation then asserts that, when it comes to destruction, “*Ecocide > War*.”

The draft Ecocide Act, a model to be used in creating actual legislation, defines ecocide (in part) by saying, “A person, company, organisation, partnership, or any other legal entity who causes ecocide under section 1 of this Act and has breached a non-human right to life is guilty of a crime against nature.” Thus, a “non-human right to life” is established by some of the very people who do not recognize a human right to life.

The drive to criminalize ecocide is profoundly subversive. First, equating resource extraction and/or pollution with genocide and ethnic cleansing trivializes true evil by erecting a moral equivalency

between horrors such as the slaughter in Rwanda, or the killing fields of Cambodia, with wealth-producing enterprises that may (or may not) deleteriously impact the environment.

Even more fundamentally, an ecocide law would cause unimaginable human suffering. Remember, the movement does not merely seek to regulate or constrain targeted economic activities – it seeks to criminalize them. Such criminal constraints would collapse national economies.

Ecocide champions are not hiding their intentions. In 2011, they sponsored a mock ecocide prosecution against two fictional energy company CEOs. This was no minor exercise held in a college classroom. The trial was held in the courtroom of the English Supreme Court. (Needless to say, the CEOs were found guilty as charged.)

Yes, development can disrupt localized environments and can cause pollution. But that harm can be limited – and sometimes completely eliminated – through proper environmental regulatory policies. Beyond that point, “ecocide” – to use their polemical term – need not be permanent. Indeed, once timber has been harvested, ore extracted, coal mined, and oil squeezed out of shale, companies are often required to remediate and restore the land to its pre-development state.

Take ecocide's public enemy number one: the Alberta Tar Sands. If you listen only to ecocide campaigners, and rely on their photographs of clear environmental destruction, you could be forgiven for assuming the worst. They claim that after a “given territory” is exploited for its oil, the company moves on and leaves nothing but a destroyed moonscape that will afflict the population for generations to come.

This is simply not true. As one example: The Province of Alberta requires tar sands companies to both remediate and reclaim the land – a process that begins at the project planning stage and

only concludes when the land has been restored nearly to its pre-development state. Remediation is a clean-up of pollutants and contaminants to protect future “residents” from potential harm.

Not only that, but Alberta required oil companies to deposit hundreds of millions of dollars into a reclamation security trust fund, so even if the companies go broke, money will be available to restore the land. The province also will not allow a company to complete a project until it receives a “Reclamation Certificate” proving that it has restored the land to its proper state.

Other ecocide-targeted industries similarly remediate impacted ecosystems and natural expanses – or certainly could and should be legally required to do so. Forestry companies replant forests. Fisheries are restocked. Mined mountains are

restored to their natural states. Impacted wildlife are returned to the wild.

Can and should more be done in this regard? Absolutely. But we can maintain proper environmental standards without criminalizing the activities that make the modern world livable and global prosperity possible. Indeed, given the extensive environmental impact reports that companies must provide, and the rigorous permit procedures often required before companies can even begin operations in the West, criminalizing such activities seems more a desire to throttle capitalist industries than to protect the environment. If you

doubt that, consider which countries have the best environmental policies – those with regulated free market economies or communist/socialist systems.

Until the last few years, the ecocide movement remained on the fringes of radical environmental advocacy. But this reality holds no more. Demonstrating that even the most radical ideas often become mainstream over time, criminalizing large-scale enterprise is becoming part of the broader Left's agenda.

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**If ecocide  
campaigners  
prevail, we  
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as prosperity  
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watch as the  
developing world  
remains mired  
in destitution.**



Take France, where the government plans to pass an ecocide law – complete with criminal penalties – for companies that despoil the environment. *EuroNews* reported on November 23, 2020:

The French government is planning to crack down on behaviours against the environment by creating an “ecocide” offence.

The plan was originally brought forward by the Citizens’ Convention for Climate, an assembly consisting of 150 randomly selected citizens established in 2019 by President Emmanuel Macron with the aim to reduce France’s greenhouse gas emissions. The new proposal underlines sanctions from a minimum of three to 10 years in prison, as well as fines starting from €375,000 to €4.5 million.

Pope Francis has added the heft of the Roman Catholic Church behind the ecocide cause – with the pontiff expressing particular hostility toward capitalist enterprises. On November 15, 2019, Pope Francis told the World Congress of the International Association of Penal Law that an “elementary sense of justice” must be applied so that “certain conduct for which corporations are usually responsible, does not go unpunished.” The pontiff continued:

“[E]cocide” is to be understood as the loss, damage, or destruction of the ecosystems of a given territory, so that its utilization by inhabitants has been or can be seen as severely compromised. This is a fifth category of crimes against peace, which should be recognised as such by the international community.

