AHR Forum
The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course

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"The most difficult question which now confronts the college teacher in history seems, by general agreement, to be the first year of the college course."¹ So remarked Harvard historian Charles Homer Haskins in 1905 to the American Historical Association (AHA). Historians, Haskins explained, having established specialized instruction in their discipline at advanced college levels, now faced the new task of developing a course to serve the general education of freshmen and sophomores. This project, carried forward by the next generation, led to the Western Civilization course.

The rise of "Western Civ" is one of the great success stories in the history of the historical profession in America. For a time between the First World War and the campus protests of the 1960s, all roads led to the Western Civ class. Compulsory enrollment requirements at many institutions brought liberal arts students from every discipline, and from science programs and professional schools came others in mass numbers to brush with "culture" in a class renowned for grand ideas and great books. Classrooms filled, budgets bulged, teachers multiplied. In the discussion sections that became a feature of the course virtually everywhere, three generations of "teaching assistants," the best and the brightest graduate students in European history, began their apprenticeship in college instruction. Western Civ, more than any other academic invention, brought European history to power in the college curriculum, and the easy acceptance of the class in colleges across the country indicated that it represented an idea about the Old World whose time had come. By hindsight, scholars have interpreted the course as a product conditioned by the era of the two world wars, a time when Americans envisioned themselves as partners with the European democracies in a great Atlantic civilization, formed from a common history, challenged by a common enemy, and destined to a common future.² If so, Western Civ not only expressed this particular ideal of

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America's place in history but educated youth of the period to see the world in these terms. Historians are accustomed to writing about men of influence in human affairs. When they write the history of their own influence in the present century, the Western Civilization course will have an important place in the story.

Today, the grand old course still clings to life at various schools. At many other locations, however, it passed with the passing of the 1960s. Somewhat suddenly, after a half-century of uninterrupted success, Western Civ seemed less appealing to students and less defensible to faculty. In a period of expansion, experiment, and self-expression, the venerable reputation of the course was no match for the moral force of a curricular philosophy of laissez faire, education without compulsion or prerequisites. When compulsion stopped, enrollment dwindled, and across the nation, one after the other, Western Civ courses were decommissioned like old battleships. Easy come, easy go.

After every revolution, however, comes Thermidor. Looking back on the old course, historians at an AHA session in 1976 returned to the problem of the introductory course. There Professor William H. McNeill of the University of Chicago explained that Western Civ originated in "a great idea about the whole human past," the idea of history as the evolution of freedom. This notion, now described quaintly as the Whig interpretation of history, once provided a vision useful and inspiring. But with time, McNeill remarked, the vision faded, the idea was no longer believed, and new material mingled with the old subject matter, clouding over the central theme. Western Civ became a jumble, a course without memory of its own origins or convictions. When challenged, historians in this proud tower gave up without a fight, retreating into the sanctuaries of their own special areas. The result, McNeill observed, was to turn history programs into a pyramid without a base, a superstructure of advanced courses without the supporting foundation of an introductory class where students could be prepared and recruited. His lament was not that historians failed to defend an outmoded concept of the past but that they had failed to develop a new one to take its place. This he found "amazing, suicidal, absurd"—"the central failure of our profession in the last two decades." Historians, it appeared, were on the road that teachers of the classics had followed to irrelevance and antiquarianism. "The only thing that can rescue us from such a fate," McNeill concluded, "is to find something worth teaching to undergraduates en masse: something all educated persons should know; something every active citizen ought to be familiar with in order to conduct his life well and perform his public duties effectively."³

of beliefs and values" and called upon his faculty to "redefine our collegiate purpose." The resulting reconstruction of a core curriculum at Harvard was only the most conspicuous success in a resurgence of general education that continues across the nation. Therefore, the proper time has come to review the story of Western Civ. It was the pre- eminent course of the earlier general education movement, sharing all of the ideals and illusions of the movement itself. To study the rise and fall of Western Civ, indeed, is to study the historical background to present debates about the curriculum.

The history of the course is written here in terms of the concept of general education. "General education," explained a committee of educators in 1947, "is the term that has come to be accepted for those phases of nonspecialized and nonvocational learning which should be the common experience of all educated men and women." The movement for general education is best understood, however, in connection with its origins after 1900 as an emotional response to the perceived "chaos" of the new elective system. American higher education was then in the closing decade of a historic transformation that, within a single generation, sundered the classical curriculum of the old liberal arts colleges and installed the specialized programs of the modern university. Historians have explained how this "academic revolution" between 1870 and 1910 established the reign of the graduate school, professional disciplines, and research. Generally associated with President Charles William Eliot of Harvard, the elective system was truly the guillotine of this revolutionary process, dismembering the curriculum in the name of the equality of courses and the liberty of students to choose among them. Underlying the elective system was a philosophy of diversity, a perception that the "knowledge explosion" and the modern division of labor required men to vary their purposes and the community to divide its talents. "For the individual," Eliot advised, "concentration, and the highest development of his own particular faculty, is the only prudence. But for the State, it is variety, not uniformity, of intellectual product, which is needful." To some, the resulting system of "curricular do as you please" was the principle of liberty in education; to others, it was the law of the jungle.

One response was the general education movement. Without original thinkers or founding texts, it began in an emotion to integrate modern learning into forms comprehensible and useful to nonspecialists. A freshman without comprehension of the unity of knowledge, explained historian Preserved Smith, was not prepared to grasp the meaning of separate disciplines. "At the very outset of the college course," he urged, the student should have "set before him, in a panorama

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infinitely reduced in scale but true to proportion, the whole scheme of things entire as we know them.\textsuperscript{8} The community of scholars in America, such men believed, must be a democratic community, citizens educated as undergraduates in shared values that made possible an enlightened public consensus. General education, therefore, was a philosophy of unity: unity of knowledge, unity of the curriculum, unity of education and life. Thus is revealed its historical significance as a defensive reaction arising at the close of the academic revolution against the forces that threatened to engulf higher education: specialization, professionalism, and vocational training. These things taught individuals to be different; general education taught them what they should know in common.

There is an old saw to the effect that changing a curriculum is like trying to move a graveyard. On its own, the general education movement was not up to the task. Specialization was the prevailing tide in higher education; general education merely slackened the flow. Even this limited success, however, depended on influences outside of the movement itself. In particular, the history of general education is inseparable from the period of the world wars, when, for a time, a sense of common purpose caused the language of the movement to strike a responsive chord in the nation. Otherwise, life was difficult. If the ideals of general education—nonspecialized learning, core course requirements, and the interdisciplinary approach—sustained the movement as a fighting force, they also placed it in opposition to dominant trends within the university. At most schools, therefore, the program found a place to grow only in unclaimed areas away from the empires of academic departments.

Thus developed the movement’s preoccupation with the freshman and sophomore years. In this no man’s land between high school and advanced college work at the junior-senior level, the Western Civ class emerged as the ancestral course of the general education curriculum. This article recounts the history of the course in connection with the four institutions—Harvard, Chicago, Amherst, and Stanford—represented at the AHA session in 1976, at which Professor McNeill called for rebuilding freshman history on the general education ideal, and a fifth institution, Columbia, where Western Civ purportedly was “invented” in 1919. Admittedly, the number of schools in this sampling is too limited. Western Civ classes appeared across the country in immense variety and rich contrast. What is presented here is a view from the commanding heights. The universities of Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard dominated the development of general education in the United States, and each has an official history of its own pioneering role in the movement.\textsuperscript{9} Amherst and Stanford, by extension, provide contrasting studies of schools directly influenced by these three great universities. What follows, then, is a selective history of the Western Civ course, piecing together, in the form of a mosaic, the experiences of these five institutions.


Origins of introductory European history: Harvard, 1873–1904. The Western Civ course was a characteristically American invention. The United States inherited a Western perception of civilization as a process that began in the ancient Near East, evolved through classical Greece and Rome, and was transmitted to medieval and modern Europe. European "civilization," in this way, was the sum of world history. In Europe, historians during the nineteenth century divided this universal history into separate national strands. Nation-states became the interest of historians. While national history thus came to dominate schools on the Continent, however, European history in America commonly continued to be presented en bloc. As a result, scholars have noted, more European history was taught in the United States than in Europe itself. Leonard Krieger has explained how this continuing perception of Europe as a unit gave the writing of European history in the United States a bent for broad interpretation, a concern with common experiences underlying national differences. What was stressed, therefore, was not political flux but the enduring achievements of the mother culture. What made Europe a "civilization," remarked John Franklin Jameson in 1890, was not politics but culture; in thought and letters, he explained, American historians would discover "abundant evidence of a common European life."  

