

## **You Can't Teach That!**

What Happens Next – 09.01.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics, the arts and current events.

Today's session will be on You Cannot Teach That!

Our speaker will be John Ellis who is the former Dean of the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Professor of German Literature. The topic is the corruption of the Humanities, and what this means for the University.

I've raided the What Happens Next archives to find additional material that supports John Ellis's discussion. We are going to hear from Arnold Weinstein who is a Professor of English at Brown University who will discuss the increasing resistance to teaching Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

We will also hear from my friend David Grazian who is a Professor of Sociology at UPenn who will discuss the challenges of teaching Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* and why it is much easier to teach the HBO Series *The Wire* than the novels of Tom Wolfe.

Our final speaker is Patrick Allitt who is a Professor of History at Emory University. Patrick is going to discuss the increasing relevance of George Orwell and his central role in the American literary canon.

What Happens Next uses a team of interns to make this program and I have job openings. Interns improve the podcast by selecting topics of discussion, editing, and production. If you're interested, please let me know.

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Let's begin with John Ellis's opening remarks.

John Ellis:

The main thrust of this book is that the nation faces one of the most serious crises that it's ever encountered because its entire educational system from top to bottom has been thoroughly corrupted by destructive political radicals. The problem: it's that the aims themselves have fundamentally changed. Higher education has decided to repurpose itself. Instead of producing new knowledge and a thoughtful well-formed citizenry, it wants to promote a political ideology.

Advanced societies obviously have all kinds of institutions to function: fire, police, courts, and so on. Only one of them has decided that it will do what it wants to do, not what society employs it to do. Academia has repurposed itself essentially without ever having asked or received permission to do that.

First of all, just how bad is the situation really? I've tried to give the public a strong sense of how extensive is the rot. The second question is, how can this have happened? We know that Harvard, Yale, Berkeley were brilliant places and deserved our respect for a long period of time. How is it possible that these places can have descended into what is utter buffoonery and stupidity.

The third basic question is what is the extent of the damage that's being done to our society? Academia trains journalists, school teachers, lawyers. And those professions are going to be corrupted too.

The fourth question really is what can we do to fix this? You can't persuade professors to do any better. They're solidly entrenched in those institutions. You cannot persuade those people to do differently, because that's what they want to do.

My point is that only the public is in position to change things because the only way forward is to decide that this travesty doesn't deserve public money any longer. State legislators ought to stop funding state universities until radical reform is done. And radical reform means removing from the classrooms people that are political activists and not professors at all.

Larry Bernstein:

How do activist professors use the classroom for political purposes?

John Ellis:

They are using the classrooms to persuade students that radical leftism is the only viable political philosophy. First, you must rid the campuses of dissenting opinions because in a fair debate, radical leftism doesn't do well against other political positions.

One of the ways in which they proceed is by persuading students that other points of view are not just wrong, but they're morally corrupt which relieves them of the need to analyze and justify one political position as opposed to another. In the real academy, what happens is an idea is put forward and you look at the strengths and weaknesses of it. The radical left prefers that there's one position that's advanced as the only morally decent position. And all other positions are morally corrupt.

Larry Bernstein:

Is there much variation in political activism by department? For example, is the problem different in the social sciences like sociology, anthropology, political science versus the hard sciences like biology, physics or math?

John Ellis:

So, slowly the stem fields and the professional fields caught up with the humanities and social sciences. There's a big push to control STEM fields and the professional fields. It is being done by the means of diversity, equity and inclusion. It's very noticeable this movement to have all professors who are applying for jobs at an institution, complete a diversity statement, what action to promote diversity. Those required statements of everyone who wanted to apply for a job. They targeted the scientific fields, because they were the last bastion of independent thought. This is converting even the scientific fields to radical leftism.

Larry Bernstein:

How can we evaluate the extent of political activism at the university?

John Ellis:

The control of radical leftism is increasing everywhere. Dan Klein and his team of researchers did a study of recruiting. They found that if you look at the junior ranks the left to right ratio was sharply out of whack compared to the whole campus.

For example, the Berkeley campus associate professor split is something like 47 left to one right now, the campus generally was 12 to one. What that means is that the radical control of the administration is so complete that they can now ensure that virtually every appointment is left oriented.

Larry Bernstein:

I was looking at a study by Mitchell Langbert and he showed that liberal arts schools Williams, Amherst, Bates, Wellesley and Swarthmore each have a faculty size of around 200 professors and each of these schools only have a single faculty member that is a registered Republican. Bryn Mawr a women's liberal arts college outside of Philadelphia has a faculty of 127 that has no registered Republicans, zero.

If the subjects are corrupted, would you expect students to abandon the liberal arts for different subjects like business, engineering, or computer science?

