Introduction to Contemporary Civilization: The Values of a Columbia College Education and the Legacy it Leaves

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December 17, 2023

The Columbia College Core Curriculum remains a staunch facet of a Columbia education since its beginnings in 1919. It is one of the first things Columbia highlights on its undergraduate page, and looms large on college tours and pamphlets. Touted as a set of required courses for all undergraduates regardless of major, this "core" coursework aims to provide students with "wide-ranging perspectives on significant ideas and achievements in literature, philosophy, history, music, art, and science."[1] The foundation of this collection of courses comes from an Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course (referred to often as CC) first taught in the 1919-1920 academic year. Growing from a war issues course prior to the first world war, and replacing the required first year philosophy and history courses, this new rendition was created in order to introduce and familiarize Columbia men with "the facts and problems which are common property and responsibility of their generation."[2]

Now, the course is described as introducing students to a "range of issues concerning the kinds of communities... that human beings construct for themselves and the values that inform and define such communities; the course is intended to prepare students to become active and informed citizens."[3] While this course has changed over time, the foundational values of this course are largely the same: to familiarize students with a range of issues relevant to the rest of their education and lives beyond the academy. In order to more fully understand the current form of Columbia's educational

[1]"Insistent Change: Columbia's Core Curriculum at 100," Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions Insistent Change: Columbia's Core Curriculum at 100, accessed December 17, 2023, https://exhibitions.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/columbia_core_100/1920s/textbooks.
[2]Adam L. Jones et al., Syllabus from Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, Fall 1919.
[3]Insistent Change: Columbia's Core Curriculum at 100.

model, it is critical to examine the early renditions of one of the cruxes of the University: the original Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course.

Working closely with the original syllabi from the first CC course reveals that the method of knowledge standardization by the College ensured that Columbia men reflected the status quo of the time, including eugenicist and imperial modes of thinking. The College shows a continued effort to uphold these values both in respected educational settings, and globally, as many Columbia men were involved citizens of their time. Understanding these dynamics helps to interrogate the value of the Core, what can be learned from it, and perhaps most importantly how it shaped and continues to shape the minds of Columbia students.

The early Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course was deeply influenced by the events and figures of importance of the preceding years. Namely, Nicholas Murray Butler's presidency at Columbia, and the U.S. involvement in World War I, or the Great War.

Butler assumed the presidency in 1902, only five years after the College's move uptown, facilitated by then President Seth Low.[4] Low, hoping to revitalize the campus' diminishing reputation, as many New York elite began to prefer to send their sons to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, facilitated the purchase of land uptown, where the university would have more space and otherwise be revitalized. Shortly after the move, and the beginning of Butler's presidency, he began the construction of residence halls, aiming to drive up prices[5] and create conditions in which only New York's elite could

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[4]Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia A History of Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[5] "Memorandum Regarding the Establishment of a Residential College," 1917, Box 346, Herbert Hawkes files, CF, CUA, CUL.

send their sons– namely, those who were white Protestants. Higher cost of attendance would help Butler to reduce the influx of Jewish students attending the school, which he viewed as a problem.[6] This discrimination towards Jewish, foreign born, and otherwise "non-elite" students played a critical role in the development of the University values, both in and out of the classroom.

Also key to the formation of the early Contemporary Civilization course was the first World War, and Columbia's involvement in it. President Butler was a ready and willing supporter of the American government and military, altering campus culture to support the cause.[7] First, the Columbia Training Corps was created, where Columbia men were trained physically for military operations, but also were taught material with the goal of helping them understand the war's causes. Physical fitness became a requirement for graduation, and as the war continued on, and the Columbia ROTC was founded in 1918.[8] Butler took his role as an extension of the American military seriously, creating a committee of deans and faculty to seek out those who were deemed "unpatriotic" or otherwise anti-war.[9] This shutdown of free speech on campus went so far as to cause a student, Leon Samson, to fail to be re-admitted to Columbia for anti-war remarks he made off campus in an unrelated event.[10] The school did not offer Samson a hearing to explain his actions, but refused him back at the school. Many students questioned Butler's actions, and sided with Samson and academic freedom.[11] Coincidentally, Samson and many of the students who sided with him were Jewish, offering Butler the

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[6]Paul Starr, "50 Years Ago: Columbia at War," Columbia Spectator (New York, NY), December 14, 1967.
[7]Ibid.
[8]"Government Established R. O. T. C. at Columbia," Columbia Spectator (New York, NY), April 22, 1918.
[9] Neil Hamilton, Zealotry and Academic Freedom: A Legal and Historical Perspective (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995) 15.
[10]"Meeting of Reds Traps Slackers," New York Times (New York, NY), June 12, 1917.
[11]"Samson's Friends Plan New Protest," Columbia Spectator (New York, NY), October 16, 1917.