Both the words and their provenance are chilling.

Other cultural notables have also endorsed the ecocide cause. According to the Stop Ecocide website, their ranks include primatologist Jane Goodall, rock legend Paul McCartney, and the Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg. Even the World Peace Prayer Society “welcomes the Law of Ecocide to be recognised as a crime against peace.”

The drive to criminalize enterprise is the culmination of decades of radical environmental advocacy – a drive that seemed so far-fetched that far too many of us took it insufficiently seriously to mount a meaningful defense.

**Deep ecology:** Our descent into irrationality began with the “deep ecology”

movement in the 1970s. The term was coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. Inspired by the environmental alarmism of Rachael Carson’s *Silent Spring*, Næss rejected human exceptionalism, arguing that each facet of the natural world – including humans – are equal to all others. In 1984, Næss and George Sessions published “The Deep Ecology Platform,” a list of specific ideological goals which at the time were quite radical, but which are now mainstream within contemporary environmentalism. They include:

- The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes;
- Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs;
- Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening;
- The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease; and
- Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

**Gaia theory:** At about the same time Næss was conjuring Deep Ecology, another environmentalist philosopher named James Lovelock posited an equally radical idea: that the Earth, known as the pagan goddess Gaia, “evolved as a single living, and self-regulating system.” The “Gaia Theory” posits that the Earth possesses such intelligence that it “maintains conditions suitable for its own survival.” In essence, Lovejoy urged us to treat the environment – more accurately, the Earth – as a living being: “The living system of Earth can be thought of analogous to the workings of any individual organism that regulates body temperature, blood salinity, etc.”

**Nature Rights:** These esoteric ideas are now being implemented in practical ways that will negatively impact human thriving. Most alarmingly is ecocide’s first cousin, the “nature rights movement.” (See Wesley J. Smith, “The Return

of Nature Worship” in the Summer 2018 issue of *Religion & Liberty*.) The “nature rights” movement would grant “rights” to all aspects of the natural world, including geological features such as rivers and mountains. Those rights would be equal to those given to human beings. Here is the definition promoted by the movement’s chief proponent, the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund: “Nature or Pachamama [the Goddess Earth], where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.”

Enforcing nature’s “rights” would not require waiting for regulatory or government action. Rather, anyone who believes that nature’s rights have been violated would have standing to bring lawsuits and obtain a court order preventing enterprise from proceeding. Talk about a full employment guarantee for lawyers!

Lest you be tempted to think that “it will never happen,” it already has. Four rivers, including the Amazon, have been granted rights. So, too, have two glaciers. More than 30 U.S. municipalities have granted rights to nature, usually to stop fracking. Lake Erie was granted rights by voters in Toledo, an ordinance subsequently preempted by the Ohio state legislature.

Throughout most of humans’ inhabitation of this planet, life has been brutal and short. We lived with the effects of the environment in a Darwinian world of natural selection and the struggle to survive. Only in the last few hundred years, thanks to industrialization, have humans liberated themselves from the claws of the natural world.

*We need more of such activities, not fewer.* Simply stated, if ecocide campaigners prevail, we will be less free, suffer as prosperity declines in the West, and watch as the developing world remains mired in destitution. In that sense, the ecocide movement is a profoundly anti-human movement that must be stopped while it is still in its embryonic stage.

Award-winning author Wesley J. Smith, is the chairman of the Discovery Institute’s Center on Human Exceptionalism. [IRL](#)

## REV. MACIEJ ZIĘBA, O.P. (1954-2020)

REV. BEN JOHNSON

Few people have the courage to resist a totalitarian system from within; fewer still have the intellectual and moral grounding to plant the seeds of its metamorphosis into a free and virtuous society. The world lost one such person on the last day of 2020, when Rev. Maciej Zięba, O.P., died. The 66-year-old Dominican, who suffered from cancer, worked closely with Poland's Solidarity movement and the late Pope John Paul II to expose the spiritual, philosophical, economic, and anthropological fallacies at the heart of communism – and then to raise up a young cadre of leaders thoroughly versed in Christian principles.