The organizing ideas for Western Civ were, therefore, long present in historical consciousness. What gave them new meaning in the early twentieth century, scholars have concluded, was the emergence of the United States from isolation to partnership with Europe in a wider world. But Western Civ did not come into existence fully assembled, nor was it conceived in one swoop at Columbia in 1919. Rather, the course and the concept came together piece by piece, not by grand design but as a makeshift response to the effects of the academic revolution on the history curriculum. Stated briefly, specialization and the elective system created, by reflex, the need for a general course.

Beginning the story with Harvard is instructive, because Harvard was the hothouse of the elective system and thus the place where the special problems of the introductory course in history emerged most clearly. The subject of history had no place in the classic liberal arts and only gradually did it intrude—beginning at the junior-senior level—upon the curriculum. When President Eliot was inaugurated in 1869, for example, all history at Harvard was taught by a "dear old gentleman" without training in the discipline. But the elective system was the undoing of his kind. Out went the amateurs and in came the experts: more courses, more fields—and more confusion. In describing the curriculum of 1884, one professor admitted that junior-senior offerings in history were expanding without order or direction, with everything in "more or less confusion."  


introductory course. As early as 1873 a course for sophomores, "Outlines of General History," was developed out of earlier reading requirements on classical antiquity. In 1880 it became "History 1: Medieval and Modern History," a course with a long life to come. Opened to freshmen in 1884, it was established by 1890, in a regulation that reversed the logic of the elective system, as a prerequisite to advanced classes in history. Specialized instruction at one end of the curriculum had made necessary general instruction at the other, a class for freshmen and sophomores that was comprehensive and preparatory.

Such classes, however, had problems of their own. Eliot reported in 1880 that old, hide-bound methods of student recitation had "well-nigh disappeared" at Harvard and that lectures and discussion were in fashion. Remarked a commencement speaker in 1886, "This is one of the greatest educational discoveries of modern times—that the business of a teacher is to teach." But, as the lecturer came to head the class, the student disappeared into the audience. The rise of large introductory courses increased the distance between them. In 1882 only five classes at Harvard enrolled as many as one hundred students; by 1901 fourteen classes each had over two hundred. In the following year the university's Committee on Improving Instruction sounded the alarm: "there is in the college today," it concluded, "too much teaching and too little studying." Large lecture courses concealed students from faculty surveillance, made standards unenforceable, and encouraged traffic in lecture notes. Such large classes, the committee reported, were a practical necessity, but so were new arrangements to bring students out of the crowd and make them speak again.

History 1 was a case in point. When Professor Archibald Cary Coolidge took over the course in 1894, the enrollment was 364 and rising. "Three times a week," wrote Coolidge's biographers, "he lectured to mobs of freshmen and sophomores." But, as the mobs grew larger, the results of the lecture system became more uncertain. In 1896 a number of graduate student "assistants" were delegated to inspect lecture notes and to quiz students individually outside of class. This so-called check-up system, however, was no favorite with students. Finally, in his last year with the course in 1903-04, Coolidge restructured History 1, reducing lectures to two per week and incorporating the "section method," an experiment (already operating in other Harvard courses) with subdividing large classes into smaller groups for weekly meetings with graduate assistants. So was developed what became known in early debates among historians on the introductory course in history as the "Harvard method": lectures to the mass by a faculty member and sections in the care of young apprentices.

The lecturer was the great man of the enterprise. Originally a mode to transmit ancient learning, the lecture method had been revitalized in German universities as

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12 Unless otherwise noted, references in this article to course descriptions, regulations, and enrollments are drawn from annual school catalogues and reports.

13 James Freeman Clarke, Commencement Address, as quoted in Morison, Three Centuries of Harvard, 347; and "Report of the Committee on Improving Instruction in Harvard University" (1902), 4, HUA.

a means to communicate new knowledge derived from original research. A crowded classroom of American freshmen, however, was no place for learned lectures. Instruction here had to be both education and art. The report of the Committee on Improving Instruction explained in 1902,

The larger these courses grow, the more evident it becomes that the object of the lectures in them is not so much to impart concrete information as to stimulate thought and interest in the subject; and since the stimulus depends in part on the attitude in which the audience stands towards the lecturer, it is important that these courses should be conducted by the men who have already achieved a reputation. Indeed . . . to be effective the lecture course must be conducted by the best lecturers in the university.

In the Harvard system, therefore, the development of the discussion section did not so much diminish the lecturer as exalt him—and provide a staff of helots to do the work. "The function of the instructor is to stimulate and interest his hearers," proposed the committee report, "while the responsibility for seeing that the work is done, for helping and explaining, and for maintaining the standard of the course, must rest chiefly with the assistants, who come into more immediate contact with the students."15

Having formed discussion sections, Coolidge had to give them a purpose. To him, freshman history was factual history, and quizzes, map drills, and recitations on lectures and textbooks were the order of the day in section work.16 Elsewhere, however, this emphasis on memorizing detail was giving way to efforts to promote understanding through readings from original sources in English translation. Historians first debated the value of this "source method" at a meeting of the AHA in 1897; in affirming the prevailing conception of history as a body of knowledge to be communicated to undergraduates by lectures and textbooks, members approved a limited and subordinate use of primary materials to "vitalize" events and promote critical debate. This view, carried into the high schools, became identified with a democratic education. The Committee of Seven, for example, appointed by the AHA to recommend a history program for secondary schools, praised the German contribution to historical studies but observed that German gymnasium methods of rote learning were "not the system for making American citizens." Habits of discussion, the committee concluded in 1899, were essential to a system of individual initiative.17 When, therefore, committee member Charles Homer Haskins succeeded Coolidge as instructor of History 1 in 1904, the source method was introduced into the discussion sections. Thus was completed the form of the introductory course at Harvard. The content took more time.

The Committee of Seven was the first group of professional historians to review systematically the condition of history in the high schools. The members made no secret of their ambition to drive out the old, overstuffed course in "General History," a one-year, headlong survey of "world" history from ancient civilization to

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17 Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1897 (Washington, 1898), 5; and The Study of History in Schools: Report to the American Historical Association by the Committee of Seven (New York, 1899), 11–13.
modern Europe. To replace it, they recommended a sequence of four courses: first, in grade nine, ancient history, followed in grade sequence by European history, English history, and American history. The logic of this "block system" was simply to extend instruction through high school and to place American history in European perspective. "American history," remarked a committee member, "is in the air—a balloon sailing in mid-heaven—unless it is anchored to European history." Although the program was adopted widely in the schools, many students, it was noticed, made a habit of leapfrogging the "block" on European history. Reports indicated that pupils completed ancient history (at that time, a common requirement for college entrance), switched to other subjects in the following two grades, and returned in their last year to take American history. The effect was to strengthen the conviction of those college instructors who, in discussions on the introductory course, supported European history as the proper subject for freshmen. "Now the real reason why we introduced into American colleges this general course on European history," commented Charles Homer Haskins in 1906, "is because students did not bring it to college with them."

Haskins was a prominent personality in the advance of this version of the introductory course. He sat as chairman at various conferences on freshman history, advocated the cause in the AHA, and promoted his course at Harvard as a model in the field. Focused on European history, combining lectures and discussion sections, textbooks and primary sources, History 1 in the early years of this century no doubt had an important place in debates on the freshman survey. But Haskins led it backward, not forward, in time. Ancient and American history dominated the high schools; medieval history, Haskins believed, would educate freshmen to connect one world with the other. "The year devoted to the Middle Ages," he proposed, "bridges the gap between ancient and modern studies, but by showing the remote origin of modern institutions and culture it deepens the sense of indebtedness to the past and furnishes something of the background so much needed in our American life." In 1904, History 1 became "Medieval European History."

Elsewhere, the trend was in the other direction. Rising with the "New History" (about which I will say more later) after the turn of the century, an interest in modern history spread through colleges and high schools. At Harvard itself, enrollment in History 1 fell from 380 in 1904 to 250 in 1911. The following year, Haskins reintroduced modern history to the course, and History 1 became "European History from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the Present Time." The Harvard course was a descendant of the academic revolution, formed through the

18 Lucy M. Salmon, as quoted in The Study of History in Schools, 194.
22 Increased demand for modern European history was noted by the Committee of Five, appointed by the AHA in 1907 to review the recommendations of the Committee of Seven: The Study of History in the Secondary Schools: Report to the American Historical Association by a Committee of Five (New York, 1912), 53–57. Also see the college survey in Raynor W. Kelsey, "Recent Changes in the Teaching of History in the Colleges and Universities of the Middle States and Maryland," HTM, 6 (1915): 207–10.
efforts of historians to adjust their methods of instruction to the special features of the freshman year. Some scholars have interpreted the result as the prototype of the Western Civ class and recognize Archibald Cary Coolidge as the father of the course.  

