

PRIMARY SOURCES IN THE TEACHING OF HISTORY:  
THE WESTERN CIVILIZATION PROGRAM AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

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For over four decades large numbers of undergraduates at the University of Kansas have had to pass through the Western Civilization requirement on their way to the baccalaureate degree. For some it has been one of the most important and lasting educational experiences of their university years, for others a necessary but inscrutable evil to be endured and survived, and doubtless for most something in between.

Western Civilization is a general education requirement for students in all B.A. and B.G.S. and most B.S. degree programs in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the program's academic "home"). It is also required of all students in the Schools of Journalism and Social Welfare. Unlike Western Civilization programs at many colleges and universities, which are often Western history survey courses, KU's program has always been an independent, interdisciplinary "great books and ideas" course sequence organized around direct student encounter with and discussion of some of the influential and representative writings of the Western intellectual tradition. The two-semester, six-hour course sequence begins with classic works from ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel and comes down to the present. For many years the "Western Civ" readings have provided a common core of primary texts shared by large numbers of KU students.

In a time of educational specialization and career preoccupation, Western Civilization ideally offers KU students an integrative dimension of their educational experience. They examine some of the chief questions and answers in the Western world regarding broad and basic human issues. Specifically, our program is organized around four themes: (1) the problem of human nature; (2) the question of individual liberty; (3) the connections between science and religion, or more generally between knowledge and values; and (4) the relationships among the individual, society, and the state. Our hope is that what students learn in "Western Civ" helps them to relate their varied fields of study to a common tradition, to see connections among ideas otherwise isolated from one another. At perhaps the deepest level we intend it to be, at least for our American students, a basic exercise in historical, cultural, and intellectual self-discovery, a "roots" exposure to the ideas and ideals that have shaped them and their world.

A committee of faculty from various departments and schools established KU's Western Civilization Program in 1945. That was an auspicious year, and the faculty founders explicitly designed the program to be an educational response to the repeated crises that had shaken the foundations of Western civilization in the twentieth century. In the words of the program's original charter, they believed that the university's special role was to bring "this situation and its problems more consciously to the minds of students today, that they may be ready to live constructively in a complex world tomorrow." To that end the goals of the program were the study of the origins and development of the ideas and values of Western civilization through examination of primary sources, in the hope that students would become better informed about the roots and development of both democracy and totalitarianism in the West and begin to develop a global outlook. These foundations

bequeathed to the Western Civilization Program a certain emphasis on writings on political topics, especially in the second semester's reading.

"Western Civ" at the University of Kansas was originally designed as an independent reading program, not a regular course sequence. Students were given the list of primary readings and a guide to the readings called the *Student's Manual*. The *Manual* of background essays is still used, having gone through many revisions and editions. Although students were supposed to meet regularly with a faculty member or with senior or graduate student "proctors" in a tutorial setting, they were essentially on their own. In the 1950s weekly small-group discussion sections were established to provide students with more assistance and the opportunity for peer exchange, and that remained the way in which most students enrolled in the program until the fall of 1987. Until 1978 the only way students could complete the Western Civilization requirement was to pass a comprehensive examination over the readings at some point before graduation.

Apart from the half-time faculty director, the budgeted Western Civilization teaching staff was until 1987 made up entirely of able graduate teaching assistants from a wide variety of departments and schools. Over the years faculty were involved on a voluntary basis, usually teaching an honors discussion section as a course overload. This has been a distinctive "Western Civ" tradition at KU. Even chancellors and other central administrators and deans regularly used to teach a section, and there are KU faculty who have done so for ten and even twenty years. Besides faculty, academically qualified persons in the community with close ties to KU have also taught in the program over the years, including in earlier years a local physician and until recently one of our state legislators.

The Western Civilization Advisory Committee spent three years (1984-87) designing and implementing changes intended to strengthen the program. In 1985 we received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities' Division of Education that made it possible. We undertook the changes in concert with reforms of the general education requirements in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which went into effect in the fall of 1987.