John Ellis:

Students are voting with their feet. The number of majors in English has been dropping for decades, but it's a sharp drop recently. Let me give you an example from my own campus. University of California, Santa Cruz was founded as a liberal arts place that was going to be its pride and joy. In fact, now about a quarter of student enrollments are in engineering, which would've been anathema to the founders of the campus and about a third of the graduate students on campus are in engineering and especially computer engineering has grown rapidly. Meanwhile enrollments in the politicized fields have been dropping.

Larry Bernstein:

Does the choice of texts in the literary curriculum matter? Does it make a difference if we include Mark Twain's Huck Finn?

John Ellis:

These books have stood the test of time. You want students to be exposed to the very best writers to the authors that raise ethical issues in the most interesting and productive way. What you don't want is to have texts chosen for political reasons. So, when you drop Huckleberry Finn, and replace it with a 20th century book by a writer and the heart of the book is a grievance about the way one group of people treat another, and there's very little complexity. It is just held up as a political statement. That's a great loss. What you're getting is second rate writers, instead of first ones like Twain. Huckleberry Finn is one of the greatest books ever written about race. That's absolutely brilliant treatment. You compare it to the average novel that replaces it there's just a one long lament. You don't get the students understanding how these problems developed. All you get is, gosh, how badly one set of people were treated by another, which in the hands of Mark Twain, it's a lot more interesting and more complicated, something you'll never forget once you think about that book.

Larry Bernstein:

There is limited space in the curriculum. If something is added, something else has to be cut. There are major differences between my curriculum at New Trier public high school in Winnetka Illinois when I was a kid and my children's private high schools in New York City. For example, my American literature curriculum included Emerson, Thoreau and Melville, and the European literature curriculum included Dickens, Dostoevsky and Camus, and my kids did not. Do these choices of books and writers' matter?

John Ellis:

The list you just gave me is a list that's very varied, very interesting, very complicated. But another thing about it is this, our time has a certain set of values. It's not the same set of values as 200 years ago. It is interesting for students to learn about other times. It is vital that they learn about how modern life developed. What were the stages it went through? The world of 1500 before the age of discovery got going is a very different world. If you study that world, you understand a lot about the present because you could just see that as a fundamental shift has gone on. And how did human life go from the world of 1500 to the present day? If you're stuck in the attitudes, of this present time, you miss a great deal. Our value system now has changed. And the development of modern life, how it happened is a core part of any student's education. The student ought to be able to tell you what's characteristic of 1800 that's not true now.

And, and how did it develop from one thing to another? You learn something about the present day, for example, if you do that. All the kids get is a heavy emphasis on 20th century leftist authors. I don't see it give students anything.

The great thing about great literature is it treats an enormous variety of subjects The great authors are wonderful commentators on human life, and they serve up highly interesting analyses. All kinds of different situations and relationships between people.

Larry Bernstein:

One author who has been increasingly used in curriculums are the novels by George Orwell. 1984 was not part of my curriculum but today both Animal Farm and 1984 are taught in almost all classrooms nationwide. Why has Orwell become such an important part of the curriculum?

John Ellis:

He's very relevant right now. The degeneration of language, for example, freedom is slavery, and so on. In modern times, we are seeing that kind of attempt to change language, make it mean the opposite. This latest bill that's been passed, the Inflation Reduction Act, which is nothing to do with inflation. Orwell not only put his finger on certain fundamental things about human life, but he did so in an utterly compelling way. That's the key to it that he was able to put those issues to you in ways you'll never forget. Shakespeare: "brevity is the soul of wit". I mean, you'll never ever need more than those five words to remember that idea. And once you've got it, you never forget it. Orwell had that ability to crystallize issues that are very relevant.

Larry Bernstein:

Recently, the novel Gone with the Wind has been condemned by progressive critics, and the film has been censored by the major streaming firms. Should Gone with the Wind be censored?

John Ellis:

Personally, I think that's a great book. You have a situation where you're dealing with a particular time in history that is not our time. You have to look at as one of those transitional points on the way to modernity. It clearly marks one of the key transition points. The Southern downfall. It is a very, very interesting book from that point of view. I would not have thought that it is wholly out of step with modern values. It's clear that the writer is not sympathizing with that Southern culture, but she's telling a story of how it blossomed and how it fell and that's the story that everyone should be concerned with. And the leftist attempt to simply get rid of anything that's not 21st century values, but it's important for people to see what life was like at the time that that particular novel is set.

Larry Bernstein:

When I graduated from college, my first job was at Salomon Brothers which was the top fixed income trading firm, and when I started working there, Tom Wolfe released his book Bonfire of the Vanities that was loosely based on my employer. Sherman McCoy the protagonist of the novel was a bond salesman. The book was marvelous and was sure it would be taught in classrooms for generations.

I was completely wrong. To my knowledge it isn't taught at all.

John Ellis:

Tom Wolfe was a very popular author. He doesn't make it into college curricular because the framework is largely conservative. Bonfire of the Vanities caricatures on the make bond traders.

So that should actually appeal to people on the left but apparently it never did. People know that Tom Wolfe is a conservative and that probably is what holds him back from point of view of university curriculum.