Maciej Zięba was born on September 6, 1954, in Wrocław, Poland. He earned his college degree in physics, but soon after hearing Pope John Paul II denounce Marxism's "exclusion of Christ from the history of man," Zięba took up intellectual and spiritual arms. Intellectually, he joined forces with the Solidarity movement, contributing to its journal, *Tygodnik Solidarność*, alongside future Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Spiritually, he joined the Dominicans (Order of Preachers) in 1981, being ordained in 1987 and serving as provincial for the order within Poland from 1998–2006.

He relied on the theology of then-Pope John Paul II who, in turn, displayed great personal affection for the Polish priest. He defended "democracy on the basis of Christian anthropology, with its understanding of God-given human dignity," wrote Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Philadelphia. Rev. Zię-



ba believed that respect for human creativity must allow individuals to participate adequately in economic and political life. Above all, he emphasized that a successful society must rely fully on God's grace and providence; man-made utopias of any variety will surely fall, bringing tragedy to those impacted under their rubble.

In 1992, Rev. Zięba joined with Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, George Weigel, and Rocco Buttiglione to found what is now the Tertio Millennio Seminar on the Free Society. The organization seeks "to deepen the dialogue on Catholic social doctrine between North American students and students from the new democracies of central and eastern Europe" and tours sites of persecution, such as Auschwitz. Rev. Zięba also commemorated dissidents as a leader at the European Solidarity Center in Gdańsk.

Rev. Zięba sought not merely to curse the darkness but to enlighten students' minds with Christian and social principles that could empower them to create a flourishing society. To that end, he wrote numerous books, including *Papal Economics: The Catholic Church on Democratic Capitalism*, from *Rerum Novarum* to *Caritas in Veritate*. Perhaps his most influential accomplishment came when he co-edited *The Social Agenda: A Collection of Roman Catholic Magisterial Texts* with the president and co-founder of the Acton Institute, Rev. Robert A. Sirico. The florilegium traverses every topic of social importance, from the human person and the natural family to abiding Christian principles for the economy and the environment.

Rev. Zięba's profound understanding of the human condition had been forged in the crucible of socialist persecution. "Of course, it is good that the horrors of totalitarianism are behind us. But we will miss those who defeated it," wrote Archbishop Gudziak. "Their experience is again becoming necessary" during a time of "surveillance capitalism," in which faceless "algorithms in social networks" are engaged to "determine our conduct ... politically." Furthermore, the economic system that fueled the Eastern Bloc's repression, socialism, has become distressingly popular among young people in the West.

If we do not heed the abiding biblical truths that he spent – and risked – his life teaching, we may find ourselves replicating the society that suppressed him, improving only the quality of its all-pervading surveillance and social control.





ESSAY

# Brexit: Freedom beckons

Rev. Richard Turnbull

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his chief Brexit negotiator, David Frost, achieved an extraordinary success in the negotiations to leave the European Union. At midnight (Brussels time, of course, or 11 p.m. GMT) on December 31, 2020, the United Kingdom exited the one-year transition period and finally escaped the clutches of the EU which, like the tentacles of an octopus, had suffocated the nation for some 50 years.

Prime Minister Johnson accomplished this feat by not blinking at the last minute – something former PM Theresa May did so often that EU negotiators came to expect it. Johnson held firm and made

clear we were walking in any event; no extensions to the transition period, no caving on key issues, no further surrender of sovereignty. He seemed so resolved that German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly made calls under pressure from her own industry chiefs, who would have faced utter devastation if tariffs were imposed.

Of course, there was a case to leave on World Trade Organisation terms, with schedules of customs tariffs but no formal arrangements with the EU. This would perhaps have offered the greatest global opportunities long term, but without question there would have been extensive costs in the short and medium terms. Yet by standing firm and being willing to leave on those terms, Prime Minister Johnson gave the UK a stunning result.

Delivering Brexit and exiting the EU has delivered at least four key victories:

**Sovereignty restored.** One of the most contentious areas of the UK's relationship with the EU has been the role of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) as the court of final appeal. The ECJ should be distinguished from the European Court of Human Rights, which is not specifically linked to the EU. During all of the negotiations with PM May and in the months

of negotiations with PM Johnson's team, the EU insisted that the ECJ must be the final arbiter of any dispute. All parties know which way their judgements would have gone. Boris played a blinder: He successfully removed all references to the ECJ in the trade agreement. The court is not mentioned; the law which will determine disputes is not EU law but international law. The process is one of independent arbitration and, crucially, the UK retains the right to diverge from EU law. This restores UK sovereignty. In addition, we are free to negotiate trade deals globally without any reference to or interference from the EU.

