

## **What Happens Next – Sunday March 14, 2021**

### **Future of War, COVID Variants, Farm to Table (NOT), Citizenship, and Dummies**

#### **Mark Bauerlein QA**

Larry Bernstein:

We had Don Hirsch on What Happens Next a couple of weeks ago, and he was speaking about the importance of learning cultural literacy, to all read the same books, to be exposed to one American culture, and that the progressive movement is opposed to that. Do you think that this undermining of cultural literacy is part of your story, or do you think it has more to do with screen time?

Mark Bauerlein:

It is most definitely part of the story. I should say, I'm on the board of the Core Knowledge Foundation, which is Don Hirsch's education organization. Let's just talk about multiculturalism. Multiculturalism promised to be, in the 1980s, a rich diversification of our sense of the past. That we would read more novels by women and by people of color. That we would understand the perspectives of historical events from the victims, not just the conquerors. And that this again, would be a historiographical project that would give people again, a fuller, richer sense of the past. Well, multiculturalism in practice is actually an eradication of a sense of any past. It is completely present oriented, and it is focused on future change. It is not about an in-depth study of the past. I've been part of many debates over this, I've been in many formations of standards in the literary canon, working with states and projects like Common Core and with the College Board.

And it is very clear now that students who graduate from high school don't know anything more about African-American literature than they did 30 years ago. In fact, I would say they know less. And what does this mean in terms of the youth? It means you're coming into the world, you're coming into a universe, and the past offers nothing. In fact, the past is a time of guilt. The past is a time of injustice. Your parents and grandparents belonged to a world that wasn't fair. This is a terrible thing to give young people, it sort of says, you're on your own. There is no legacy that can inspire you. There is no heroism in the past on which you can build your own character. It's all future oriented. It's utopian. It is progressivist. And the internet has steered into this by giving them a totally present oriented world of social contact with one another, it only aggravated the elimination of the voices of the dead in these young people's lives.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that kids don't read and particularly they don't really literature once they got out of school. As an English professor, why do you think that reading literature will help solve some of these problems like emotional dysfunction, suicide, anxiety, reductions in medication, et cetera, and increase happiness?

Mark Bauerlein:

Well, if you talk to a reader, those few who are left and the many who were there in earlier times, in the 1960s, and '70s, when the baby boomers hit college campuses, English was one of the most popular majors on campus. I mean, it got about one out of 12 college students graduates, the four-year colleges, majored in English. Now one reason was they came into college from high school, having had a high school English teacher who had them read Hemingway, and the guys loved Hemingway. The girls read Jane Austin and they found Elizabeth Bennett in Jane Austin, a role model. Gone with The Wind, many young women found that Scarlett O'Hara was a role model, an inspiring character for them. So, the novels actually played an important mode of moral instruction for young people. Young people learned how to be young adults, how to be women and men by reading novels, they learned about the nature of people, they started to understand human motives as a complicated phenomenon.

What looks like a villain, isn't always a villain. Some dumb thing that someone does actually could have a very complicated history to it. And novels were particularly good at exploring human motives in that way. And this was the mode of identification and again, moral instruction that was very important for young people, as they started thinking outside the home, beyond their own families. And when they stopped reading, what did they replace it with? These stupid movies that Hollywood gives them now, these idiotic Marvel superhero movies, is that supposed to replace Phillip Marlowe? I mean, is that supposed to replace Gatsby and understanding what an adult sense of things is about? No, no. This is a terrible decline. And our culture is in the midst of the rising stupidity and vulgarity. It's everywhere.

You go ahead and do a Lexile score of the script of a current Hollywood film versus the script of a Hollywood film in 1973, you will see a sharp decline. Look at the magazine, I mean, everything you see. I mean, you can't even turn on the TV and watch the commercials, you say, "Why are they showing people being so stupid?" But this is the world, this is the media immersion that young people have today. And remember, when you're 17 years old, they're communicating with other 17-year-olds all the time now. Peer pressure has never been so high. Peer imitation has never been so high as it is now. And we've got to have more adult intervention to show them how to grow up. This is the problem for boys who grew up without fathers in particular, this is a real problem, they take their lessons in manhood from one another, and that's not good.

Larry Bernstein:

We had some discussions in the last few weeks, we heard from Arnold Weinstein at Brown, he discussed the censoring of Huckleberry Finn, and no longer in the syllabus. Elizabeth Outka from the University of Richmond, when I mentioned Gone with The Wind, she said that book could not be taught in American classrooms today. And then last week, David Grazian said that he would not teach Bonfire of the Vanities because of the use of certain racial dialects. What are your thoughts on the censoring of certain materials from the classroom? Don Hirsch didn't

really seem to care if Huckleberry Finn was eliminated, as long as we all found another text to read that was similar, and we could have a common cultural literacy. What is your view on censoring which books to be taught in American classrooms?

Mark Bauerlein:

Well, I'm always suspicious of the process and when you see Huck Finn under the ax, you got to wonder, okay, what is the motivation here? What are we trying to protect people from? This to me is sensitivity taken way too far. And it also is to forget that a lot of arts, a lot of literature, music, is just as prone to bad ideas and bad images and bad feelings, as human beings are. I mean, one of the masterpieces of the silent era is D. W. Griffith, the Birth of a Nation. What Griffith did there is technically and aesthetically spectacular. He is one of the great pioneers, and yet the film has an abominable moral message. The nation, which is celebrated there, is the Ku Klux Klan, which is founded right after the war in 1865, it was abolished a few years later, it didn't come back until 1915.