I was very lucky to be able to meet Tom Wolfe and get together for a chat once. He's a very charming person. I think there's an element of comedy in everything he does.

Larry Bernstein:

Oh, for sure. Take the opening paragraphs of his novel *The Right Stuff*. Tom Wolfe explains how commercial pilots have adopted the Texas drawl of air force test pilot Chuck Yeager, It's funny. Wolfe is incredibly observant about choice of language, what the social X-ray was wearing at the WASP dinner party on the Upper East Side in *Bonfire*, or the wild interactions in the Bronx courtrooms. He nails it, across race, across class. It's truly remarkable. It is hilarious because it's both true and crazy.

John Ellis:

Yeah, that's right that's a very good way of putting it, true and crazy. That's my impression of books like *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Larry Bernstein:

Has the history department been corrupted as well?

John Ellis:

The study of history seems now to be limited to a period. Say 17th century, 18th century, find something that's racist and that's it. That's the whole point of history to find racism all over the place. So, those earlier periods are interesting precisely because that value system we have, which is summed up with *gens una sumus* where we're all one race that value system we have did not operate in the 17th century. No one believed that. So, to go back to the 17th century and find everyone's a racist, well, yeah, actually the pretty much more accurate thing is to say that 20th century values had not yet developed yet. Then the question is, well, what was going on? What were the value systems and why were they different? What was it about those times that made them different, but history now? Well, let me give you an example of a man called Bruce Gilley wrote an article on colonialism. And the point of the article was to say that colonialism has, at the moment, a bad odor, but you actually look at what happened. Quite a lot of good was done by some colonial regimes, not all.

And that the end of colonial regimes, in some cases, usually in the fifties, led to much worse conditions for the people of the country. Zimbabwe is an obvious example. Zimbabwe's absolute catastrophe for the Zimbabweans, when the colonial regime ended. Well, the outcry among historians was staggering. Petitions signed by thousands of people, death threats against the editor of the journal that published that article. The editor of the article was pressed to withdraw it, to say that they disowned it. The rationale for all of the hatred of the article was quite explicitly, they didn't make any bones about it. You mustn't say anything nice about

colonialism. So even if you, you think you could prove that it was rather good that India got railways from the British, democracy, and a common language.

You mustn't say those things, this colonialism is evil. Now I'm not kidding. I wish this were an exaggeration. There's just been another incident like this. The President of the American Historical Association published an editorial in which he said that the 1619 project, the one that tries to nail down the fact that America was born in racism and devoted to racism from the very beginning. The President published an editorial in which he said the 1619 project is not actually historically accurate. There are many mistakes of fact that really do change the picture.

And again, there was an outcry. Nobody questioned the fact that he was factually correct. The outcry was how could you say something that's not politically correct? How, how could you say something that undermines the fact that we live in a racist country? You've got to stick to the narrative. That was the message that this President of the AHA got: stick to the narrative, this is a racist country. Don't say anything that gets in the way of that. And hundreds of angry tweets, the professor whose head of the American Historical Association published a groveling apology for what he said, even though what he said was absolutely true.

I don't think there's a worse lynch mob anywhere than this collective of history professors. If you get out of line and say something nice about colonialism, no matter how limited, or you say something that mitigates in any way, our racist history, you will be subject to an absolute battering from these people. And they won't argue that what you said is untrue. What they'll argue is, you have no right to say anything which interferes with our political narrative. That is literally what they're saying.

Larry Bernstein:

New topic: Shakespeare. We had a book club with James Shapiro who is a Shakespeare scholar at Columbia University to discuss his book entitled 1599 about Shakespeare's most productive year as an author when he wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, and *Hamlet*.

I asked Shapiro, when you look at the next generation of scholars, who do you think is doing impressive scholarship, and he said that sadly that he is the end of the line for Shakespeare scholarship.

And I said, what are you talking about? There must be dozens of great Shakespearean scholars who are 10, 20, 30 years your junior. And he said, no, they're asking ridiculous questions about race, gender and sexual preferences that aren't relevant to Shakespeare's work.

John, what are you advising young graduate students who want to enter academia?

John Ellis:

it's one of the saddest things about this situation that people like him at Columbia, people like me, you see a very bright undergraduate who approaches you and talks about graduate school. Usually, would you be their doctoral advisor. And it puts you in a terrible position because you

know that given the current state of the profession, an intelligent student who wants to work with someone like me or Shapiro has interests and ambitions in the field that will be anathema to the powers that be within the field.

I've had a couple of cases where I've had to say to bright students who would've been those next generation of great scholars, "you better think hard about what you're doing because you'll enter profession that doesn't have the slightest interest in the kinds of things you are interested in. And you better think about whether you can make a life for yourself in that kind of situation."

Larry Bernstein:

From time to time, I read some literary criticism and it's a lot of mumbo jumbo. It's not written for the public. The content is lost to a non-academic audience. To what extent should academics write for a general audience?