**Freedom from EU regulatory standards.** This is related to the first point but is so significant that it deserves separate mention. The EU wanted automatic penalties and tariffs applied to British goods if the UK departed from the EU's regulatory standards. They called this the "level playing field." The agreement replaces it with the principle of managed divergence, which enshrines the right of the UK to differ from regulations imposed by Brussels. It contains no role for the ECJ (as mentioned) but establishes an independent judicial review process and gives only a proportionate and limited right to the EU to impose tariffs under such circumstances. The crucial point is that the UK can choose to free its economy from the EU's stifling standards, and the EU has no right to respond with wide-ranging, punitive tariffs.

**A zero-tariff, zero quota trade agreement.** Gaining the principle of free trade between two such enormous trading partners significantly advances the cause of free trade itself. True, customs declarations will still be required, but the principle of no tariffs on either imports or exports, with no quotas on goods, is a major step forward for the principle of free exchange. This is the first time that the EU has ever agreed to a 100% tariff liberalisation in a trade agreement. The agreement is primarily about trade in goods, and critics have pointed out it contains little reference to services, the UK's comparative advantage. However, it contains mutual professional recognitions, and the City of London is content. The world's two main global financial services centers will remain New York City and London.

French President Emmanuel Macron waves goodbye to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Photo credit: John Smith Williams / Shutterstock.com


**Fishing rights.** Currently, the UK fishing fleet is entitled to 50% of the catch share in the waters that will revert to UK sovereignty. This will increase to 66% over the course of five years, after which the UK will hold annual negotiations to agree catch shares. An alternative way of looking at this is to say that the UK reduced the share of fish which the EU is allowed to take from British waters from 50% to 34%. Many UK fishermen wanted even better terms, though it has to be said that the UK fishing fleet needs time to develop in order to be able to take advantage of the increased share. There was undoubtedly some compromise here by the UK, but the overall outcome seems reasonable.

To all of this has to be added control over our own immigration policies; our own regime of “state aid”; and agreements on air travel, security, and scientific co-operation. The agreement itself is 1,246 pages long, and there will no doubt be areas we would prefer to have been different. But leading Brexit attorneys have examined and endorsed the deal.

Note the margin of its sweeping passage: The House of Commons voted 521–73 to accept the legislation. Just 18 months ago, Parliament was deadlocked as Conservative Brexiteers voted against May’s agreement, which left us trapped in the EU. Since then, the December 2019 election has changed the landscape. The Labour Party, desperate after its defeat at the polls, flip-flopped to support the arrangements, though some 40 Labour Members of Parliament abstained. They are likely to continue to be torn by tension as members of a mostly pro-Remain party, since few Britons would ever vote to rejoin the EU.

More than four years after the national referendum and years of failed negotiations, these four advantages – and all those which are to follow – have been secured.

Freedom beckons.

*Revd Dr Richard Turnbull is the Director of the Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics in Oxford, UK.* 

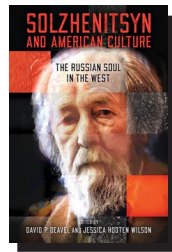
BOOK

# Solzhenitsyn: Prophet to America

*Solzhenitsyn and American Culture: The Russian Soul in the West*

David P. Deavel and Jessica Hooten Wilson, eds. | University of Notre Dame Press. 2020 | 392 pages

Reviewed by John Couretas



English literature scholar Ed Ericson told a story about teaching Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* to American undergrads, who knew plenty about the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews and other dehumanized minorities but next to nothing about the genocidal history of the Bolshevik and Stalinist regimes. Ericson, who worked tirelessly to widen Solzhenitsyn’s audience in the West, thought it was comic (or maybe tragi-comic) that students often thought “gulag” was something served in dormitory cafeterias, mistaking it for “goulash.”

With the publication of *Solzhenitsyn and American Culture: The Russian Soul in the West*, Ericson’s life work gains a fitting tribute from scholars who are today at work studying and assessing Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), a protean writer and thinker who ranged over the twentieth century’s tragic landscape in political analysis, history, fiction, and poetry. The new book of essays is dedicated to “the memory of Edward E. Ericson Jr., Christian, scholar, mentor.” Ericson, who died in 2017, was a Chicagoan who spent the bulk of his teaching career at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He collaborated with Solzhenitsyn and his family for years and edited the first abridged, one-volume edition of *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1985.