More accurately, however, History 1 was a point of departure. At the start of the twentieth century, educational thought was already leaving it behind.

The making of Western Civ: Columbia, 1905–29. The years after 1905 were a period of experimentation in the introductory history class. No other course, one historian observed, matched the pace of innovation in freshman history. Significantly, these changes took place in an intellectual environment different from that in which developed the introductory course at Harvard. The counterrevolution was coming in American education, the movement to restore unity to the undergraduate curriculum. If, to this point, the introductory course in European history was conditioned by the academic revolution, thereafter it was conditioned by the reaction of general education.

Columbia led the way. Few schools were more deeply under the German spell of specialization; few broke out of it with greater vengeance. That shift, that break is epitomized in the career of Columbia's President Nicholas Murray Butler. He began as a paladin of professional scholarship, critical of the "idling and dawdling" of undergraduate work and committed to the hegemony of the graduate school. Then, after 1900, he followed the journey of educational thought. It led him first to those seeking to recover the "inner unity" of knowledge and finally, under the patriotic influence of the First World War, to the cause of a common education for citizenship. "The more men and women who are being trained up to twenty to twenty-one years of age without any reference whatever to a particular vocation or occupation," Butler told the Columbia trustees in 1918, "the better for the citizenship, the intelligence, and the moral and spiritual life of the nation."

Such was the background to the creation at Columbia in the following year of the freshman class in "Contemporary Civilization," mother of Western Civ and—according to Columbia sources—the progenitor of the general education tradition. This course itself was, however, successor to classes leading back to an early version of introductory history at Columbia: History A, "Epochs of Ancient,


24 Lucy M. Salmon, "Vassar College Introductory Course," HTM, 1 (1910): 145. After first discussing freshman history in 1901, the AHA took up the subject again at meetings in 1905 and 1906. The ferment among instructors is revealed in the early volumes of the History Teacher's Magazine, founded in 1909 to increase communication between high school and college teachers.


Medieval, and Modern History.” By 1900, this troubled sophomore course in old-style “general” history was taught in large lecture classes by two young instructors from the bottom rank of the Department of History. At a time when the AHA was trying to root out world history from the high schools, Columbia implanted it as an undergraduate requirement. The result, critics complained, was an overburdened, chaotic, and unteachable course.27

The man who brought order out of this chaos was James Harvey Robinson. Robinson never taught History A (although he was assigned to simplify its content) nor any other introductory course, but no one did more to shape the first-year history course in American colleges. Scholars remember him for his promotion of the “New History,” a history useful and “progressive,” united with the social sciences and brought to the service of social reform. Just as important was his promotion of a simplified, thematic, interpretive version of European history for high schools and colleges, a general history free of “every unessential detail which serves only to obscure the great issues and transformations of the past.”28 Critics have observed that Robinson was not an original thinker, that he was merely “representative” of intellectual trends, a propagator of ideas already current among historians. True enough. But no one represented them better or propagated them more effectively. At the cost of a career in original scholarship, he committed himself to the cause of this nonspecialized undergraduate history, and to all of the committee work, polemics, and textbook writing that went with advancing it within the educational establishment.

After the publication of Robinson’s first textbook in 1903, recalled an admirer, no one could return to writing introductory history in the old style of past politics.29 The crucible of ideas for Robinson’s successful line of undergraduate and high school texts was his popular graduate class at Columbia, “History of the Intellectual Class in Europe.” Where instructors at Harvard began the introductory course as general history and reduced it over time to the more manageable unit of the medieval period, Robinson began his class as medieval history and enlarged it to general history. His students have explained how he started with readings from medieval documents, extended coverage to the French Revolution, then continued year by year to reach further into the past for the origins of European ideas and further into the present for their consequences. As Harry Elmer Barnes reminisced,

The Middle Ages sent him back to pagan culture, pagan culture to the ancient Orient, oriental culture to the mental life of primitive man... Similarly, his interest in science and criticism led him to go forward from the French Revolution to a study of the growth

27 See, for example, the criticisms of Charles Homer Haskins, “The Historical Curriculum in Colleges,” in Minutes of the Second Annual Convention of the Association of History Teachers of the Middle States and Maryland, March 11–12, 1904, 17.


29 J. Salwyn Schapiro, “James Harvey Robinson,” Journal of Social Philosophy, 1 (1936): 281. For a comparison of Robinson’s works with previous texts in the field, see Luther V. Hendricks, James Harvey Robinson, Teacher of History (New York, 1946), 68–89.
of modern science and its influence upon material culture and the world of ideas. The course thus became more universal in its scope and more interpretive in character.30

By 1915 the class syllabus forecast the outline of the Contemporary Civilization course to come.31

Others had judged such general history to be too vast and disorderly. Robinson made it manageable by making it "modern." Like most American historians of Europe at that time, Robinson had been trained in medieval history, and his appointment at Columbia in 1895 came in recognition of his promise in that field. Somewhere along the line, however, he turned modernist with a passion. In debate with Charles Homer Haskins at the AHA in 1907, Robinson argued that medieval history had been overstressed in college teaching and that coverage of the Middle Ages should be diminished, simplified, and subordinated to that of modern history. Robinson became fond of a particular question about the contemporary world: "How did we get this way?" The answer, he believed, had to come from "living history," that part of the past that continues in the present. The result, in his textbooks, was history presented on the model of evolution in the biological sciences, a central narrative that excluded everything defunct, anomalous, and sensational, that eschewed all of the lost causes and dead ends. Recalled Robinson, Only gradually did the writer come to conceive of history as something far more vital than the record of bygone events and the description of extinct institutions. He then saw that if history was to fulfill its chief function and become an essential explanation of how our own civilization came to take the form it has, and present the problems that it does, a fresh selection from the records of the past would have to be made. Much that had been included in historical manuals would of necessity be left out as irrelevant or unimportant. Only those considerations would properly find a place which clearly served to forward the main purpose of seeing more and more distinctly how this, our present Western civilization, in which we have been born and are now immersed, has come about.32

For most citizens, Robinson proposed, this was the only history worth knowing. Actually, the whole project was rather unhistorical, Whiggish, and Eurocentric. In substance, Robinson's textbooks are basically intellectual history (with an overlay of economic, social, and cultural developments), the story of what he called "the mind in the making," the perceived evolution of rationalism, science, and liberal values. In form, the narrative begins in a tight description of progress from prehistory to the close of the Middle Ages, then broadens in the coverage of modern Europe and its influence on other continents. In effect, the past is subordinated to the present, recent history becomes "relevant" history, the human past becomes the prologue to European history, and Europe is interpreted as the seat of modernity, the source of

“contemporary ways of doing and thinking.” Western history in Robinson’s texts is, therefore, “high history,” overarching the past of other peoples. Westerners, of course, had long universalized European history into the general history of mankind. More effectively than others of his generation, Robinson made this old general history into a “modern” history of Western civilization.

So, before the First World War, American educators were prepared intellectually for the coming of the Western Civ course. What prepared them emotionally was the war itself. During the Great Crusade, historical perceptions of a pioneer America, formed by the frontier experience, gave way to an alternative vision of the nation’s connection with Europe. The war, in this sense, vitalized an interpretation of history that gives the United States a common development with England and Western Europe and identifies this “civilization” with the advance of liberty and culture. Scholars have described how a sense of patriotic purpose swept campuses, inspiring academics to bring education to the service of the nation. Many historians now felt the lure of a “useful” history geared to modern events in Europe. And many in other fields felt a duty to transcend disciplines in order to create a general education for citizenship. Those at Columbia later remembered the Contemporary Civilization course of 1919 as a “war baby,” born of the struggle to make the world safe for democracy. More precisely, it was the child of a strange marriage between war propaganda and the liberal arts: the “War Issues Course” of the Students Army Training Corps (SATC).

The War Issues course was part of an extraordinary episode in American higher education. In 1918, as military conscription threatened to decimate college enrollments and budgets, school officials came together with the War Department to create SATC, units of conscripts to be drilled and quartered on college campuses as military officers in training. In October, at over five hundred institutions, the majority of male students, more than one hundred and twenty-five thousand young men in military uniform and under military discipline, commenced training programs apart from the regular curriculum. American colleges became military camps and professors mixed with drill instructors in the education of student soldiers. Compulsory for all was the War Issues course, a class designed to explain the origins and meaning of the European conflict. Explained the national course director from Washington, “This is a war of ideas, and ... the course should ... give to the members of the Corps some understanding of the view of life and of society which they are called upon to defend and of that view against which we are fighting.” This required the integration of material from a variety of intellectual disciplines, and the War Department called upon each college to assign to the planning and teaching of the course the best men available from the departments.