The changes we designed for "Western Civ" were a response to two widespread and long-standing concerns: (1) the lack of regularized, compensated faculty involvement in the program, and (2) what appeared to be a decline in student historical knowledge and reading ability in more recent years. Enrollment is no longer open to freshmen except members of the honors program. Given the demanding nature of the Western Civilization readings, we believe that most students are better equipped to understand them with at least a year of college behind them. All students taking Western Civilization are now required to attend two background lectures each week in addition to their small-group discussion sections. The background lectures are designed to provide both historical context and specific guidance to the readings.

Central to our new structure are six KU faculty from various departments and schools appointed to teach half-time in Western Civilization for a renewal period of two years. In two teams of three each, they teach two large honors lecture sections twice a week, and each also leads two small honors discussion sections. Non-honors students are in medium-size (35 students) lecture-discussion sections mostly taught by experienced GTAs lecturing twice a week and dividing the class into small groups for discussion the third period.

Other changes we have undertaken, partly with grant assistance, include a substantial review of the program readings, a textbook to replace the *Student's Manual*, working closely with the university's Writing Center to develop pedagogically useful writing assignments, the cataloging and acquisition of good audio-visual resources for the lecture periods, a program informational brochure, identification of courses in other departments that might be especially useful as background to or in conjunction with Western Civilization, a program lecture series and annual distinguished lectureship, a newsletter, and seminars for high school teachers in Kansas to encourage emphasis on the reading and conceptual analysis of primary texts and the study of world and European history.

Easily the most difficult and controversial aspect of KU's Western Civilization Program is the list of primary source readings. Constructing a list of "great writings" of the Western world from ancient times to the present for twenty-six weeks of readings is excruciatingly difficult, and trying to take seriously a wide range of opinions and suggestions, as I believe we have really tried to do over the years, is bewildering. The most common complaint is that there is too much political theory; others think there is too much religion, particularly in the first semester; still others lament that there is not enough on science; another familiar criticism is that there are not enough great works of literature and nothing from the arts. We have a long tradition of maximal staff participation in the readings evaluation and revision process, in which our large GTA staff, the advisory committee, and now the regular faculty are all involved. The variety and opposition of opinions among us is a microcosm of the general diversity of opinions around the university. Developing and revising a reading list for a program like ours involves the most fundamental questions about the nature of the program: What counts as "Western"? On what basis do we decide who and what are most "important" and "influential" among the large number of authors and texts from which we might choose? Since a one-year program must be highly selective, how broad can it try to be without becoming fragmentary and incoherent? If instead it has a focus, what should it be--political, philosophical, literary, or something else? What should the "Western Civ" readings do that nothing else in the students' curriculum does, and what will be of the most long-term value to them? Since the aim is to read classic works, how can we justify including twentieth-century authors whose writings have not stood the test of time?

At the conclusion of its year-long review of the Western Civilization Program during academic year 1984-85, the program advisory committee drew up a "Statement of Principles" to serve as guidelines to the changes upon which we were embarking. With regard to the primary source readings, the committee stated: "Efforts should be made to read more classics in their entirety, even if some previously included works are omitted; and to avoid or limit the use of excerpts of larger works which do violence to the intention of the authors. The general guideline for selection of primary sources should be one author and one complete work or sufficiently representative portion thereof per week. This guideline should be interpreted flexibly, since sometimes adequate length and focus will be served by a 'natural' pairing of more than one author or more than one work."

Behind this statement lay a desire to streamline a reading list that especially in recent years had become increasingly complicated by adding extra authors and brief selections to a number of weeks' readings. I have long argued to my staff that if we really want to cram in as many authors and selections as possible then let us

make things easy for ourselves by simply adopting a good standard anthology such as Beatty and Johnson's *Heritage of Western Civilization*. But this was clearly not the direction the advisory committee wanted to go in its Statement of Principles, and our view here coincided with the Western Civilization recommendations of the Dean's Task Force that developed the reforms of the College's general education requirements.