But the distinction between the aesthetic value and moral meaning is something that has to be respected, and we don't want to deprive young people of aesthetic brilliance because there could be bad moral messages here. A year later, Griffith did a film called Intolerance, which is the exact opposite message of racism and Negrophobia, as it was called back then. So, the point, again, it's tricky, it's not like I'm going to stand or fall on, Huck Finn, you must teach Huck Finn. No, but what I will stand or fall on is the subjugation of aesthetic and technical mastery, to moral and political dogmas. I think Richard Wagner is one of the great geniuses of music and he's going to be around forever, but he was a horrible person and there are some bad messages in that music, so be it.

In my experience, people call for the censoring or the judgment of the fitness of things, are very often the very last people you want to have that power.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think about the idea that every generation thinks the next generation is going down the wrong path? Why do you think that you are just not an angry old man complaining about the next generation? Why do you think this older generation's attack is more legitimate than the past?

Mark Bauerlein:

Well, Larry, I am a grumpy old man.

Larry Bernstein:

I don't doubt it.

Mark Bauerlein:

In fact, this is the responsibility of the elders in any society, to chastise the young. They're adolescents, they're going to be adolescents and they need to be told, "Knock it off, straighten up, fly right." And that's a responsibility the elders have now. It is also the responsibility of the young to fight back and say, "Oh, there's stuff going on that you don't understand. You're a little behind the times on things happening." Some tension between the generations is a healthy thing for a society. We are now in a condition where all the elders and the education and cultural sphere, because they're so afraid of sounding old fashioned or conservative or reactionary, or get off my lawn types, they want to be hip to all the new things. They don't want to criticize the young for their cultural choices, their leisure habits.

That's one problem on the side of the elders. That's why I have one chapter in *The Dumbest Generation* was called, the betrayal of the mentors. A book I have coming out begins with the sentence, what have we done to them? So, the problem with the young right now is you guys are irrelevant, we don't even bother debating. I mean, in the '60s with the youth movement, a guy like Tom Hayden, the head of SDS in the early '60s, they couldn't stop talking about the elders. They were fixated on all the things the elders were wrong about. The millennials, they're not fixated on what the elders were wrong, they just say, "You're irrelevant. You're old. You don't apply anymore." This is a very unhealthy condition.

Now for those who say, "Ah, this is just the old thing. They complained about Elvis and comic books too." I would say, wait a minute, weren't you guys who said that the digital age is a revolution, weren't you guys claiming that the advent of the iPhone is the equivalent of Gutenberg? Isn't this the electronic word, something on the order of the very invention of writing? And now when people like me, a cultural, conservative and education conservative as Don Hirsch is as well, Don's a liberal Democrat, but an education conservative, he calls himself that. So, when people like us say, 'Whoa, wait a minute. What are you doing here? Slow down.

This is bad. You can't dispense with the path like this." You claim your radical revolutionaries and then when we say, "Whoa," you say, "Lighten up, come on," sorry guys, you can't have it both ways.

Larry Bernstein:

You talk about the role of Facebook, social media, texting between kids, as being very problematic. Is there anything we can do about it or has that train left the station?

Mark Bauerlein:

Larry, it's all over. It's the decline of Western civilization, we're done. The life of the mind, the induction of the rising generation into the death that has been fought and said, we had 2000 years of that, it was a pretty good run. The cultivation of humanities, that wasn't bad. But there is regress as well as progress and we're hitting a dark age and the main characteristic of this

dark age is it's so bright, it's so loud, it's so nonstop. I wish we could have a little silence and quietude and dark for a little while, so that people might be able to contemplate. We might be able to think, I've got to go to the airport in a few minutes, and I'm going to go to that airport and there is not going to be a single quiet spot in that entire airport. There will be nowhere where there isn't crappy pop music playing, where CNN isn't blathering on a screen, the whole thing.

Larry Bernstein:

You mention religion as being on the decline and maybe a causality of why we're finding our lives less meaningful. Do you see any way that that decline in religiosity and organized religion will turn around? And I mean, also in Europe, it's much worse than in the United States, and we remain the most religious country. How do you think about the role of religion in this story?

Mark Bauerlein:

Well, Larry, organized religion is going down. The phenomenon of the nones, N-O-N-E-S, keeps rising. But Larry religiosity is up, woke, black lives matter, Antifa, racial justice, social justice, these are religious substitutes. They have dogmas and they are applied with all the ferocity of a 17th century Puritan. This is what happens to people when you take away from them any transcendent horizon, when you don't give them an organized state, when you don't provide for them a model of history. Christianity has a model of history, it has beginning, a middle and an end. Marxism has a model of history too, it's teleillogical just as much. And we see the return of socialism taking place. Although it's not unthought out socialism, this is a place for millennials to find a meaning in life, to find a purpose to which they might commit themselves, something that would give a moral structure to their daily activities.

So the fervor is out there, I think it is going in a very, very bad direction. I mean, they are very much in favor of cancel culture. Millennials show much higher rates of being in favor of that than older age groups. It is very much of a youth inspired phenomenon and it's dangerous.