33 On the effect of the war in promoting modern European history, see Samuel B. Harding, “What the War Should Do for Our History Methods,” Historical Outlook [hereafter, HO], 10 (1919): 188–90. Also see Carol S. Gruber, Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America (Baton Rouge, 1975).


of history, government, philosophy, economics, and literature. Here, critics warned, tumult was to be expected. Instead, academic rivalries dissolved in the heat of patriotism. As a result, therefore, the War Issues course was a successful experiment in general education by government decree: compulsory, interdisciplinary, an exercise in common learning for the duties of citizenship. Many educators were relieved to see it end in December 1918; other recognized it as an idea of instruction whose time had come.

From the War Issues course came the various Citizenship classes that appeared at colleges after the war. When the course ended at Columbia, some of the instructors involved appealed immediately for a “peace issues” course to take its place. Wrote a faculty dean,

It is not surprising . . . that those who have had to do with this course are beginning to ask themselves if it does not constitute the elements of a liberal education for the youth of today. Born of the consciousness that a democracy needs to know what it is fighting for, it has awakened a consciousness of what we, as a people, need to know if our part in the world of today is to be intelligent, sympathetic, and liberal. In the past, education was liberalized by means of the classical tradition . . . If education is to be liberalized again, if our youth are to be freed from a confusion of ideas and standards, no other means looks so attractive as a common knowledge of what the present world of human affairs really is.  

James Harvey Robinson, preparing to leave Columbia, was not involved in the discussions of 1918–19 that led from the War Issues course to the Contemporary Civ class. But his ideas remained to give depth and substance to a class founded on the simple world view of Allied war propaganda. Early statements about the course, which today appear flatfooted in their chauvinist idealism, reveal the political purpose of Contemporary Civ to promote liberal opinion, acculturate the young, and create “a citizen who shall be safe for democracy.”  

The achievement of those who planned the syllabus was to subsume these political designs within the organizing idea of Robinson’s history: the view of the past as the progress of reason and liberty. Without this sustaining historical framework, one may speculate, the Contemporary Civilization course would likely have faded away with the other citizenship classes of the postwar years, victims of peacetime moods and the debunking of the wartime patriotism of the academic community.

Just as important as the power of Robinson’s history as an organizing idea, however, was its power as an integrating discipline. The interdisciplinary sweep of the New History contributed to Contemporary Civ a mode of incorporating other fields of knowledge into a panoramic overview of the process of civilization. The course was designed in committee by representatives from the departments of history, economics, philosophy, and government, and it was taught from a common syllabus by a staff drawn from all of the departments involved. Its technique of instruction was the small discussion class, and a successful class was judged to be one

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36 Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, “The ‘Issues of the War’ Course in the SATC Schedule,” Columbia Alumni News, 10 (1918): 217. Woodbridge, dean of the graduate faculty, directed the course at Columbia.

37 The phrase is that of Columbia Dean H. E. Hawkes; see his “A College Course on Peace Issues,” Educational Review, 58 (1919): 150.
in which the students were unable to detect the department of their teacher. In a
word, integration was the Contemporary Civ ideal. This, in part, explains the
appeal of the class to many faculty and administrators as a form of common
learning, a uniform orientation course for the mass of freshmen who entered the
college after the military demobilization of 1918–19. Commented President Butler
to the trustees, "A result of prescribing this course for all freshmen is to make sure
that every student in Columbia College has a common starting point and a single
point of vantage from which to study, to understand and to appreciate the world of
nature and of men."38

Although Contemporary Civ was approved by only a "bare majority" of faculty in
1919, the opponents of the class were soon scattered. Butler in 1922 declared the
course a "pronounced success" and in 1924 polls among graduating seniors began
to identify it as the most valuable class in the college.39 By 1929, when the faculty
voted to extend Contemporary Civ to a two-year course, opposition was nowhere
to be found. Thus, a compulsory two-year requirement in Contemporary Civilization
was established: the freshman year (called CCA) on the historical-cultural back-
ground to the modern world, the sophomore year (called CCB) on the problems—
from a social science perspective—of contemporary American society. Thereafter,
plans were advanced to found other general education classes, to spread the spirit
of the new course through the college, and to adjust advanced offerings to the work
of the freshman year. General education had won a battle at Columbia—and the
war spread elsewhere. With the success of Contemporary Civ, recounted a later
Columbia report, there began "a quiet and gradual revolution in undergraduate
instruction throughout the United States."40

Stated differently, general education began its advance in American colleges on
ground prepared by the New History. The intelligent citizen, many educators had
come to believe, was historically minded. When Arthur M. Schlesinger surveyed the
history programs at various colleges in 1919–20, he found that the European war
had heightened the appeal of history and inspired instructors of introductory
courses, faced with surging enrollments, to become less interested in producing
fledgling historians than in educating freshmen to be "intelligent citizens of the
republic and the world."41 This was the environment that formed the Western Civ
courses. The progress of the course at this period must be seen in connection with
the general progress of European history in America. Between the world wars, the
modern European history curriculum first took shape in the United States. It was,
as Leonard Krieger has described, European history with American relevance—
liberal, "progressive," concentrated on modern history and based on the premise of
a common history that bound together the North Atlantic nations, connected the
United States to the European past, and established Western preponderance in the
world. Wrote Carleton J. H. Hayes, Robinson's student and successor at Columbia,

38 Columbia University, Annual Report of the President... , 1920, 22.
39 On the success of the course, see Harry J. Carman, "The Columbia Course in Contemporary Civilization,"
Columbia Alumni News, 17 (1925): 143–44. Carman, a Robinson student, early staff member in the course, and
later the dean of Columbia College (1943–50), shepherded the course from its first syllabus to its heyday after
World War II.
40 A College Program in Action, 22.
in his popular Western Civ textbook in 1932, “For two thousand years and more, Europe has been the seat of that continuous high civilization that we call ‘Western’—which has come to be the distinctive civilization of the American continents as well as of Europe, and which has latterly affected the peculiar civilizations of the ‘east’ more than those have affected the ‘west.’”

What started as a new direction in European studies soon became an “establishment.” Publications increased and programs prospered. In 1929 the Journal of Modern History appeared as the periodical of the growing field of European history since the Middle Ages. In 1934 the report of the Commission on the Social Sciences of the American Historical Association, written by Robinson’s colleague in the New History Charles A. Beard, recommended more European history in secondary schools:

In all departments—intellectual, esthetic, and ethical—the civilization of the United States has always been a part of European, or “Western,” civilization. . . . The program of social science instruction should provide for . . . more detailed study of the evolution of Western civilization, emphasis being placed on changing modes of production and distribution, on the succession of social systems, ways of life and ethical conceptions, on the development of democratic ideals and practices, on the accumulation and spread of knowledge and learning, on the advance of science, technology, and invention, on the abiding traditions of the unity of Western culture and its growing integration in world culture.

Thus was established a support system that sustained Western Civ courses for nearly a half-century and promoted European history as the integrating discipline of general education programs.

The challenge of other courses: Chicago, 1929–50. Survey courses, citizenship courses, great books courses, critical thinking courses—such were the names given to the experimental classes that proliferated in the 1920s. Some authorities estimate that the number of these early strivings in general education increased from two courses in 1911 to eighty-two by 1925. An educational philosophy was in search of proper subject matter. Many educators believed that Contemporary Civilization at Columbia set the example. When the American Association of University Professors evaluated new courses across the country in 1922, however, it recommended instead classes on “critical thinking.” For freshmen, the association report concluded, systems of logic, not the historical process, was the proper foundation of a general education.

No major school went further in this direction than the University of Chicago.

44 Charles T. Fitts and Fletcher H. Swift, The Construction of Orientation Courses for College Freshmen (Berkeley, 1928), 169. Most sources recognize the Amherst College course “Social and Economic Institutions” in 1914 as the first general education offering; Fitts and Swift have found earlier beginnings in a “College Life” class at Pomona College in 1911.
There, in 1931, began a truly radical departure in general education: an undergraduate college for freshmen and sophomores with an integrated curriculum on comprehensive areas of knowledge—no disciplines, no departments, and, deep in its educational philosophy, no assent to the claims of history as the prince of unity. This rejection of history as an integrating discipline obstructed the coming of the Western Civ course until after the Second World War. Success came easier elsewhere, but the eventual triumph of the course at Chicago, where everything was against it, is more revealing of the real force of Western Civ, the influence of its support system in secondary schools, and the fundamental place of the history survey in general education.