John Ellis:

Let's go back 50 years. The academic world was the place where you could discuss issues more broadly and more deeply than you could outside the academy. People outside the academy were not interested in digging deeper into ideas. Now it's the other way around. I mean, if you want to discuss affirmative action, does it work? What are the real effects of affirmative action? I mean, does it actually harm black students or not. Now you can discuss that in the outside world. You can't discuss it on campus. You get shouted down; you'll get called racist.

I just finished two long articles on how to interpret Kafka. 20 years ago, I'd have published that in Modern Language Association of America publications or the German Quarterly, which is a publication of the academic profession. I don't do that anymore. I published those two in the New Criterion, which is a publication of the general public.

I didn't think it was worthwhile publishing for other Kafka scholars, because they're all interested in race and class and gender. And I don't think Kafka is interested in those topics. This was intended to be a real introduction to the world of Kafka and what it really means and how to get hold of those complicated, crazy texts and understand them. The books for general readers are going to be of much greater higher quality than stuff produced in campus journals.

Larry Bernstein:

What is the political variation in the University of California system? And how does this affect students' choice of study?

John Ellis:

I would say personally that the most left campus of the system is probably Berkeley and the least is UCLA. Santa Cruz is probably up there in the top half to the radical left. Berkeley developed a liberal arts focus meant that it was more vulnerable to the developing leftism of the academy than most places because those were the subjects that were first affected.

At Santa Cruz there was beginnings of an enrollment crisis where we weren't getting as many applicants as we should. And we made some efforts to remedy that. I was in the administration at the time. I was Dean of the Graduate School back in the seventies. But slowly the subjects that were initially neglected became stronger and stronger. So, mathematics, physics, earth, sciences, biology, and then engineering became suddenly much stronger than anything else on campus. And students then started to come to the campus for those fields.

Santa Cruz has a special relationship with Silicon Valley, which is only 30 miles away. We have a flood of students wanting to do computer engineering and is changing the face of the campus. And it's causing problems of faculty distribution.

Larry Bernstein:

New Topic: Political Science. I hosted an event at Stanford a couple of years ago, and one of the speakers was a Professor of Political Science. And I asked if political philosophy was an interest of study among his graduate students. He told us that the department used to have two specialists in political philosophy. But when they retired, they were not replaced. Graduate students in political science at Stanford focus their work on statistics and data science, and when they get their degrees, then they go to work for Google and Facebook. What is the state of political science departments?

John Ellis:

Politics is a special case, right? I mean, if the average political science department has something between 10 or 20 professors of political science, now you would think that a competent department has to have all the main political philosophies represented. You got to have a political conservative, leftists, moderates, a Marxist, a Straussian. You cannot teach to a PhD level in politics without a range of voices so that there can be a competent debate within the department. Now, you know, what I'm going to say? You have a faculty that's a hundred percent radical left, not just left, radical left. And I make no bones about this, there is no way you can deny it. That is a totally incompetent department. If I had my way, I'd say to that department, were shutting you down. You're not competent to teach your field. So, what's actually happening there in Stanford is students are bypassing political science. What they're doing is they're going into, as you say, data science fields. They're going to become statisticians, within the political social science framework, which is complete abdication of what political PhDs used to be about.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session on a note of optimism, John, what are you optimistic about?

John Ellis:

Well, I'm optimistic about America. It's the best equipped country to withstand these problems. What we are going to need is for the public to rise up and say this is not what we pay for. We do not give you four years of our students lives and hundreds of thousand bucks to do this Mickey Mouse radical leftist nonsense. And if you're going to do this, we're going to withdraw

our money. No more tuition payments, no more taxation payments to support state universities until you stop this idiocy.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks John. I now want to go back and replay excerpts from our What Happens Next archives. These are our greatest hits. I chose these particular clips because they expand on the ideas expressed by John in his talk today.

We are going to start with Brown literature professor Arnold Weinstein who spoke about the increasing opposition to teaching Huck Finn. Arnold.

Arnold Weinstein:

Huckleberry Finn has always been controversial from the get go. When it was published in the 1880s, it was infamously rejected at the Concord Public Library. And the reason they turned it down is that they thought the book was coarse, and they called this language, I quote, "the various trash," but there was no mention of the N-word. Twain was delighted with this bad press and he thought it would sell some more copies.

Throughout my whole career, the book has been controversial. Teachers and administrators and students have been stung by its treatment of race.

Jim has been thought one dimensional and from a literary point of view, the entire last third of the novel is thought to be botched. It turns into a carnival of disguises and tricks and fun and games as if Tom Sawyer had hijacked the book, so that the moral plot, the freeing Jim gets lost sight of and loses authority. One reason that's worth bearing in mind is because today the book is in even more trouble because of the N-word, it's all over the book. Some of my best students have told me, "I can't quote this word. I'm not allowed to even when teaching it." And my own fear is that once we start sanitizing books, we're not all that far away from burning them.

