

WESTERN CIV NOTES

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Ramsay Centre's Name

Earlier this year, Dr Bella d'Abrera admirably drew attention to the backlash against the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation from academics of the Left ('How to win the West back,' *The Spectator Australia*, 6 Jan). However, I suggest that she failed to hit the bullseye, and that this is because of a matter of terminology.

The meaning of the word 'civilisation' needs to be clarified in the context of the all too obvious decline of civilisation in the modern West.

D'Abrera wrote: *The concept of Western civilisation, she [Professor Catharine Coleborne, University of Newcastle] stated, is unfashionable and 'past its use by date' because quite simply, it does not reflect the diversity of the classroom. Eventually, she continues, universities will just have to accept that classes and lectures will be virtually indistinguishable from a general assembly of the United Nations.*

This diversity is certainly true of my university classes, although I would not insult my students by comparing them to the poisonous United Nations. One would make the point, however, that the study of Western culture in the Ramsay Centre universities will be optional, and that, at a time when our culture is at best ignored and at worst openly despised by creatures of the Left, it needs to be endorsed as deserving to take its place alongside the other great cultures of the world as a worthy object of study.

I have deliberately used the word 'culture' rather than 'civilisation'. Professor Coleborne undoubtedly hits a sore point with her '[Western civilisation is] past its use by date' comment. One has only to read Douglas Murray's book *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (2017) to find abundant evidence of the truth of this. The European Left has found countless brilliantly effective ways of destroying the very environment which has given them the freedom to speak and act as they do. One can imagine these lifelong delusives clinging desperately to the prow of the ship of

the West as it sinks slowly beneath the waves, shrieking out blame for the debacle against anyone but themselves. This scene is suggested by the word 'Untergang' ('undergoing') as used by Oswald Spengler in the title of his epochal work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* ('The Decline of the West') (1918-1922).

Spengler can help us take better aim at Professor Coleborne's comment. I would argue that 'Ramsay Centre for Western Culture' would have been a more appropriate and effective title. Spengler clearly distinguishes between 'culture' and 'civilisation', and argues that the transition from the former to the latter sets in train the inevitable decline of all great cultures. Western culture began, so Spengler argues, not in the Graeco-Roman era, but in the eleventh century CE. Its prime symbol is limitless space: hence for example the music of Bach and Mozart – products of a longing to fill a spatial infinity with sound –, the landscapes of Claude Lorraine, the Gothic cathedral, the differential calculus and group theory in mathematics. At the opposite pole is the Classical culture, the prime concern of which was 'the material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present'. Western mathematics happily embraces irrational numbers, which filled Classical man with fear. Most importantly, from the authentically Western feel for distance derives concern and care – care for the past and for the future, and care for others. The Christianity of an unmistakably Western stamp which began in the eleventh century sits very happily with this.

If any cruelty emanates from the West, it is arguably in so far as the world city has triumphed over its culture. Spengler is endlessly eloquent on the megalopolis as an expression and cause of the decline: 'Civilisations are... a conclusion ... death following life, rigidity following expansion... an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again'; 'A handful of gigantic places in each Civilisation disfranchises and disvalues the entire motherland of its own Culture under the contemptuous name of "the provinces" [*sc.* 'deplorables'];

'These final cities are wholly intellect' [*cf.* the inner-city elites].

For Spengler, the decline began with Napoleon, abated for a century, and was locked in by the First World War. For Great Britain specifically, Niall Ferguson in his book *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order* nominates the Boer War, with its monstrous suffering unthinkingly yet no less culpably for that inflicted on the Boers, as arguably the beginning of the end: 'when Brailsford called it "a perversion of the objects for which the State exists, that the power and prestige, for which all of us pay, should be used to win profits for private adventurers"', he was not entirely wide of the mark.' This tells us where the Rhodes Must Fall campaign is coming from, and they may indeed have a point, although this is not to justify their extremism.

In a similar vein, the Australian Irish poet Christopher Brennan, who wrote the patriotic poem 'Irish to English' in the midst of the Great War ('Irish and rebel both/And both unto the end—/And here I pledge you troth/And here I stand your friend'), had vehemently opposed the Boer War, expressing his revulsion in the unjustly neglected sequence of poems *The Burden of Tyre* (1901). Brennan was for many years Associate Professor of German at Sydney University, but it was observed of him that he could have held with distinction the chairs of Greek, Latin, English, French, German, Italian or Philosophy. I suggest that the year of publication of his magnum opus *Poems 1913* is significant. It was as if he summed up and transmuted into art a great deal of what is most important in Western culture, before its decline. One hopes that the Ramsay Centre will not neglect him.

We hear what the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation says in its name, but we know what they mean. The Centre would be well advised to rethink their name, for the sakes of Professor Coleborne and all the other orphans of their own culture.