From the start, Chicago had planned to do something different with freshmen and sophomores. Founding President William Rainey Harper, judging them to be unready for "strictly university work," wanted to stick them someplace out of the way. From this first principle of separate status came the Junior College, an "ill-begotten" institution that, into the early twentieth century, was used by university departments as a training camp for young faculty and graduate assistants. In 1923, for instance, about one hundred assistants held menial teaching positions in a variety of elementary courses, and staff turnover reached an annual rate of 40 percent. With the general education movement rising across the country, early undergraduate education hit bottom at Chicago. To the rescue came Robert Maynard Hutchins.

Enemies noted that President Hutchins arrived at Chicago with the Great Depression of 1929. Supporters recorded that his coming reversed the tide of battle in a faculty debate on a "College Plan" to convert the Junior College to a compulsory general education curriculum. Great curricular revolutions, someone has claimed, require either a commanding personality above or a common faith below. At Columbia, the coming of general education required a moment of patriotic unity; at Chicago, it required a philosopher-king. Nowhere was the debate more divisive—or more "religious." For Hutchins, the university, in its most lofty sense, ascended out of the common communion of undergraduate learning: "We can never get a university," he insisted, "without general education."

Observers recorded that the content of general education at the College of the University of Chicago was worked out not by Hutchins but by faculty and deans, sometimes in response to their president, sometimes in opposition to him. All shared, however, what has been called "the Chicago idea." Basic to it was the conviction that disciplines, divided by convention into independent departments, fell naturally into larger clusters, groups of subjects connected by similar methods of inquiry. From this was formed a core curriculum of courses in three comprehensive fields: the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences. Ideally, instruction in these broad areas was intended not to transmit factual knowledge but to develop critical understanding of their distinctive organizing ideas and systems.

of logic. The result in the humanities was the so-called Aristotelian tendency to classify cultural expression in terms of conceptual categories. Artistic works were studied not within the flux of historical change, where everything was relative to time and place, but within genres, forms, or topics that were deemed to be timeless or recurring in human creative production. Wrote College Dean Clarence H. Faust, "The history of human culture, that is, the organization of an intelligible, chronological sequence of man's achievements in philosophy and the arts, has come to seem much less useful to general education than the careful study and discussion of excellent examples of these achievements." Here, in theories of approach, was the conflict between history and the Chicago idea. And where the prospects for Western Civ were concerned, "approach" was everything. Without support for history as a mode of intellectual synthesis, Chicago was a foreign country. Where the New History did not go, neither, at this point, did Western Civ.

History department files at Chicago reveal the Hutchins years as a time of protest, distrust, and fear of subjugation. Resentment lingered, for example, after a wrangle in 1934 following unofficial circulation of a mimeographed essay by Professor of English Ronald S. Crane, founder of the Chicago school of literary criticism and—to historians—embodier of its antihistorical precepts. Crane argued that the New History, in attempting to annex all disciplines, in fact left historians no discipline of their own. In presuming to integrate subjects in which they had no expert competence, he remarked, historians became amateurs in a university of professionals. All disciplines, he concluded, study the past, and specialists know the technical history of their trade in a way that historians cannot: "Other things being equal, the only histories of thought that can be taken seriously will be those written by philosophers; the only good economic histories will be written by economists; the only good histories of art are those written by men trained in aesthetic analysis."

Where every discipline was its own historian, there was no longer a discipline of history. To Crane, nothing so revealed the poverty of the New History as its claim to "integration" and "synthesis." Writing sweeping summaries of the past, he contended, was the work for popularizers and required little more than common sense and practical experience.

Historians replied with meetings, manifestoes, and much "thrashing over of matters" among themselves. At a time when the New History emboldened historians elsewhere to expand the claims of their discipline, historians at Chicago had to defend their very existence in the university. Beginning on high, this debate soon spilled down into the College course in Humanities, where historian Ferdinand Schevill was working as course director to develop a distinctive Western Civilization approach. When introduced as a core course in the new general education curriculum in 1931, the class was based on an earlier offering in
European history, now hollowed out in order to make room for material from other disciplines. The College catalog announced, “This course uses the materials of history as a foundation and framework for the presentation of the literature, philosophy, religion, and art of the civilizations which have contributed most conspicuously to the shaping of the contemporary outlook on life.”

In the years before his retirement in 1935, Schevill, an old-school lecturer of considerable fascination, made the course into a popular attraction in the Chicago area; but thereafter staff members from other humanities disciplines began to close in on his successor. The course, they complained to historian Arthur P. Scott, was too historical. To them, history as a medium of integration in the humanities was a form of reductionism that failed to provide independent aesthetic standards by which students could evaluate cultural works. Everything, instead, was interpreted as an “expression” of historical time and place. Historians, they objected, were concerned with factors that conditioned literary and artistic creations; they, in contrast, were concerned with the value and truth of literature and art. Scott complained in response that history was being reduced to mere chronology and that those in humanities already monopolized the substance of the course. But, in fact, the eclipse of history was only beginning. In 1942 the course was converted to analytical methods more consistent with the Chicago idea, and history virtually vanished in the new “Four Year College,” the radical Hutchins experiment combining high school juniors and seniors with college freshmen and sophomores in an integral general education program. In a school founded on faith in the unity of knowledge, no place remained for instruction in the unifying methods of history.

Instead, the crown course of the new curriculum was “Observation, Interpretation, and Integration” (OII), a class providing a final, philosophical synthesis of the whole four-year program. Recalled sociologist Daniel Bell, who worked for a time in the Hutchins College, “The OII course represented, to the extent that any single course can, the specific ‘ideological’ commitments of the Chicago curriculum.” Complaints increased, however, that students lacked historical knowledge and the “time sense.” Finally, after much debate over this “history question,” the faculty in 1946 authorized an experimental Western Civilization course to be placed opposite OII in the final year of instruction; Western Civ was to integrate the curriculum by the historical method, OII by the analytical principles proper to the Chicago idea. As a result, Western Civ not only entered by the back door but also stood isolated at the end of the curriculum, a “conclusion” to a program based on a different educational philosophy. In the encounter of Western Civ and OII, however, the New History and the Chicago Idea met head to head.

Decisive to the outcome was a return toward “normalcy” that followed the departure of Hutchins from Chicago in 1950. As his successors dismantled the more unconventional philosophical structures of the College, OII went adrift, foundered, and was eventually abandoned. Conversely, Western Civ, moored in

52 On this quarrel, see UC, SCD, Arthur P. Scott Papers, box 1, folder 3.
secondary school history classes and more familiar general education ideas, became securely fixed in the curriculum. The ironic conclusion, noted Bell, was that the course alien to the Chicago program became the most enduring.54

The original Chicago version of Western Civ, however, was very different from the class at Columbia. Both were the products of committees in which representatives from various disciplines worked to compromise their differences. At Columbia, the members from the start accepted historical chronology as the organizing structure of the course; at Chicago, on the contrary, this was the most contentious issue of all. Here the analytical methods of the Chicago idea did battle with the genetic principles of the New History. Struggling during 1947–48 to form a majority among themselves, the committee members finally pieced together a course based on a topical or “problems” approach.55 In form, selected topics ranging from the Greek polis to Bolshevik Russia were aligned in the syllabus like—in the phrase of one committee member—“a string of beads,” placed in chronological order but connected only loosely by the line of historical continuity. Exceptional—but necessary for the support of committee members in the humanities—was the insertion at various places along the “string” of special topics on cultural themes, such as the assignments on “The Representation of Space in Art,” which followed the topic on the Renaissance and Reformation. The overall design was to stress “analysis” over “genesis,” concepts over chronology, and the internal world of the topic over the process of historical change.

Furthering this purpose was the emphasis—traditional at Chicago—on source readings and discussion methods in the course (one common lecture and three discussion sections per week), and committee opposition to the primacy of lectures and textbooks. Once in operation, however, the class appeared fractured by “discontinuities” and chronological gaps. In remedy, the teaching staff devised “bridge” lectures to connect topics, and staff chairman William H. McNeill authored a textbook to supply the historical narrative that was missing from the course. Thus the “story” of history was placed in the background, with students generally expected to reconstruct it on their own. In the original form of Contemporary Civ at Columbia, dominated by the evolutionism so central to the “progressive” outlook of James Harvey Robinson, textbooks carried the class, providing the central narrative on the central civilization in world history. At Chicago, however, where selected topics were the main focus, McNeill’s History Handbook of Western Civilization (1953) was improvised as a kind of manual for historical reference.56

Many of these arrangements derived from the array of forces in the founding committee and the nature of the teaching staff in the early years of the course, when about half of the personnel were in fields outside history. Looking back, some historians remember Western Civ at this time as a course in bondage to other

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54 Bell, The Reforming of General Education, 36. Today the class continues as a required course (with options) for most sophomores.