Twain published the book in the 1880s, the timeframe within the novel is in the 1840s. And that matters because in the 1840s, there's been no Civil War, no Abraham Lincoln, no emancipation proclamation. Slavery has not yet been adjudicated. The second piece is Twain's stroke of genius, is to entrust the story to Huck Finn, who was a kid from the wrong side of the tracks, unschooled, with no cultural capital. He's not a preacher, he's not an abolitionist, he's not a university student, he's not a progressive.

We need to read this book and to see that Huck Finn is barometric, he's exemplary of his moment. He is serenely racist as are many of the other characters in the novel. There's a line in the book, where a Huck improvising, as he always does, is asked why he was late by his Aunt Sally. And he explains that there had been an accident on the steamboat. I quote, "We blowed out a cylinder head." Her answer, "Good gracious, anybody hurt?" He says, "No, killed an N-word." She answers "Well, it's lucky because sometimes people do get hurt." So, these are the ways in which Twain is giving us the words of the tribe as it were, about the, serenely racist views of that moment and culture in Missouri and places like that.

Twain came to the view that if you put this young boy on a raft in the Mississippi with an older man, escaped black slave named Jim, you'll get magic. It's only on the raft that Huck comes to realize that Jim is real, that he's a human. Another line that's worth quoting is, "That I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for theirs. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." And it's amazing to me that many cultural theorists would have picked up on that today, that word, natural, which one of the lessons in our time, many times is that natural, once you start to examine, it means cultural and means a whole set of assumptions that are anything but natural.

The book offers us a Huck who was an orphan because who's been cared for, but never been loved, which is what he experiences on the raft. And the pinnacle moment of the novel is when Huck, who is totally beset by a bad conscience, because he's aiding an escaped slave, he writes to Ms. Watson, the owner, that he knows where Jim is. And then he finds to his amazement that he cannot send the letter quote, "All right then, I'll go to hell." And tore it up. So, this view of the novel, what I'm trying to convey, is that it's filled with rich things that I think are the kind of testimony of literature.

Most readers sense that in any poetic or spiritual sense, that the real father that a Huck has is Jim. That would be the love that they're not speaking its name at that moment, it couldn't have been rationally understood that way, and yet it's what the moral truth of the book is. Huck's moral education is among the most beautiful things in American literature.

So that's the way I'd close this presentation. The N-word, I heard it every day in Memphis, where I grew up, in the forties and fifties. I'm offering a simplistic piece of advice, our country, could be worse than to reread Huckleberry Finn or read it because we still need to learn as a society when Huck learned that Jim is real and he is a human being and that's still controversial.

Larry Bernstein:

Thank you, Arnold. There are many school districts that will not teach Huck Finn. Can we replace it effectively with another one of Twain's books? Or should we simply choose a different author from American literature that covers a similar message?

Arnold Weinstein:

Canon formation has always been a work in flux. The book was very important for several generations of literature professors and students. One should perhaps be more cautious in exiling people, dead white males or whatever group.

But we need to work harder to teach people to be more discerning readers. My view is, what's controversial about this book is the reason why it needs to be read.

There's a large chunk of this country that needs to read this book and that because something offends, is not a reason to remove it. On the contrary, it's a reason to hold on to it and to ask why does it offend? We haven't resolved these issues. They are still very sensitive and explosive issues in American society.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do you think that specific literary works deserve to be in the canon?

Arnold Weinstein:

People think the great books are just the white male canon, but many of the great books are nothing but trouble. They're multi-perspective about fault lines in the cultures that they come from. Art itself is elastic. Virginia Woolf can create male characters who are very interesting, Hemingway can create female characters and William Faulkner can imagine Black characters.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think one reason there's resistance to teaching Huck Finn is that teachers fear that students will face difficulty reading the book because of Twain's use of dialects and language?

Arnold Weinstein:

That's a marvelous question and it's an uncomfortable one, because it's so easy to say you just like a book for all kinds of ideological reasons. It's much harder to admit that you don't like the book because you can't read it, you can't understand it, you can't negotiate his language. Twain was quite proud of the number of dialects, the enormous amount of research he had done to put into that book and my students, they simply have a great deal of trouble negotiating sentence by sentence, what's in the book. So, it has its own can of worms because people don't want to say that's the problem, it's easier to lay the blame on positions that you disagree with.

Larry Bernstein:

In forming a national curriculum, is it important that books represent the diversity of the country? For example, some educators argue that we need to hear more voices.

Arnold Weinstein:

The purposes of education are for creating a populace or a comity where there are shared communication and that's more important than insisting on quality. I also feel that the core of my field runs the risk of it is qualitative.