Limiting the number of authors and trying as much as possible to read single whole works or representative portions of works continues to be an ideal that some of our teaching staff--particularly our teaching assistants--are not yet prepared to take seriously. Our annual discussions of the reading list always manifest a basic tension between two understandings of our task: what I would call the "intellectual history" versus the "great texts" approaches. Those who take the "intellectual history" approach believe that if we read Luther we must also include something from the Counter-Reformation; if we read Descartes the rationalist we must include Locke or Hume the empiricist; if we read Locke on political theory we must include Hobbes and Rousseau; if we read Marx and Engels we must include Bernstein, Kautsky, and Lenin. Those of us who are committed to the advisory committee's principle believe, by contrast, in a "great texts" approach in which we frankly recognize that we cannot expose the students to everything it might be desirable to expose them to in terms of great movements in Western intellectual history. We think it is more valuable for students to come to grips with a smaller number of authors and works in a more focused and less confusing way. We have some confidence that in the background material we provide in the lectures and the *Student's Manual* (and soon in the even more comprehensive textbook) we can help our students to fill in at least some of the blanks.

It turns out that neither side in this debate is entirely consistent. The "intellectual history" advocates are greatly exercised over the need for "balance" on a number of topics from the seventeenth century on, but are strangely silent about the fact that we allow Thomas Aquinas to speak for the whole Middle Ages and (currently) Seneca to speak for the Roman world. The "great texts" partisans, for our part, compromise all over the place. Some multiple-author weeks are old institutions in the program: the selections from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, always an extremely painful decision; pairing Pico with Machiavelli; Galileo with Newton; Descartes with either Locke or Hume; Burke with Paine; papers from *The Federalist* with Tocqueville; and Darwin with Wallace and T.H. Huxley.

There is further the problem that many terribly important classic texts are simply too long to read in their entirety as a one-week assignment in an introductory-level course. When we choose readings from such works we now try to select an entire section or set of chapters rather than selecting "snippets," anthology-style; but this can be very tricky with authors such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke and Hobbes and Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, and Darwin. For several years our reading from Thomas Aquinas was a small paperback entitled *Treatise on Law*. Now the Angelic Doctor never wrote a little book called the *Treatise on Law*. The volume simply "packages" Questions 90-97 of the huge *Summa Theologica*. Currently we are using selections from a new Norton anthology entitled *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*.

At the same time, there remain a number of important works of the Western tradition that are just the right length read in their entirety: from our current reading list, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Plato's *Apology*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Luther's *Christian Liberty*, Descartes's *Discourse on Method*, Frederick Douglass's autobiography, Mill's *On Liberty*, Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and Wiesel's *Night*.

Another issue with which we perpetually struggle and which we are very far from working out to our satisfaction is historical balance. The first semester we span close to 3000 years of history; the second semester covers the last two hundred years. We give ancient Greece three weeks and ancient Rome only one. A thousand years of Western history--the Middle Ages--get one week and Thomas Aquinas as their representative, by contrast with the four weeks we give to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution--a period of about 300 years. We have experimented, at the drawing-board stage, with dividing the two semesters at a different point, with giving Rome and the Middle Ages two weeks each, and we always end up stalemated over readings selections or over the tough choice of what to sacrifice somewhere else.

Last year we decided to include the readings from Locke's *Second Treatise* in the second semester, because we had to free up a week in the first semester and thematically Locke seemed appropriate to head a six-week period in which we deal with issues surrounding the liberal democratic tradition. We also returned to an old "Western Civ" tradition of beginning the whole program with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*--a novel that students almost invariably find absorbing and that poses just about all the themes of the program in the context of a modern dystopia. Inspired by that decision, we also decided to focus the second-semester readings on the nineteenth century, but to "frame" the semester with contemporary works. So we began with Elie Wiesel's gripping account of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps and raised the question, "How did we get from the optimism of the Enlightenment to the horrors of the Holocaust?" As a final reading we assigned Part II of Jonathan Schell's much-discussed book *The Fate of the Earth*. This is by no means a "classic," of course, even in comparison with recent writers such as Beauvoir and Wiesel, but in it Schell contemplates the perils of the nuclear age in the light of central themes and values in the Western tradition. We also decided to add to our Mary Wollstonecraft reading a short contemporary essay by Simone de Beauvoir, and to Frederick Douglass's autobiography Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