55 Deliberations can be followed in the records of committee member William T. Hutchinson of the Department of History; see UC, SCD, Hutchinson Papers, box 19, folder 5.

56 McNeill has discussed the early course; see his “Integration: History of Western Civilization,” in The Idea and Practice of General Education, 225–32.
disciplines and antihistorical ideas. Liberation came in the circumstances after Hutchins's exit in 1950, when those in other disciplines dropped away from the staff, the special cultural topics were removed from the syllabus, and the course moved under the protection of the Department of History. Significantly, however, the topical approach to subject matter was retained. A method of organization that historians once accepted as a matter of necessity they came to recognize as an effective strategy of instruction. The story of the Chicago course, for this reason, demonstrates an important development in the larger history of Western Civ classes after 1945: the quest for new principles of order.

James Harvey Robinson developed a general history extending across all human activity but narrowly limited by a perceived genetic principle of historical development. Incorporated into Western Civ Courses, this version of history, designed to help undergraduates find their bearings, soon lost its own. One reason was an inherent tendency in the New History to expand and sprawl; another was the deterioration of Robinson's principles of selection. The politics of the 1930s, for example, ravaged the assumptions of Robinson and his successors on the progressive course of events. Reviewers of Carleton J. H. Hayes's new textbook in 1936 noted, in this regard, that fascism and dictatorships in Europe had brought a strain of pessimism to his historical outlook. This decline of faith in a central direction in history opened Western Civ courses to subject matter from all directions, to all of the "aberrant" events, lost causes, and silent peoples that Robinson had swept away with the clutter of the old general history. "We have probably put into these introductory courses by now all that they will hold," explained Smith College historian Sidney Packard in 1940; "the next step must be selection and omission, a process which calls both for judgment and courage."

Textbook writers confronted the same task. From the start, Western Civ traveled by textbook, and it was the success of particular works that helped standardize the course across the country. Indeed, the books spawned by Western Civ classes—a mass market in college textbooks if there ever was one—are a study in themselves. Condensed, the story is this: larger history begat larger textbooks. Some observers believed that the ultimate was reached in 1942 with Walter T. Walbank and Alastair M. Taylor's Civilization: Past and Present, two volumes of over one thousand double-columned pages, surveying the "history of man—his government, economic, social, religious, intellectual, and esthetic activities—from the earliest times to the present, in Europe, Asia, and in the Americas." After this, remarked a reviewer, the mission was to cut and slash. Thus, by the start of the Second World War, both teaching and textbooks in Western Civ were in need of new methods to relieve the congestion of material caused by a deterioration of the old approach.

57 Interview with former course chairman Karl J. Weintraub, September 26, 1979.


59 For the results of Packard's survey of sixty college courses, see his "The Introductory College Course in History," Social Education, 9 (1940): 538–53.

This process, carried through after the war, was influenced by a profound change in methods of intellectual inquiry that overspread all areas of knowledge. Scholars have described it as a "conceptual revolution," a shift from modes of investigation developed to verify facts and processes fixed in reality to the construction of conceptual models used to interpret a world in which all knowledge was relative to the knower. In historical studies, this involved the decline in evolutionary concepts of development and, as a result, the depreciation of historical narrative as the primary mode of explanation. Robinson himself once pondered whether an expanded history, having gained the whole world, would lose its soul. For him, the calling of the historian was to describe "the process of life and change." Now some of the best historical minds came to see this style of historiography as an expression of nineteenth-century evolutionism. In process was a fundamental reorientation in which history opened to the social sciences and methods of conceptual analysis, and descriptions of genesis and growth made way for the study of social phenomena, ideological systems, and the "structure" of historical periods.

Where these ideas trickled down into Western Civ courses, many instructors moved independently toward the forms of instruction that characterized the Chicago class. At Columbia, a postwar observer noted a "striking change" in the Contemporary Civilization course (CCA). No longer was the stress on historical continuity, but on the social and intellectual configuration of particular epochs, with little attention to the details of transition from one time period to another. In sum, Robinson's history had been traded for a "string of beads." Standard textbooks were replaced by a volume of background readings, and, after 1945, all instruction converted to discussion of source materials. Half a century earlier, in "the great debate over the source method" at the AHA in 1897, historians upheld the supremacy of textbooks over primary materials and knowledge of the historical process over the habits of critical analysis engendered by the source method. Now, at some schools, scholars were reversing the order of things.

Western Civ was passing beyond the conventions of a no longer New History. Being left behind as well, however, was the original organizing idea of the course. As new documents collections, "problems" pamphlets, and case studies involved students in "doing" history rather than simply learning it, and as the source method and topical approach fragmented the sense of historical continuity, the unifying idea of genetic development was diminished. Wrote Daniel Bell of developments in Contemporary Civ at Columbia, "What was gained by the addition of original material was, in part, offset by the lack of a consistent interpretative framework." More importantly, such Western Civ courses, in departing from instruction in a

62 Charles H. Russell, "The Required Programs of General Education in the Social Sciences at Columbia College, the College of the University of Chicago, and Harvard College" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1961), 60.
65 Bell, The Reforming of General Education, 212.
common body of knowledge, became at the same time less defensible as general education.

Events at Chicago reaffirmed the central position of history in general education. Already, however, Western Civ courses were living on credit. Therefore, when general education entered a period of crisis in the 1960s, it was inevitable that Western Civ would follow. Having traced the rise of the course in connection with this movement for a common learning, it remains now to trace its decline.

The second world war gave a second surge to the general education movement.66 Members of President Truman’s prestigious Commission on Higher Education, confronting a human wave of college-bound war veterans, recommended in 1947 federal funding for more of everything on campus; but general education, they concluded, was the really “crucial task” for American colleges. “In the nation,” exclaimed the dean of the College of the University of Chicago in 1950, “general education is at last in vogue. Its principles bid fair to become the operative educational theory of the remainder of our century.”67

Not so. War veterans brought a new seriousness to college programs. In 1957, Sputnik revealed the new seriousness of the Soviet challenge in education. In the name of higher standards, specialization returned in force, departments raised up honors programs and freshman seminars, and core programs began to break apart. The Department of History’s “take-over” of Western Civ at Chicago was but one episode in the waning of the general education ideal. Another was the dissolution of CCB, after thirty years’ travail, as a sophomore requirement at Columbia in 1959, when social science departments objected that their vocabulary had become too technical for general education courses.68 These developments, however, were only part of much broader changes in general education requirements at both schools, in which restraints loosened, electives returned, and areas of specialization were introduced. In brief, the elective system was breaking through the lines of general education, threatening the dogmas that lay at the center of its educational philosophy: the unity of knowledge and the ideal of a common learning. This challenge to general education meant a challenge to Western Civ as well. For connected to the absolutes of general education were the absolutes of the original Western Civ idea: the belief in the oneness of history, in the potential of the historical method to integrate human experience, and in Western history as the “high history” of mankind.

The coming crisis was forecast in developments at Harvard after 1945. There the forces of general education, after having conquered the very fortress of the elective system, were thrown into confusion at the moment of their greatest success. Moved

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67 Higher Education for American Democracy, 49; and F. Champion Ward, Foreword to The Idea and Practice of General Education, v.
68 “Report of the President’s Committee on the Contemporary Civilization Courses in Columbia College” (October 1960), Columbia University, Colombiana Collection.
by the experience of the Second World War, the Harvard faculty in 1945 approved in principle a committee report that thereafter became scripture in the general education movement. *General Education in a Free Society* (dubbed the Redbook by virtue of its Harvard crimson cover) anointed general education with the fair name of Harvard, giving it a legitimacy that convinced college faculties across the country of the value of a common learning. But the Harvard faculty had second thoughts. The Redbook plan for compulsory core courses in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences gave way in debate to a “temporary” experiment permitting two to four optional courses in each of these areas. With time, what was temporary became permanent, and two to four options became more, and more. The elective system, thrown out the door, came back in through the window. Thus, from the start, the object of the whole exercise—a common educational experience—was lost.

Lost as well was a planned Harvard version of the Western Civ class, projected in the Redbook as the core course in the social sciences.69 In rejecting the course, Harvard faculty members, in principle, rejected the historical pre-eminence of Western man. “To center a course exclusively on the Western tradition,” objected one opponent, “would merely help to perpetuate the old myth of civilization as a monopoly of the regions bordering on the Atlantic.”70 Nor, objected others, was the historical approach sufficient to encompass the social sciences. When, therefore, two optional courses were approved, Western Civ at Harvard died without seeing the light of day. The options lived and multiplied. From two freshman-sophomore general education courses in the social sciences in 1949, the number increased to four courses by 1950, seven by 1960, and fifteen by 1970. An educational philosophy of unity and compulsion thus led to a curriculum of diversity and choice. The general education catalog, cracked a Harvard dean, was beginning to resemble the Manhattan telephone directory.