In their introduction to this collection of essays, editors David P. Deavel and Jessica Hooten Wilson assess Solzhenitsyn’s claim, in his 1983 Templeton Prize Lecture, that “the devastating outcomes of the twentieth century derived from the fact that ‘men have forgotten God’ is no simple appeal to theocratic and autocratic past. It is a recognition that though human will and technique are powerful, they will tend toward destruction and violence if untethered to divine and natural law.” The English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge once called Solzhenitsyn a “holy prophet” and strongly recommended the study of his work on college campuses. “Rather than view Solzhenitsyn as only a Russian writer or a political dissident,” the editors write, “Ericson argued, in agreement with Muggeridge, that Solzhenitsyn was a Christian writer, one whose work embodied a vision of life which we would all do well to see and apply.”

This new collection of essays brings together scholarly assessments of Solzhenitsyn’s work from the West, and from Russian novelist Eugene Vodolazkin, in five parts: “Solzhenitsyn and Russian Culture”; “Solzhenitsyn and Orthodoxy”; “Solzhenitsyn and the Writers”; “Solzhenitsyn and the Politicians”; and “Beyond Solzhenitsyn: Russian Writers and American Readers.”

In the first part, an essay by Deavel brings forward an observation that Solzhenitsyn made about the intellectual climate on campuses in the West and in elite outlets of journalistic opinion, which holds up well with the passage of time. “It is safe to say,” Deavel writes, that Solzhenitsyn “saw the intellectuals – and both journalists and professors belong to this class – as particularly ready to surrender to illusions. Particularly to illusions of a benevolent and progressive sort.”

Among the chief illusions held by Western intellectuals – and here let’s not leave out left-wing seminary professors and a legion of social justice preachers – is the embrace of socialism in all its permutations. Solzhenitsyn asserted that the “defects” of capitalism merely represent the flaws of human nature under an ethic of unlimited



freedom and the affirmation of human rights unmoored from human obligations. Such flaws, which exist in all societies, “under Communism (and Communism is breathing down the neck of all forms of socialism, which are unstable), run riot in any person with the least degree of authority; while everyone else under that system does indeed attain ‘equality’ – the equality of destitute slaves.”

For Americans, Deavel writes, “we need to be able to look at Solzhenitsyn and his Russian forebears for an experience that is both like ours and not, the experience of a nation historically Christian that was swallowed by a materialism sadly too much like the one we seem tempted by.”

Those new to Solzhenitsyn would do well to start with Ericson’s one-volume abridgement. (A new edition with a forward by Jordan B. Peterson was issued in 2018.) By way of an introduction to *The Gulag Archipelago*, readers would profit from reading Daniel J. Mahoney’s essay titled “Judging Communism and All Its Works” in the *Solzhenitsyn and American Culture* collection.

“Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s writings remain the greatest scourge of the ideological justification of tyranny and terror,” Mahoney begins. He pushes back on the sentiment that what happened in Russia in the twentieth century can be explained away by an ingrained Russian tradition of passivity or one of Asiatic despotism. “Truth be told,” Mahoney writes, “the ideological justification of ‘utopia in power’ is part and parcel of philosophical and political modernity, rooted in the unfounded belief that human nature and society can be transformed at a stroke.”

That terror in the service of utopia began at the outset, with Lenin and swallowed up any person or group that was seen as an obstacle to the true ideological aim of total power: workers, local council officials, nuns, priests, monks, members of co-operatives, kulaks, suspect teachers, eccentric Tolstoyans, and that durable scapegoat known as the *bourgeoisie*. Some 85,000 priests and nuns were executed in 1937 alone at the height of Stalin’s Great Purge.

Mahoney tells us that, as a writer, Solzhenitsyn could reveal the “sparks of the spirit” that literature alone can truly incarnate. “*The Gulag Archipelago* is an ‘experiment in artistic/literary investigation,’ in Solzhenitsyn’s description of it, in no small part because of its power to illustrate the sparks of the spirit that miraculously survived the assaults of ideology,” Mahoney writes. “Human nature is more powerful than ideology. God’s grace is more powerful than imperfect human nature.”

I like to think that Ericson, who died in 2017, would have been delighted with the publication of *Solzhenitsyn in American Culture* but he, characteristically, would have been embarrassed by the well-deserved attention it would have brought him. I can think of no greater tribute to this man’s life work than to include *Solzhenitsyn and American Culture* in university reading lists for teaching not just Russian history, but the entire tragic arc of twentieth-century history. That reading list would include the one-volume edition of *The Gulag Archipelago*, the *Solzhenitsyn Reader* edited by Ericson and Mahoney, and novels and short stories beginning with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Solzhenitsyn described Ericson as “measured, very good-hearted – and concerned above all with spiritual matters.