When I earlier mentioned some basic questions that have to be raised in developing and revising a Western Civilization reading list, I asked, "Since the aim is to read classic works, how can we justify including twentieth-century authors whose writings have not stood the test of time?" This question is one important ingredient in making decisions regarding the second semester's readings especially difficult, and our discussions of them the most heated. The question also opens out onto what is perhaps the most controversial aspect of KU's Western Civilization Program: what I would call our attempt to incorporate elements of both permanence and change in the Western heritage. When we speak of the Western "tradition," we realize that tradition is a living process that each new generation both appropriates and reinterprets. In the modern period the Western dynamic of change

has accelerated with bewildering rapidity, which is what makes the second semester's readings so difficult to choose. We have also become acutely aware of the intellectual, cultural, and ethnic pluralism of the Western tradition as never before, and of the global and inter-cultural context in which Western culture plays such a large and fateful role in our world. The fact is that the Western world itself has of course changed dramatically since KU's Western Civilization Program began in 1945. How are we best to reflect those changes and their significance for our students, while at the same time placing them within the larger context of the history of Western ideas and values?

A chief focus of debate over the Western Civilization Program's attempt to balance permanence and change has been our commitment to incorporating readings, mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on sexism, racism, and antisemitism in the Western world. Selections from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* have been included, in alternation with other writings on fascism, since 1958. Readings on racism were introduced in 1971 and on sexism in 1972. In 1985, as part of its general review of the program, the advisory committee formalized the importance of these inclusions and broadened their scope by adopting the principle that within the context of the program's four traditional themes, "attention to the issues of racial and sexual discrimination and antisemitism should be integrated fully into the curriculum." Adoption of this principle is a recognition of the local, national, and global significance of these issues and of the need for today's students to be confronted with the roots and development of these forms of discrimination in the ideas and values of Western culture.

It should be noted that the advisory committee's statement goes farther than the inclusion of primary sources on these topics. It implies the integration of materials on racism, sexism, and antisemitism into the course as a whole, in our lectures and in the background readings. In "mainstreaming" these issues into a Western Civilization curriculum, incorporating (for example) women's studies scholarship on Western history generally and intellectual history in particular is as important as including primary texts by women. It is important for us and our students to read old texts with fresh eyes, asking new and hard questions of them regarding their assumptions about gender, social superiority and inferiority, the normative human group and the "others," and the like. For example: What sort of approach should we take to Aristotle's observations on women and slaves in the *Politics*? Is antisemitism rooted in the New Testament itself? What about the agonies of some of the U.S.'s Founding Fathers over the paradox of slavery in a democratic republic? How did Darwinism become the basis for very influential racist, antisemitic, and sexist theories?

Among the criteria for our contributors to the new textbook is incorporating attention to these issues in their chapters. Although it is still the case that far too few scholars have background in women's and minority studies scholarship, on the whole our contributors are doing a conscientious job, and those who are specifically trained are providing excellent perspectives. The new textbook also includes specific chapters on the three issues. A difficult task in connection with the program's commitment is the training and sensitizing of our teaching staff. This is an area in which I would say we have made only a beginning.

Readings explicitly on antisemitism and the Holocaust, on modern racism and colonialism, and on historic and continuing injustices against women still comprise

only a small portion of the total readings, and we continue to struggle with the question of the best ways to incorporate these issues. There are complex and inevitably controversial problems surrounding selection of primary texts in these areas that I haven't time to get into here. We remain firmly committed to the "great tradition" of texts by such enduring molders of the Western intellectual heritage as Plato, Aristotle, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Augustine, Luther, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Marx, and Freud. At the same time, in keeping with the living character of tradition, we are trying fully to recognize that the Holocaust and contemporary struggles by women and minorities for greater liberty and justice--together with dramatic scientific and technological developments and the perils and promises of the nuclear age--demand that we bring to the "great tradition" new questions and appropriate it in fresh ways. If that tradition is largely an elitist, white, male, Christian one, then it is important that students come to grips with that fact and its implications as well as with the enduring and universal ideas and values of the tradition. We are clearly trying to steer a different course on these crucial questions from the one Stanford University has followed: one in which we are trying as fully as possible to integrate urgent contemporary struggles for wider justice and equality, together with other important contemporary issues such as the impact of science and technology, into a traditional Western Civilization Program.