This breakup of an educational creed coincided with the breakup of the world that inspired it. Much of the deep structure of general education lay in a psychology developed during a half-century of U.S. involvement in the “crusade for democracy” in Europe. In logic that mixed patriotism and pedagogy, educators equated core courses with common values, the need for unity in the republic with the need for unity in the curriculum, and the Western military alliance with Western civilization. With the passing of the Cold War, however, there passed also the illusions that sustained general education as a civic religion. America’s new hegemony in the West eroded earlier notions of a common partnership with Europe, and the rise of the Third World confronted the United States with an international environment of polycentrism and cultural diversity. Europe was no longer the world. Emerging were other peoples, other histories, a globe of historic diversity beyond the imagination of earlier Westerners, a cosmos where pluralism replaced the “oneness” of history and where human experience could not be

69 The course “Western Thought and Institutions” is described in *General Education for a Free Society*, 213–17.

ordered into a unilineal pattern of development. As educators came to recognize the world in this way, they recognized, at the same time, the poverty of the Western Civ course.

The decline of "high history": Amherst, 1954–66. As noted earlier, the Harvard approach to large classes was to station a dominant figure at the center of things, to identify the course with his personality, and to unite the class from the lecture platform. In the Western Civ course at Amherst College, that dominant figure was Laurence Bradford Packard. During his graduate student years at Harvard from 1909 to 1913, Packard was a teaching assistant to Charles Homer Haskins in History 1 and thereafter was one of those who spread the influence of this famous course to other schools. Packard would gladly teach. His reputation as a dynamic lecturer was already made—to the neglect of research and publication—when he came to Amherst from the University of Rochester in 1927, and immediately he established his new European history survey as the most popular elective course in the college. Within a short time, it was attracting over 80 percent of all freshmen.71 When the general education wave hit Amherst after World War II, therefore, Packard's class was converted in 1947 into a compulsory core course in the social sciences: "The Development of Western Civilization: A Survey of European History and an Introduction to the Social Sciences."

Packard loved the course, taught it every year, and never wanted to leave it. He was, in this sense, one of the exceptions to the rule: professors voted to compel general education courses but declined to teach them. But Packard was little moved by the spirit of general education. Ideally, all courses in the Amherst program were to conform to the "big ideas" of the general education curriculum of 1947: (1) the integration of disciplines, and (2) the introduction of discussion methods in small-group situations.72 Packard's class, however, true to its roots in the old History 1 at Harvard, remained largely a history survey, with only a sprinkling of subject matter from the social sciences.73 Nor was Packard a man given to discussion methods—either in the classroom or at department meetings. Therefore in Western Civ at Amherst (three lectures and two discussion-section meetings per week), interdisciplinary analysis was subordinated to historical narrative, discussion methods to the lecture system, and the section staff to the lecturer. Packard held the ship on course, the others worked below deck.

In the manner of the great men at Harvard, Packard gave his class a consistency and continuity of direction that sustained it through changes in historical thought and curricular philosophy. Stated differently, the course grew old with him. For others involved, therefore, Packard's retirement in 1954 was a liberation. The course changed radically in the following years as a succession of instructors tried

71 For information on Packard, I am indebted to his friend and colleague Professor Alfred F. Havighurst of Amherst. Also see Havighurst, "Remarks . . . on the Occasion of the Announcement of the Laurence B. Packard Memorial Collection in the Robert Frost Library, April 30, 1977,” Amherst College Archives.
new approaches. In the end, however, the ship went down with its captain. During 1962–63, an influx of young specialists in non-Western areas of history came to represent new interests within the Department of History. First, they wanted to extend coverage in Western Civ to other civilizations; finally, they wanted to scrap the class altogether. In 1966, as a retreat from general education spread across the nation, Western Civ at Amherst was replaced by a historiography course designed by these new men to be “innovative,” elective, more practical—and less Eurocentric. “Traditional courses left us dissatisfied,” one of them explained. “There are, of course, telling arguments for acquaintance with some portion of the sweep of human development, . . . but there seem to be no overwhelmingly convincing reasons for choosing one period or area over others as the introduction to history.”

Thus lapsed at Amherst the notion of the European past as “high history,” a development central to the human experience. Elsewhere, observers noted similar developments: the “intellectual capital” of the Western Civ course was being used up. So was the moral capital. The American way of war in Vietnam caused many students to ponder the pre-eminence of Western history. At the 1976 AHA session on the Western Civ class, Amherst historian Frederic L. Cheyette bid good riddance to the grand old course. Despite its claim to be universal, he asserted, Western Civ in truth was limited and provincial, a history of those who were men, white, Christian, and European. Others had entered history, not merely the forgotten people of the Third World, but the newly discovered peoples of Europe as well: women, children, Jews, and peasants. “There is not a history,” Cheyette remarked; instead, there are “many possible histories.”

Nor, further, is there a Western tradition. Cheyette complained that teachers of Western Civ had merchandised a fixed and idealized conception of the European past. Their method was to lift ideas and events out of history, standardize them, and declare them to be “representative” of trends and values inherent in the Western experience. Illustrative, perhaps, is an Amherst freshman’s description of proceedings in Laurence Packard’s class in 1948:

In our history course we would not be concerned with the fall of the Bastille as a particular event at one place in time, but as a manifestation of a revolutionary spirit that later overwhelmed all of France. Monarchist government was on the way out at that time, and we speak of the Bastille as an event illustrative of a trend of resistance toward the monarchy. Our method of dealing with historical events is one in which we relate them in terms of trends of political, social, and economic thought through the ages.

In any case, the purpose of the technique, according to Cheyette, was to propagate a perception of European history as the progress of liberty and reason. To his mind, this revealed the “socializing function” of Western Civ. It explained the place

75 Bell, The Reforming of General Education, 211.
76 McNeill et al., “Beyond Western Civilization,” 536.
of the course in the history of education as well as its origins in the sprawling, immigrant America of the early twentieth century. "Western Civilization," Cheyette concluded, "like other creations of the General Education movement, had as one of its many burdens the task of acculturating Jewish kids from the Lower East Side, the fair-haired children of mid-Western towns, and the heirs and heiresses of Los Angeles janitors—the new clientele of the expanding university system—into the world of upper middle class America." 78

Certainly the course was a celebration of Western culture. But not everyone will agree with Cheyette that it was a form of thought control. More serious, however, because more generally shared, was his premise that history was no longer "one." Here, where Western Civ and general education came together, the consequences were plain. When there is no longer a history, when history ceases to have a central narrative, there is no longer a logical necessity for students to know either the same facts or the same history. The conclusion is this: just as, not long ago, scholars of the classics could not make a special case for the high culture of Greece and Rome in the college curriculum, so historians can no longer make a special case for the "high history" of Western civilization.

THE DISESTABLISHMENT OF GENERAL EDUCATION: STANFORD, 1967–69. In the same year that Western Civ died at Amherst, Daniel Bell presented to the Columbia faculty his brilliant report on the need to renovate the general education program. It succumbed to similar causes. "Through some persuasion of the Zeitgeist," commented a Columbia scholar, "the majority of the faculty were no longer concerned with general education in the large and honorific meaning of the phrase." 79 Across the nation, as students rose against requirements, they encountered faculties already prepared to retreat. Spirit had gone out of the general education ideal, and deans and secretaries were left to enforce the dead letter of core course requirements. At Stanford University, professors called it "general education by the registrar's office."

This crisis of general education was particularly devastating at Stanford as a result of a university self-study carried out at the most extreme stage of campus unrest during 1967–68. At a time when other schools tried to protect their programs from the storm, Stanford opened all of the windows. The national press described the self-study report, The Study of Education at Stanford, as "the most comprehensive effort to find new answers" to curricular problems. Today, however, it reads like a historical document, a manifesto of the 1960s, filled with the rhetoric of "relevance," liberation, and self-expression. "Let the objective of curricular planning be to encourage the faculty member to teach what he likes to teach," the report concluded, "and the student to learn what seems vital to him." 80

78 McNeill et al., "Beyond Western Civilization," 534.
Against this return to "curricular do as you please," the Western Civ course could not stand.