He worked absolutely selflessly and, to ease the procedure of negotiating with publishers, he renounced any fee.”

For more on Ericson’s work, see my conversation with him in “Literature in the realm of moral values,” from the Spring 2010 issue of *Religion & Liberty*. In 2018 on the Acton Institute’s *PowerBlog*, I posted in a short video clip of Ericson talking about “Teaching *The Gulag Archipelago* to American College Students.” A common reaction from Ericson’s students, who thought they were well-educated in modern history, when they encountered the history of the Soviet gulag was: “Why didn’t they tell us this? I haven’t heard this from our teachers.”

The lesson that students should draw from the study of Solzhenitsyn’s works, and his great soul, is to resist the temptation of thinking that the demonic forces of famine, imprisonment, and mass murder in Russia could never happen in America or in the West.

“Alas,” Solzhenitsyn wrote, “all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth.”

John Couretas is a writer and editor based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. 



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# Preserving the inheritance: A defense of the great books

Josh Herring

Books are powerful. They have the ability to lift us out of present circumstances, to speak beyond their time, to impart messages, arguments, and ideas in both didactic and experiential ways. The books we read together, often assigned in a class context, form the basis of a community's ability to converse with itself and make effective use of symbols. Each time we see TSG Entertainment's Greek man firing an arrow through axes, hear references to a "Trojan horse," or hear the choice between serving in Heaven or reigning in Hell, we're reminded that we live in a society of shared stories. Reading, contemplating, and discussing these stories is a necessary rite of passage, allowing youths to step into an ongoing adult conversation.

This tradition of reading books that have always been read is under attack. The most recent manifestation of this attack is #DisruptTexts, a Twitter movement that has received official recognition from Penguin Publishing and whose 7,000-plus participants presumably support the idea of "disrupting" the traditional canon. #DisruptTexts received wider attention at the end of 2020 when a *Wall Street Journal* editorial brought attention to one teacher who celebrated removing Homer's *Odyssey* from her school's curriculum. Where one might expect teachers to value the beginning of Western literature, #DisruptTexts highlights an increasing tendency to replace time-honored classics with more recent, "relevant" texts driven by identity politics. This leads to selecting books that fit the current orthodoxy at the time the school approves its budgeting and curriculum. I propose a different answer to the question: The books that we require students to read should be recognizably great, sufficiently difficult to require a teacher, and suitably beneficial to the formation of the moral imagination.

Being recognizably great is an admittedly *qualitative* measurement, and one that literature teachers never tire of debating. Greatness is more easily seen at a distance, a primary reason why traditional school curricula favor older books. It's much easier to see if a book is worthwhile if people still read it, discuss it, and value it 50 or 100 years after publication than if it creates an immediate buzz. John Grisham's legal novels were huge in the 1990s, but they have since faded. For a time, one couldn't go anywhere without seeing *Harry Potter* novels for sale; these, too, have subsided in popularity, replaced by the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *Percy Jackson* series. The great books are, first and foremost, those works which have stood the test of time. It is difficult to articulate why, but generation after generation of people around the world, in vastly divergent cultural contexts, have found value in going back to the greats: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the anonymous monk who pieced together *Beowulf*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jean Racine's *Tartuffe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and so many more. These works, and others that fit with them, unite people across generations and create the possibility of rich conversations based on shared experiences.

Some books are so simple they need not be taught. Most (though not all) young adult fiction fits into this category. For a book to be worth assigning as mandatory reading, it needs to have a certain amount of difficulty. The old books are hard to read; Homer requires patience. *The Odyssey*'s more than 12,000 lines of poetry display poetic craft, imaginative skill, linguistic agility, and narrative control, but when we first encounter Homer, we need a guide to point out the beauty of the epic simile.

Can anyone understand such text without assistance? As the Ethiopian eunuch asked the apostle Phillip, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" That question is the ideal literature class' foundation. Students need not just the initial phonetic decoding skill

to know how to read; to understand these texts, they need analytical, contextual, and hermeneutical tools. To mine meaning, they need a teacher who will mediate the text for them while equipping students to become more proficient readers, capable of correct interpretation. After this process, students will be prepared to tackle a different book on their own. Of course, a great and difficult book cannot help but teach students how to write by example. Spending five weeks in Milton's glorious poetry causes one to appreciate the use of allusion, vocabulary, and pentameter. Suddenly, students' essays start sounding a little like Milton.