"proof" he sought to equate Judaisim with radicalism, and justify his discrimination. The steadfast pro-war sentiment at Columbia, facilitated by Butler, encouraged already growing instances of anti-Semitism on campus in the years just prior to the Core's beginning.

The Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course was critically shaped by these racialized and discriminatory understandings of patriotism, loyalty, and suppression of free speech that resisted the status quo. The war issues course that preceded CC was born from the same campus environment that silenced free speech, both by policing what faculty could say or teach, and by clamping down on student speech, even off campus. This intense desire to exist as an upper echelon space stemmed from a need for the College to be seen as elite, exclusive, and important, as well as patriotic, appropriate, and in line with current trends. The move uptown, construction of dormitories, intense pro-war sentiment and consequent activity on campus encapsulate Columbia's age-old desire to remain well within the comfort of the status quo, all while claiming to be ahead of it.

Understanding the early CC as a variant of a war issues course reveals the intentions behind the structure of the course, even under its facade of keeping students up with the current cultural and geopolitical views of the world. The two semester course is laid out over the course of 150 pages of syllabus, divided into different "books," or categories, for each term. The general structure of the course first aims to orient the student with the "facts" of the world, before introducing them to contemporary issues influenced and caused by these "facts." Again, Columbia is eager to showcase its ability to keep their students up to par with the current state of the world, seemingly without questioning what that meant, or perhaps being ambivalent to those meanings.

The first term introduces the students to the physical world, "which man has to live in and use," acquaints them with the "chief racial and cultural groups," "chief human traits," as well as "unique features of the western world today... displayed in contrast with the characteristic features of the civilization of earlier days," history of international relations, and the insistent problems nations must face, both internal and international.[12] It is noted that these problems will not be treated in isolation with only technical considerations, but "with reference to the outstanding contemporary ideals of life."[13] The authors of the course approach these categories through assigning various readings and provoking certain questions.

The second term aims to put these problems or facts into the context of current events, taking students through the backgrounds of current states, recent developments of states, international relations and the world war, the spread of imperialism and European civilization, the problem of political control, industrial problems, conservation, and education.[14] The mechanics of the course appear intentional in priming students with certain understandings of the said "facts" of the world, making the following topics in the second term, of imperialism and western/European supremacy, seem well justified, if not benevolent. In the second term, the authors of the course take a more hands on approach to their teaching, including more general readings but providing much more in depth questions and responses to some of the problems that arise within the syllabus, imbuing their personal beliefs into the course.

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[12]Adam L. Jones et al.,1919 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[13]Adam L. Jones et al.,1919 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[14]Caldwell, W.E., Carman, H.J., Coss, Irwin, et al., Syllabus from Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, Spring 1920.

A Syllabus, Part 1:

Readings from the first term include Hammond's *Business Atlas of Economic Geography*, Edward Thorndike's *Educational Psychology,* and Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius*.[15] While these three samples represent only a portion of the books assigned in the first part of this two term seminar, they represent the approaches and understandings that the authors believed and imbued unto their students. The content of these books provides a deeper understanding of the truths that Columbia men, educated by this curriculum, would have believed, promoted, and acted on behalf of.

Hammond's Business Atlas of Economic Geography is aptly named, containing many maps of the different regions of the globe, often depicting their economic and political usefulness. Included in the first "book" of the syllabus, "The physical world, which man has to live in and use," the Business Atlas introduces Columbia men to the world they inhabit through an extractive lens. The section is further split between "physical features of the Earth," "distribution of natural resources," "ethnological distribution," and "radical changes in man's environment and mode of life due to his increasing control over natural conditions."[16] The atlas contains mainly maps denoting locations of natural resources across the globe (Figure 1), as well as "political maps" which depict railways and other roads within countries, European land occupation, and racial distribution. In Figure 1, an "economic map" of Central America shows the locations of natural resources,[17] apparently available for American