That great art is great. Not only because it may help bind a culture together, particularly a difficult culture like America, which has so much diversity, but also because of what it says to us about being alive and having a brain and a heart and all of these old-fashioned things that the qualitative argument addresses. And it's a conundrum to have a simplistic book, so that they know something about that group, but it's also a risky proposition.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks Arnold. Our next speaker is David Grazian who is a Professor of Sociology at UPenn. David is both a friend and has been my teacher. I've asked David to discuss the continuing relevance of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

David Grazian:

As a teenager growing up in the New York suburbs during the 1980s, my vision of the city was deeply colored by the incendiary news coverage on local TV and the tabloid papers my father brought home, the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*. Their headlines screamed of junk bond kings, white-collar crime, crooked politicians, opportunistic community leaders, real estate moguls, fears of street and subway muggings, even scarier vigilantes, and all this against a backdrop of racial strife in the city. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, published in 1987, author Tom Wolfe spins these headlines into laugh-out-loud satire, turning up the panic of the city to eleven. There are few heroes in *Bonfire*, with everyone cynically on the take, out for themselves.

Most of all, the city is divided by class. There are the haves, like bond salesman, Yale man, and “Master of the Universe” Sherman McCoy; his wife Judy, who got their Park Avenue co-op apartment featured in *Architectural Digest*; McCoy’s seductive mistress, Maria Ruskin; and the rich ladies Wolfe calls “social x-rays” on account of their slim bodies, so thin “you can see lamplight through their bones.” Then there are the have-nots, people of color who fill the city’s jails and courthouses, and heed the leadership of a corrupt Black power broker deliciously named Reverend Bacon who exploits them for private gain.

And then finally there are the working-stiffs in the middle. There’s Peter Fallow, a British alcoholic and parasitic reporter who writes for the *New York City Light*, a thinly-veiled stand-in for the *New York Post*; and Larry Kramer, an assistant district attorney commuting by subway from Manhattan to an underpaid job out in the Bronx. These characters all converge around a singular event that drives the narrative of the novel—a vehicular incident in a Bronx ghetto neighborhood from which McCoy and his mistress flee after having possibly run over a Black teenage boy with McCoy’s \$48,000 Mercedes sports roadster.

Reading *Bonfire* more than thirty years after its 1987 publication, one is struck first by how this book is as much about New York City as it is about any of its cringeworthy characters; and one is then consequently struck by how much New York no longer looks the way it is depicted in the novel, and how much the city has changed in the intervening years. Most apparently, the crime rate has dramatically sunk—for instance, in 1987 there were 1,672 murders in New York; thirty years later, that figure had dropped to only 292 murders. With the crime drop came the renewal of Times Square and gentrification of Harlem, Alphabet City, and the outer boroughs, including many parts of the South Bronx where *Bonfire* takes place.

Much else has also changed. The aristocratic world of high finance where McCoy works, a patrician investment-banking firm dubbed Pierce & Pierce where McCoy gets his loafers shined at his desk, has been replaced by the relative meritocracy represented by today’s hedge funds, day traders, and the physicists and engineers who perfect their algorithms. Meanwhile, many of the decade’s most controversial figures whose exploits are thinly-masked in the book have been rehabilitated in the new millennium, most famously race-card provocateur-turned MSNBC anchor Al Sharpton. (Even the MTA subways are cleaner now, which hopefully will remain the

case after Covid.) In fact, the New York caricatured in *Bonfire* may seem as outdated as Tom Wolfe's white three-piece suits and creamy silk ties.

Yet if the novel still resonates with readers it's due to Wolfe's attention to the all-too-human ways his class-conscious New Yorkers experience status envy as an unavoidable fact of life. Indeed, New York may have enjoyed a transformation from Gotham to Disneyworld—or from a naked city of shadowy noir to a giant entertainment free-for-all—but its class and racial cleavages still remain, even among the haves and the top 0.1%—call them the have-a-whole-lot-mores. The married men in the novel have elaborate sexual fantasies about women other than their wives, or even their mistresses, for that matter. Peter Fallow spends his late nights carousing over cocktails and chicken paillard at bistros where he prays someone else will pick up his tab. Even Sherman McCoy, a so-called Master of the Universe, frets not only over his highly leveraged apartment, advancing balloon payments, and his cheating heart, but his inability to afford to keep a limousine and driver in the city while only making a million dollars a year. Then again, perhaps only Wolfe could make the reader feel sorry for such sad saps.

Larry Bernstein:

Can you teach *Bonfire of the Vanities* in a class at Penn, in a world where they're censoring Dr. Seuss?

David Grazian:

I don't think so. I mean the truth is, for all of Tom Wolfe's talents, he's never really portrayed African-American characters all that well. Like in *Radical Chic*. The book is a sprawling novel, almost 700 pages. There's not a single relatable female character. And it's about a New York City that doesn't entirely exist anymore. Whereas if we had an updated version of this kind of a book about the city as it exists today, I think it could be taught very well in schools.