The great books' difficulty need not be purely technical: Reading the greats of a given generation requires the student to interact with the pressing issues of another age. When encountering Goethe's *Faust, Part One*, the student must grapple with Romanticism, the divinizing of nature, questions of infanticide, teenage pregnancy, and sexual predation. *The Song of Roland* brings up questions of church and state relations in the context of the Crusades, the use of literature as propaganda, and the results of "othering" the enemy. None of these are simple concepts, and wading through them prepares students to evaluate contemporary questions using the skills they developed while analyzing literature from bygone eras.

I propose the moral imagination as a third criteria for determining book selection. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke coined this phrase to refer to the human capacity to imagine moral realities. It takes a certain sensibility to perceive the potential outcomes of our actions and choose accordingly. Russell Kirk later used the same term to refer to the human ability to seek what he called "unbought grace of life." The moral imagination is our ability to imagine life in a different vein than we experience it. Some stories do a better job of cultivating this aspect of the human person than others.

Focusing on the way books shape their readers, this criterion allows teachers to determine what kinds of questions they hope to raise, and what principles they want students to grapple with. Literature is neither catechism nor ethics; a book list is no guarantee of making people more ethical. Great books, however, expose students to ideas, show them the results



of choices, and prepare students to make real choices. As Kirk put it:

[S]uch reading will teach us about what it is to be a real man or a real woman. Of this we may be certain, that when the wisdom derived from high imaginative literature is ignored, order in the soul and order in the commonwealth are crumbling. ... If we rear a generation or two quite deprived of that moral imagination which humane letters nourish – why, the victims of this denial will end frozen in the Snow Queen's icy palace.

When evaluating the texts that are required, one should consider how the work shapes the student's conception of the good.

At Thales Academy, we embrace a chronologically arranged great books approach to literature; across grades 6–12, students cycle twice through a classical sequence of literature aligned with their history classes (Greek, Roman, European, and American). In high school, the complexity of their literature increases substantially. Rather than apologizing for the lack of contemporary representation or diversity in these books, we find that the books we read help our students to step into the world of adult responsibilities equipped to read, discuss, and write about almost any topic. Their reading has prepared them to understand the moral weight of their choices, and the habits of thought cultivated through their reading has empowered them to hold great conversations.

That's not to say they do not see themselves in the literature, but that perception does not lie in the particularities of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation. Instead, they identify with universal human temptations, successes, and experiences found throughout the Great Tradition. There are many other books that are of great value outside our curriculum, but it remains our conviction as a school that these texts are essential for students' lifelong flourishing.

To the #DisruptTexts-inclined teacher, the great books teacher might respond that our students are identifying with what is universally human. Reading great books calls students out of themselves and into a larger conversation. As they enter that conversation, they are prepared to steward their

intellectual inheritance well. To deprive them of that inheritance by removing the core texts of their tradition robs students of the opportunity to perceive the larger conversations.

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## Reading great books calls students out of themselves and into a larger conversation.

Below is a selection of texts I have taught in ninth–eleventh grade literature classes over the years. Next to each is a principle that I hope students discover through their reading. Over eight years of teaching, I have found that the best way to have conversations leading to these principles is through reading these books. In their absence, my students would be missing key conversations and ideas preparing them for a successful life.

*The Odyssey* (Homer): Life is a perilous journey filled with potential distractions; those who persevere will find home, and the journey is worth the struggle.

*The Iliad* (Homer): Rage and grief can destroy the work of generations; the wise person governs the passions.

*Genesis* (Moses): While we long for the pre-Fall paradise, we live in a world filled equally with sin, death, and hope.

*Metamorphoses* (Ovid): The gods of pagan antiquity do not desire human happiness; for full human flourishing, we need something greater than the whims of Jupiter to govern justice.

*Beowulf* (anon.): Evil exists in the world, and the hero's task is to carve out space for the good through his deeds.

*Inferno* (Dante): Vice takes many forms, and by knowing those forms we also learn the nature of virtue.

*Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer): Life is not all morals and ethics; there is great joy in living.

*Le Morte d'Arthur* (Mallory): Love, misdirected, can destroy the good life.

*David Copperfield* (Dickens): Sacrificial love takes a lifetime to perfect. *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky): You are not *Das Ubermensch*; you are not exempt from moral consequences.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque): The good of youth is not always the goal of the older generation.

*Brideshead Revisited* (Waugh): Materialism alone is not sufficient to answer the question of happiness.