[15]W.E. Caldwell et al., 1920 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[16]Adam L. Jones et al.,1919 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[17] "Hammond's Business Atlas of Economic Geography: A New Series of Maps Showing: Relief of the Land, Temperature, Rainfall, Natural Vegetation, Productive and Non-Productive Regions, Mineral Products, Agricultural Products, Distribution of Population, Etc., Etc : C.S. Hammond & Company : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, https://archive.org/details/cu31924030152197/page/n72/mode/1up.

extraction. Even in maps that include climate information, they emphasize the usefulness of land for its cultivation of certain crops, rather than simply noting the climate or geography of a region.[18] This introduction to the physical world, and its emphasis on extraction and cultivation for profit, drives the student's understanding of the physical world and who it exists for.

Figure 1. Economic map of Central America from Hammond's Business Atlas of Economic Geography.

While this mode of education about the physical world was not uncommon at the time, Columbia's characterization of the world sets up its students to maintain a sense of entitlement to resources across the globe. The information conveyed by the maps completely removes other people from the equation, setting up a worldview for Columbia men where the only things that exist on the

[18]"Hammond's Business Atlas of Economic Geography."

physical earth are themselves and these resources. By reducing knowledge of the physical world to knowledge of resource locations and fertile areas, while ignoring both the people in these places and the interactions between different environmental factors, provides a limited, siloed, and self centered image of the world.

Another book introduced to students early in the first semester of the CC sequence is Edward Thorndike's *Educational Psychology*, which provides a racialized and discriminatory understanding of the study of psychology[19], often offering "scientific" explanations for white supremacy and other forms of identity based discrimination. In his writing, Thorndike asserts that "men are born unequal in intellect, character, and skill. It is impossible and undesirable to make them equal by education."[20] His baseline understanding of the inequality of men forms his science, and thus "facts" about the "chief racial groups" and the various behavior and activity of others. Early on in their required coursework, Columbia men were introduced to these ideas in a formal educational setting. For many at Columbia, this mindset may not have been far from what they learned growing up, but was nonetheless solidified into the fabric of their education, weaving white supremacy and eugenics into the worldview of the Columbia educated man.

Not only did Thorndike influence Columbia students through the inclusion of his writing in required first year courses, he also created the "test for mental alertness" which was used by the College to facilitate the exclusion of Jewish and foreign students from the school. The test, which supposedly measured innate potential rather than an ability to memorize content, suffered from various cultural

[19]Edward Thorndike, "Educational Psychology ," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, https://archive.org/details/educationalpsych01thor/page/14/mode/2up.
[20]Ibid.

biases, creating disadvantages for those unfamiliar with not only American culture, but even culture outside the five boroughs.[21] One of the deans of Columbia during the creation and beginning of the Core, Dean Hawkes, promoted the use of the test as an admissions barrier to eliminate the "low grade boy." Hawkes defended the test against its critics, claiming that the test solely sought to eliminate low grade applications, not on the basis of their religion, but claimed that a "great many" of these "low grade men" in New York were Jewish, while those of higher grade were not.[22] Hawkes was an influential proponent of the Core, and is remembered fondly for his contributions to its success by the Columbia Core at 100 exhibition, which conveniently omits his various biases and active role in maintaining the College as an exclusive space.[23]

Overall, Thorndike's racialized understanding of innate intelligence and who deserved to be educated to what extent is one of the first and foundational texts that Columbia men in the early renditions of the Core were exposed to. This introduction bolstered already common ideas of white supremacy and religious discrimination, thus not only upholding the status quo, but also continuing to legitimize these ideas in what was considered a well respected educational setting.

Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius* is another book introduced early on in the term to Columbia students, in a section titled "men show wide variety in their ability and interest." Within this section, the authors of the syllabus further break down the variety of human traits, touching on physical and intellectual differences both between races, and between individuals of the same race.[24]

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[21] Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia,* 272.
[22]Hawkes, Herbert E. "The Limitation of Numbers Entering Columbia College," Columbia Alumni News 15, no. 7 (1923): 29.
[23]"Herbert E. Hawkes," Herbert E. Hawkes | The Core Curriculum, accessed December 17, 2023, https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/oasis/profiles/hawkes.php.
[24]Adam L. Jones et al.,1919 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.