And what of our students? The University of Kansas is an open-admissions institution. We must admit all Kansas high school graduates who apply. While there is some self-selection because of KU's reputation as the premier liberal arts institution among the Regents universities, open admissions means that we get a very wide cross-section in a general education program like Western Civilization. To require as many students as we do to pass a demanding course in "great texts" that can be very difficult to understand for sophomores and juniors is a challenge, and among general requirements I think we are considered one of the most daunting (along with foreign languages and mathematics). In selecting primary texts we always try to keep this in mind. The challenge is to select works that stretch our students' minds and horizons without being completely incomprehensible; to choose texts that are readable and if possible interesting without simply pandering to students' usual reading tastes.

I have on my desk an unsolicited letter from a student praising his instructor, one of our best GTA staff members. The student describes the Western Civilization readings as "extremely dry," and completely lacking in interest for anyone other than the teaching staff and a few especially serious students. Very revealingly, he faults the readings for not being "entertaining," an adjective on which one might be tempted to expound at length in reflecting on the influence of television on recent student generations. From my vantage point, of course, the fact that anyone could include Sophocles's *Antigone*, Plato's *Apology*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Douglass's *Narrative*, or Wiesel's *Night* in the category of "extremely dry" is depressing. Some other standard texts we use are perceived as "extremely dry" by large numbers of students, and I can be a bit more sympathetic there: notably Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Burke, and Tocqueville. At the same time, none of us believe that the answer is not to have students read these important writers. Rather we think it is especially important to provide our students with clear guidance in how to read them. On the positive side, every semester I hear from students--and by no means only honors students--whose experience with Western Civilization has been an

enriching and eye-opening one. But the student who wrote the letter I have mentioned--and it was a well-written letter, by the way--represents another ongoing challenge as we continue to try to expose a large range of students to significant texts of the Western heritage in the last years of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

#### Reading Assignments, First Semester

1. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (Harper & Row).
2. Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *Three Theban Plays* (Penguin), 57-128.
3. Plato, *Apology*, *Meno*, and selections from *Phaedo*, in *Plato: Five Dialogues* (Hackett), 23-56, 89-110, 152-155.
4. Aristotle, selections from *Ethics* and *Politics*, in *The Pocket Aristotle* (Washington Square), 162-171, 261-274, 276-334.
5. Seneca, selected letters from *Letters from a Stoic* (Penguin), Letters XVI-XCI, 63-183.
6. *The Hebrew Bible*: Genesis 1-4, Exodus 19-20, Amos in *Collected Readings*. *The New Testament*: Gospel of Mark, Paul's Letter to the Galatians, in *C.R.*
7. Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin), Bks. 5-9.
8. Thomas Aquinas, selections from *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics* (Norton), 14-80.
9. Pico della Mirandola, selections from *On the Dignity of Man* in *C.R.*; Machiavelli, *The Prince* and selections from *Discourses on the First Ten books of Titus Livius*, in *The Prince* (Norton), 3-75, 93-122.
10. Luther, *Christian Liberty* (Fortress); selections from *An Open Letter to the German Nobility and Bondage of the Human Will*, in *C.R.*; Johann Tetzl's *Indulgence*, in *C.R.*
11. Galileo, *The Starry Messenger*, and *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (Doubleday Anchor), 21-58, 173-216.
12. Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Hackett).
13. Voltaire, *Candide* (Penguin).



## Reading Assignments, Second Semester

14. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Crofts), chs. 1-11, 18-19.
15. Burke, selections from *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in C.R.; Paine, *Rights of Man* (Penguin), 33-115; *Declaration of Independence*, in C.R.
16. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Penguin), chs. 1-4; Beauvoir, Introduction to *The Second Sex*.
17. Hamilton and Madison, *The Federalist Papers* #6, 10, 51, in C.R.; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Mentor), Part One.
18. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Doubleday Anchor); Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in C.R.
19. Mill, *On Liberty* (Hackett).
20. Darwin, selections from *The Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man*, in C.R.; Spencer, "The Survival of the Fittest," in C.R.; Huxley, "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society" and "Evolution and Ethics," in *Selections from the Essays of T. H. Huxley* (Crofts), 59-69, 105-111.
21. Selections from *The Sadler Report*, in C.R.; Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Progress); Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Progress).
22. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (Penguin), and "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov*, in C.R.
23. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (Penguin); original last page of *The Anti-Christ* in C.R.
24. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Norton).
25. Wiesel, *Night* (Bantam); Sartre, selections from *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in C.R.
26. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (Avon), Part II: "The Second Death."