Such a list reflects my interests as a teacher; another teacher may employ a different set of propositions. But consider the weight of these ideas, and the paucity of what is offered in their place. Rejecting Homer for contemporary works driven by identity politics robs the student of rich symbols and essential truths of human nature. Reading and discussing the old books does not deny the value of newer texts, but rather insists that there are certain truths, concepts, and conversations that cannot be encountered any other way. Students who read on their own gravitate naturally to current books, but those who do so rarely read classical literature by choice. When we replace Homer with Ta-Nehisi Coates, Aristotle with Ibram X. Kendi, or *To Kill a Mockingbird* with *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, we miss a moment that may not return. The student might not encounter the replaced work again, and, in doing so, becomes intellectually impoverished.

What should we do when teachers brag on Twitter about removing Homer from the curriculum? I suspect we should respond as we do when another headline proclaims a building renamed or a statue toppled: We mourn the reality that the barbarians are within the metaphorical gates, and we continue carrying forward the classical renewal movement in homeschooling groups, private schools, and new institutions. The woke mob may continue destroying, but the preservation of the good life will go on as it always has: one student, one family, one small community at a time.

Josh Herring is a humanities instructor at Thales Academy, a graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Hillsdale College, and a doctoral student in Faulkner University's Great Books program. He has written for *Moral Apologetics*, *The Imaginative Conservative*, *Think Christian*, and *The Federalist*. [R&L](#)

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*The notion of shared values on both sides of the Atlantic has received new attention. Leaders like France's socialist ex-president François Hollande cite "democracy, freedoms and the respect of every individual" as key values. But what about religious liberty, the breakdown of the welfare state, advancing secularism and the health of civil society? R&L Transatlantic will cover these issues here with new articles.*

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COLUMN

## A REVOLUTION OF DECENCY

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Orderly elections, the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to the next, and public confidence in the institutions responsible for ensuring that these things transpire are necessary for any free and just society. These are integral components of the rule of law, which minimizes the conflicts that may arise when the free actions of persons and institutions result in competing interests. We have seen, tragically, in the past months just what happens when our nation's institutions and leaders fail in their most basic functions to preserve the common good. Of course, we have seen this over a long period of time in the United States, but the most recent examples merit comment.

The effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have led to increasing social isolation and large-scale economic dislocation. This has, in many cases, been compounded by the failures of ham-fisted government interventions, the thirst for accumulating power and political leadership at all levels. Changes in the normal rules and procedures in the administration of elections adopted to deal with the public health impacts of the pandemic were implemented poorly, litigated extensively, and resulted in the conduct of an election in which the outcome was reported in neither an orderly nor timely manner. The already existing suspicion of institutions and leaders has now resulted in widespread public distrust and anger.

Former President Donald Trump himself disputed the results and filed several legal challenges. With the failure of these legal challenges at every level, he doubled down, protesting that the election had been stolen. The public distrust and anger, along with the intemperate and imprudent language of former President Trump and other political leaders, contributed to the tragic and dispiriting January 6th storming of the U.S. Capitol by a mob of rioters, which resulted in five deaths.

This political violence is part of a larger and deeply troubling trend. The riots of last summer in the wake of the death of George Floyd similarly resulted in property damage and tragic loss of life. They, too, were fueled by public distrust and anger and were also encouraged by intemperate and imprudent leaders such as Congresswoman Maxine Waters, who was rightly condemned at the time for inciting violence against public officials.

Those interested in promoting a free and virtuous society must refuse any sort of moral relativism, excusing or minimizing one form of political violence while calling out another. It is counterproductive to hurl political barbs back and forth, promoting further political division and polarization. Political violence, in all of its forms, must be repudiated totally.

We must recognize that the only path forward is to listen to each other honestly and with a great deal of patience. Many people are caught up in political polarization and demonization promoted by bad actors and opportunistic political leaders. We must be ruthless in promoting our principles while being gentle with our neighbors. It must be noted that this effort at honest dialogue ought not, in any way, diminish our commitment to our values and the promotion of the virtues that undergird freedom.

The growing secularist mentality sees religion as irrelevant, reducing everything to political conflicts and temporal power. The Psalmist warned about this mentality when he wrote:

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help.

When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish (Psalm 146:3-4).

The principles underlying a free and virtuous society are grounded not in the pretensions of any human ideology, but within the very nature of human persons created, sustained, and loved by God. They originate and flow from the dignity of the human person, free and secure in his rights and bound to his neighbor in his duties. This is a message that inspires our confidence, and this is the only sure ground on which to reform and build trustworthy institutions for the next generation.

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is co-founder of the Acton Institute. **R&L**