However, Galton, the author assigned to speak on these issues, nearly immediately admits in this work that he has "taken little notice in this book of modern men of eminence who are not English..."[25] The stark contradiction between the comparisons claimed to be made in the syllabus and Galton's severe lack of subject diversity reveals a gaping hole in the education of Columbia men. The "facts" of the world that they are presented with and what they are expected to understand about the difference between individuals comes solely from an author whose only subjects were English men.

Not only does Galton omit the large majority of people from his study that supposedly informs Columbia students about the entire world, his work is in direct opposition to what Columbia's Core authors have defined as scientific. Considering scientific method, the College defines science as a "body of systemized, tested, and verifiable knowledge, expressing in general terms the relations of exactly defined phenomena."[26] Galton's claim that "high reputation is a pretty accurate test of high ability"[27] fails to exist as a systemized or tested method. Not only regarding the fact that the idea of reputation is inherently subjective, but also in relation to the failure to study every other group of people in the world. Galton, and the authors of the Core, leave the first year Columbia CC student with a belief system about the entire world based on only a miniscule fraction of its population. The promotion of white supremacy is evident in the Core's early renditions, shaped by beliefs of inherent intelligence, and fed to students who already believed in their superiority as they existed in the upper echelons of New York society.

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[25]Francis Galton, "Hereditary Genius," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, https://archive.org/details/hereditarygenius00galtuoft/page/2/mode/2up, 3.
[26] Adam L. Jones et al.,1919 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[27]Francis Galton, "Hereditary Genius."

However, the creators of the Core aim to mask this fact through their use of broad and vague language. Rather than making the claims themselves that Galton makes in his writing, the College titles their section "men show a wide variety in their ability and interest," excluding what Galton will claim, which is that white men show higher abilities in comparison to others.[28] This intentional exclusion of the words white supremacy, or even racial hierarchy, within the text of the College itself aims to protect its "respectable" reputation, and facade of inclusivity that Dean Hawkes pushed so adamantly in his defense of the test for mental alertness. While the College appears comfortable promoting these ideals through the writing of others, it appears hesitant to include them outright in their own documents.

A Syllabus, Part 2:

In order to promote the contemporary views on geopolitical issues, which included the promotion of imperialism and the "problem" of political control,[29] Columbia men were first introduced to a mindset of extraction and white supremacy. While the first term of the CC sequence focuses heavily on additional reading material, specifically to engage the student with perceived truths of the world, the second term is perhaps more heavily imbued with the belief systems and knowledge of the creators of the course. Relying less heavily on outside assigned readings, the syllabus of the second term of the course is much more extensive, reaching over 100 pages, while the first term only reaches about 50. Whether intentional or not, the heavy presence of outside reading for the first term maintains Columbia's position within the status quo without creating an equal burden of responsibility– the assigned authors present the facts, while Columbia professors or administrators

[28] Francis Galton, "Hereditary Genius."
[29]W.E. Caldwell et al., 1920: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization

only exist to convey and apply them to the contemporary geopolitical climate. To reflect this difference between the syllabi, the next section focuses on the specific language of the divisions of the course, rather than the associated readings.

Titled "Imperialism and the spread of European civilization," this section of the course builds on a backdrop of white supremacy and a mindset of extraction. The section briefly addresses the shift from old colonialism to imperialism, noting the "achievements" of colonial movements.[30] These "achievements" recognize "civilized" countries successfully bringing said civilization to new parts of the world, including Latin America, the East Indies, South Africa, and the Americas. The syllabus goes on to address the underlying desires, causes, and motives for "new imperialism." Most notably, economic motives, including surplus of production, desire to invest surplus capital in "backward regions," desire for increased nationalism and homes for surplus population, and for raw materials.[31] In order to understand themselves and their countrymen as bearers of civilization, Columbia students must first learn the belief that their methods and standards are superior to those of others, and that they know what is ultimately best. Conveniently, these ideas are taught in the first semester of the course, where authors such as Galton and Thorndike emphasize the inability for certain populations to be educated to the same standard, as well as their inherent inferiority based on factors like reputation. This belief is also contingent on the dismissal of the people that already inhabit and built lives in these (at the time) potential sites of imperialism and colonization. Introducing students to the rest of the world through

[30]W.E. Caldwell et al., 1920 Syllabus: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization.
[31] Ibid.

methods like business atlases, as exemplified by Hammond's, does the work of erasure and prioritizes extraction, priming students to understand issues of imperialism as necessary and good.