In the urban studies program at Penn, we have a course on the city. And the primary text for that course is the five-season show *The Wire*, which takes place in Baltimore. And like Tom Wolfe's novel, is the sprawling depiction of the city with interlocking characters. And there's an entire season devoted to corruption in politics, there's an entire season devoted to corruption in journalism. *The Wire* captures race relations and racial politics in Baltimore. *The Wire* works perfectly as a text for a class in a way that *Bonfire of the Vanities* seems dated and out of touch.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you use literature and film to teach sociology?

David Grazian:

This was something that was much more popular in the 1950s and 1960s, in part, because sociologists were considered public intellectuals in midcentury America than they are today. And scholars like C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman, David Riesman wrote books that were best-sellers read by large swaths of the population. These were real intellectual figures that could pull from fiction to illuminate things that we observe in everyday life. *Bonfire of the Vanities* feels like sociology because he's reporting observations about everyday life.

Larry Bernstein:

For a generation, white Democratic politicians have been embarrassed by the number of black men that are incarcerated, and for political purposes, they are desperate to convict a Great White Defendant like Sherman McCoy, who is right out of central casting.

David Grazian:

The desire to take down the Great White Defendant is an exception that proves the rule. The reason they had to take down Sherman McCoy is to cover up the everyday systematic racism that the criminal justice system inflicts on Latino and Black populations on a daily basis. And Sherman McCoy becomes a useful scapegoat in a politically volatile climate.

Larry Bernstein:

You said Wolfe does a poor job with developing African American characters. but the Reverend Bacon character is wonderfully complex. He is a black preacher and political organizer on the one hand, but he also manages a municipal bond underwriting business, an insurance company, and seems as facile in an upscale NYC restaurant and successfully manages a complex public relations hit job on McCoy. What is it about Reverend Bacon that you think is problematic?

David Grazian:

It is the black English vernacular that comes through in the very first scene, which is a jarring way to start the book in a demonstration that erupts during a political speech. If a faculty member in urban studies wanted to teach this at Penn, I certainly wouldn't stop them. I just simply wouldn't teach it myself. It's not really where my students are at either, they're really looking for a more diverse wide variety of voices that speak to them, and I just don't see this as the kind of book that speaks to the millennial generation of today's college students. Particularly given how many of those students have been moved by the Black Lives Matter social movement.

Larry Bernstein:

Wolfe wrote a book entitled *New Journalism* which encourages journalists to be creative and not be beholden to verifiable facts. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, uses literary license to make up what the killers were thinking during the bloody acts, and he is just making it up. He's applying literary techniques with journalism.

In *Bonfire*, Wolfe mimics journalism and infuses it back into literature.

David Grazian:

What he is doing is he's infusing sociological ethnography with art, and I wish sociologists were trained and wanted to do better. We might be a part of the public conversation if we did.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks David. We now move to our final speaker Patrick Allitt who is a Professor History at Emory University and a very good personal friend of mine. Patrick has spoken on this podcast

numerous times. He is back to discuss why George Orwell is loved by both the left and the right and his work is increasingly read and is a part of the American literary curriculum.

Patrick Allitt:

Thanks very much, Larry. George Orwell had the bad luck to become famous only at the very end of his life. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, came out in June of 1949, and he died the following January aged just 46. Since then, his reputation has risen steadily, and people all over the world invoke his name to justify themselves and to criticize their opponents. That's unusual. Most writers, especially writers on controversial issues of politics and economics, draw as much blame as praise. Think about Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes. Each of them has plenty of admirers, but many fierce critics too.

By contrast, there are no outspoken anti-Orwellians. Most people on the political left claim Orwell as one of their own. So, they should because Orwell was a democratic socialist who thought capitalism was a dysfunctional system dedicated to preserving social injustice and inequality.

Orwell fought for the Spanish Republic during Spain's civil war in the late 1930s after enlisting in a far-left anarchist militia group. During World War II, he wrote that Britain could only win the war if it underwent an internal socialist revolution. But during the Cold War in the years just after his death, Orwell became almost equally popular on the political right. This was because his two most famous books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, were artful denunciations of communism.

During the Cold War, communism was the great enemy, and *Animal Farm*, a book even middle schoolers could enjoy, simultaneously satirized it. Even after the Cold War, Orwell remained popular on the right because his works could be used to criticize big government. People aware of electronic surveillance compare their situation to that of Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who knows always that Big Brother is watching you. Conspiracy theorists who fear the deep state also evoke the menacing image of Big Brother.

There's a lot more to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than just anti-communism. It's also a book about standing up for the truth and resisting peer pressure. Winston Smith, the central character, tries to do just that. After his arrest, his interrogator, O'Brien, tells him that two plus two can make five if the regime says so. Smith realizes that he can only preserve his dignity and his humanity if he continues to believe that two and two make four and only four.

It's a book about the emotional honesty, about refusing to believe something or to love something out of fear or expediency. The disheartening end comes when Winston Smith can no longer hold out against the barrage of falsehood and propaganda and is forced to admit to himself that he loves Big Brother. The book ends, therefore, in failure, but readers honor Winston, the struggling as long as he did to uphold truth.

George Orwell didn't go to college, and one of the pleasures of reading his work is his constant denigration of professional intellectuals. He thought of them as bloodless, cold, and shallow, willing to rely on theory instead of actual experience. His most severe scorn was reserved for British intellectuals who joined the communist party and defended Stalin's show trials.

By contrast, he had faith in the common decency and basic good sense of ordinary people. He wrote affectionate portraits of men and women who did hard jobs like the coal blackened miners in his Depression-era book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In one of his most memorable and paradoxical phrases, he called coal "the filthy heart of civilization."

Among the first American critics to realize Orwell's merits was Lionel Trilling, who taught English literature at Columbia University in the 1940s and '50s. In an introduction to one of Orwell's books, Trilling wrote that, "If we ask what Orwell stands for, the answer is the virtue of not being a genius of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple direct undeceived intelligence and the respect for the powers one does have and the work one undertakes to do." I think that's absolutely right, and it is partly why Orwell is as enjoyable and informative now as he was when his books and essays were fresh off the press.

Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, what makes Orwell's writing so good. Why can a child comprehend it and enjoy it so much?

Patrick Allitt:

He's particularly strong at depicting characters. He makes the character seem incredibly vulnerable and trying to hang on to a basic sense of decency in the face of authorities, which are going to be too strong for him.

There's a great moment when Winston Smith is being prepared for torture by O'Brien when he thinks, "Surely, this regime justifies itself according to some higher criteria like the triumph of the proletariat," but O'Brien says, "Oh, no, we're just doing it for power itself." That's a great moment where Orwell blows the lid off the pretensions of regimes to say, "Eventually, there's going to be one so cynical and so power hungry, it's not even going to pretend that it's interested in some higher principle."

Larry Bernstein:

How about the dramatic scene set in Room 101. The regime always figures out exactly what torture frightens us the most. For Winston Smith, it was a fear of a rat in a cage eating through his stomach. Each of us has these specific fears, and Orwell uniquely captures that feeling and drives it home. *1984* in some ways belongs in the horror genre.

Patrick Allitt:

That's right. I think there was quite a lot of early 20th century literature about heroic resistance to torture and heroic resistance to psychological manipulation. Orwell takes the more realistic

view of saying, "No, no. Once the tortures have worked out what we fear most, we're going to be absolutely incapable of holding out."

Julia, the woman he loves, instantly gives him away when she's tortured by what she fears most. Similarly, his knowledge that the rats might gnaw at his face, he simply hasn't got the resourcefulness to resist it. I think that's a realistic appreciation of the power of totalitarian torturers.

Larry Bernstein:

After each show trial, the regime removes the deceased from history. They'll edit the individual from old newspaper archives as well as from photographs. It would be as if the individual never existed. What do you make of this Orwellian idea and its potential application given improving technology?

Patrick Allitt:

When the Soviet Union wanted to get rid of the memory of Trotsky, it did what we'd regard as incredibly primitive jobs of removing his face from the photographs. The growing sophistication of things like photoshopping pictures today makes it incomparably more difficult for us to know what's fake and what's real, and obviously, internet interference, can be done very effectively. We've also seen demonstrations of the power that the technology companies have, Trump was thrown off Twitter. There's no question that shows the great political power that Twitter has. When regimes are themselves running sophisticated technology organizations that might reasonably be described as Orwellian.

Back in Nixon's day, Press Secretary Ron Ziegler made a statement, which was then shown to be untrue. Then he said something like, "Oh, that statement is no longer operative." In other words, "I was lying, but now I know I can't give you that line anymore, so now I'm going to give you another one." Orwell was very good at foreseeing some of the ways in which manipulation of technology adds to the power of regimes.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to John Ellis, Arnold Weinstein, David Grazian, and Patrick Allitt for joining us today. That ends this session.

If you missed last week's podcast, check it out. It was the second highest downloaded episode in the history of What Happens Next. Our speaker was Richard Fontaine from The Center for a New American Security and he led a war game to evaluate a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan. On this episode, we discuss the risk of ever-increasing escalation after China attacked the mainland US, destroying Pearl Harbor, San Diego, LA and San Francisco. Don't even get me started on China's use of a nuclear weapon that emphasized the seriousness of the Chinese intentions.

In this provocative episode you will also hear from Admiral James Stavridis, Navy War College strategist James Holmes, Daniel Markey from Johns Hopkins and Rory Medcalf who runs the National Security College at the Australian National University.

I would like to make a plug for next week's show.

The topic will be internships. Internships are a very big deal for high school and college kids to be introduced to the adult world. It is fabulous for skill building as well as self-discovery. We will discuss the benefits of internships with Jay Greene from the Heritage Foundation as well as 8 of my interns on What Happens Next. I want to explore how to find the right internship for a young person, what to get out of the experience, and for the employers how to design the program so that it is fulfilling for the intern.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.