Building on this development, the authors of the CC curriculum also address the merits and dangers of democracy, and its importance and use for the rest of the world, in a section titled "The Problem of Political Control."[32] In this section, the authors outline the benefits of democracy, such as affording the opportunity for the participation of large numbers of individuals in government, ensuring individual expression, educating the participants, and highlighting the importance of representing the "majority" in comparison to monarchy's singular representative.[33] However, as the section continues, seemingly contradictory statements are made, where it is noted that dominant groups may be unwilling to share political power with "subordinate" groups or classes, that a "difficulty... arises from lack of homogeneity," which is "difficult" to obtain, and lastly, how "subordinate" groups are often "embittered and violent, or revolutionary."[34] Again returning to the structure of the course, the first semester introduces the idea of white supremacy, where it is then applied to governmental structures in the second semester. Because students are introduced to the "fact" that white and western civilization is superior and should be built to serve them, the idea that obtaining homogoney to maintain power, or unwillingness to share political power are valid and necessary. Rather than questioning why homogeneity is seen as necessary to maintain democracy, or why certain groups appear "embittered" or "revolutionary," students accept that it is necessary to subvert these groups.

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[32]W.E. Caldwell et al., 1920: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid.

In the last section of the course, the authors touch on the issue of education, highlighting its importance as the solution to "all other" social problems, but ignore the other teachings that appear throughout the semester, which claim that only certain men are capable of being fully educated. They state that improving people's relations through more favorable arrangements will solve the problems of contemporary society.[35] This idea stands in stark contrast to the backdrop of eugenics that exists throughout the course, where authors like Thorndike state that not all men have the potential to be educated to the same standard, and thus that not all men (and certainly not women) deserve a certain quality of education. However, Columbia men deserve to be invested in and educated, and are responsible to act to protect their interests through promoting imperialism. The early content of the course allows for this point to be made: western and contemporary civilization must be in control of the "backwards" world, where people there have no hope of being educated to the standard that can be achieved by Columbia men.

A Legacy:

The texts and language used throughout the first rendition of the Contemporary Civilization course serve as examples of how the College upheld and promoted eugenicist, racist, and imperialist views through an educational lens. The foundations of this course arose in a moment of heightened discrimination against Jewish and foreign students, seen as threats to Columbia's mission, and shortly after clampdowns on free speech for both faculty and students. This CC model required that each student be taught a singular worldview before continuing his education at the school, producing students with worldviews dependent on discriminations and hierarchies. Understanding CC's creation

[35]W.E. Caldwell et al., 1920: Introduction to Contemporary Civilization

within the context of Butler's interest in maintaining a united campus view on issues such as war, the early Core shows the College's commitment to educating its men to uphold the status quo. While Columbia has always claimed to be at the forefront of knowledge production and understanding of the world, the College remains staunchly within what is considered acceptable to a particular audience, continuously aiming to keep pace with its comparable institutions, but never step too far ahead. This difficulty, inability, or lack of courage to think beyond or push back against the status quo is exemplified not only in the early renditions of the Core.

The creation of the Contemporary Civilization curriculum stemmed from a desire to educate Columbia's men on the causes of war, so that they may be politically literate in the causes and perceived necessities of it. However, as the world changed and shifted, Columbia and its affiliates maintained a desire to keep their students educated on the contemporary issues they deemed most important. The tradition of this course continues with the same goals, but excludes the eugenicist and racist authors that once acted as the foundation of the course. This ugly and cumbersome history is neatly glossed over in promotional material for the College, and in the history of the Core that Columbia narrates. However, real history necessitates truth. The failure to examine the past is a failure to take hold of the future. Understanding the impact that the early CC curriculum continues to have on the education students receive today misses an opportunity to think critically, and evaluate the benefits of this educational model. Understanding what it means to have an educational model rooted in theories of white supremacy and imperialism is crucial to an ability to go beyond these modes of thinking, to open new doors, and understand things more holistically. With a desire to create knowledge comes a responsibility to tell the whole truth, acknowledge shortcomings, and move

forward having learned from the past. Only when Columbia is able to accept these truths will it embody the values it claims to uphold.

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