Thus the fall of Western Civ at Stanford was inseparable from the fall of general education. The course there had been the pride of the general education curriculum (called the General Studies Program), and, as a requirement for almost all freshmen, was virtually a rite of initiation to the university. "Civ is the General Studies course *par excellence,*" observed a faculty member in 1967. "As we conceive that course, so we conceive the whole general education of Stanford undergraduates. If Western Civ were radically rethought . . . , the entire structure of General Studies would have to be rethought with it."81

Historically, the course at Stanford was formed in 1935 to replace a required freshman course in Citizenship, which, after patriotic beginnings in 1920, had run out of faculty support and student interest. Rather than building on existing offerings in European history, a committee of the Department of History designed Western Civ from models at other schools.82 Influential in these deliberations was a young department member who, as a graduate student at Columbia, had taught in the Contemporary Civilization course at Barnard College. Maxwell Hicks Savelle was the major force in bringing the ideas of the Columbia course to Stanford. In opposition to support for the lecture method, he won the main battle for the discussion approach (three discussion sections and one lecture per week). Thereafter, as director of the class through the first ten years of its existence, Savelle worked to promote the Columbia plan for staff power and independence.83 Unlike the interdisciplinary staff of Contemporary Civilization at Columbia, however, the Western Civ staff at Stanford remained a satellite of the history department. Historians appointed the course director, delivered the weekly lectures, recruited graduate-student instructors—and made the course a smashing success.

In a committee report in 1956 that introduced the General Studies Program at Stanford, Western Civ was identified as the most popular course among undergraduates and its instruction methods recommended as a model for the new curriculum.84 With this recognition came the financial resources to appoint full-time staff members from among some of the best graduate students in history available at universities across the country. They arrived just in time for the events of the 1960s. As the retreat from general education commenced, and as the Department of History relaxed surveillance over Western Civ, a staff of about twenty new men, holding temporary faculty appointments, came into control, year by year, of the syllabus, the lectures, and finally the course itself.

What followed is best understood in connection with the labor problem in general education. In a profession where advancement depended on expertise and publication in specialized fields, professors often preferred to leave the work of

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81 Memorandum, Subcommittee on the History of Western Civilization, April 1967, Stanford University Archives, History Department Papers [hereafter, SA, HDP], carton 21, folder 361.
82 See the committee report, undated, in SA, HDP, carton 5, folder 126.
84 Robert Hooper and Hubert Marshall, *The Undergraduate in the University: A Report to the Faculty by the Executive Committee of the Stanford Study of Undergraduate Education* (Stanford, 1957), 96–97.
general education to an academic proletariat of temporary personnel and graduate teaching assistants. At many schools, the “TA” became a classic figure of the Western Civ class, at once sustaining the course and limiting it, bringing the benefit of cheap labor and the problems of inexperience and staff instability. In part, methods of instruction at Harvard were developed to give substance and support to a class maintained by unpracticed assistants. “The section men have little effect on the enjoyment of the course,” a confidential course guide counseled freshmen concerning History 1 in 1934, and opinion polls generally recorded that students judged discussion sections to be less important than lectures. In styling its Western Civ course to the Columbia pattern, however, Stanford adopted an ideal of instruction based not on the charisma of the lecturer but on the chemistry of the discussion section.

The Columbia system, in fact, was developed in reaction to the “display of personality” involved in the mass-lecture method and the use of green, ever-changing graduate assistants hired on the cheap. If, at Harvard, the class “belonged” to the lecturer, at Columbia it belonged to the staff, a team of regular faculty members sharing conviction in the discussion approach. Declared Dean Harry Carman in 1946,

For many years we have given in Columbia College no required courses of the pontifical type, in part because the students know the defects of the type, but principally because the man-to-man effectiveness of a proved instructor, young or old, with a small group . . . has had much to do with the active undergraduate interest in the introductory work, and with the easy and steady improvement of the courses themselves.

To promote consensus, democratic debate and “workers' control” were made the mode of staff work at Columbia. The Contemporary Civ class, in consequence, was a course in motion, geared for change and self-correction, with committees of students and staff involved in constant review and revision. “Contemporary Civilization was literally born revising itself,” wrote a faculty member in 1959. “There has always been and there will always be a Contemporary Civilization Revision Committee.”

But, just as the course was strengthened in the early period by the shared beliefs of its staff, so in the 1960s was it weakened by the loss of faith in general education. A report of 1960 describes the condition of the staff as “alarming,” with morale low, turnover high, ranking professors few in number, and various junior instructors merely going through the motions. Various observers have remarked that such staffing problems were as responsible as intellectual problems for the crisis in general education courses; and Daniel Bell noted that intellectual problems were sometimes staffing problems in disguise. In retrospect, however, it appears that

85 Harvard Crimson Confidential Guide to Freshman Courses, 1934, p. 22, HUA.
86 A College Program in Action, 23–24. On criticism at Columbia of the “wholly deplorable” results of the strict lecture method, see Lionel Trilling, “The Van Amringe and Keppel Eras,” in Miner, A History of Columbia University, 40–41.
87 Buchler, “Reconstruction in the Liberal Arts,” 57.
88 “Report of the President's Committee on the Contemporary Civilization Courses,” 2–3; and Bell, The Reforming of General Education, 66.
the Contemporary Civ staff at Columbia did not begin to spin apart until after centrifugal forces built up within the course itself. When textbooks were abandoned and new methods of history developed after 1945, source readings proliferated and the syllabus began to clog. After criticism in 1957 that the gathering disorder was giving students "misleading conceptions" of scholarship, a trend developed within the staff toward individual experiment and personal initiative. Workers' control converted to private enterprise. The ideal of a common syllabus—honored since 1919—gave way in 1964 to the expedient of individual selection in reading assignments. In 1968, the famous, common source book *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West*, used since 1946 and widely adopted at other schools, was replaced by a choice of paperbacks. So, after a half-century, the commonality of learning that had made the Contemporary Civilization course at Columbia the inspiration of the general education movement was lost. If the Harvard system risked limiting the syllabus to the intellectual perspective of one man, the Columbia system risked making it all things to all staff members. One system ran the danger of authoritarianism, the other of anarchy.

By 1967, when the self-study of the General Studies Program at Stanford began, anarchy was already well advanced within the Western Civ staff. As a staff member during 1963–66, the present writer witnessed the process of disintegration. The discussion section was the world of the staff, and, left to ourselves, we reconstructed the course in its terms, disconnecting everything that was not directly involved in our work there. Textbooks were demoted to reference materials. Lectures, largely ignored in section discussions (and poorly attended by students as a result), were reduced in number and finally, when instructors began to stay away as well, eliminated altogether. Just as, at Amherst, the reign of the lecturer resulted in the subordination of discussion sections, the reign of the staff at Stanford resulted in the subjugation of the lectures.

"The instructors sabotaged the lectures," a member of the history department complained sometime later. But no one spoke at the time. In effect, the major undergraduate course in the university was turned over without challenge to the most junior faculty members. For us, the road was open; it led to experimentation, eclecticism, and the same kind of "personal preference" syllabus that ended in disorder at Columbia. We thought, in teaching from personal perspectives, that we were deepening the course. Instead, we were digging its grave. Irresistibly, the impression spread among students that the class was in confusion. Under the cover of one course, a freshman complained to the campus newspaper, different instructors taught different things.

Like the students of these protest years, the members of the self-study committee had a way of asking hard questions. What goals, they wanted to know, united a class taught in such separate ways? Why, if Western Civ was no longer a common educational experience, did it remain a common requirement? And what, precisely, was that body of historical knowledge that all educated men should know? As

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89 Department memorandum, 1968, SA, HDP, carton 21, folder 361.
individuals, historians replied differently to these terrible questions; as a department, they did not even try. Other faculty members watched in puzzlement as, throughout the proceedings, the Department of History remained silent in the face of assaults upon the course. "They think it curious," remarked the department chairman to his colleagues, "that the Department has neglected to take a more vigorous stand."  

But the compulsory class, it seemed, was no longer worth fighting for. "First of all," wrote Western Civ course director Paul S. Seaver, "many freshmen are unhappy with the requirement and, lacking motivation, find the course a source of frustration. . . . Secondly, many of us as faculty are no longer convinced that there is a standard or specifiable body of knowledge or information necessary for a liberal education."  

A poll in 1968 revealed that 59 percent of the students in Western Civ believed that the course should be a university requirement. Too many historians, however, had lost faith. Accordingly, the Department of History in the following year did not oppose a recommendation to discontinue Western Civ as a required course. Thus ended, after thirty-four years, the privileged place of history in the education of all undergraduates at Stanford. Further, the disbanding of the course coincided with the disestablishment of the General Studies Program as a whole. Faculty opinion had turned against massive courses on massive subjects, courses that pretended to all-inclusiveness, to interdisciplinarity, that attempted "to squeeze the universe into a ball and roll it toward some overwhelming question." Instead, small was beautiful. The new ideal of introductory instruction at Stanford was the freshman seminar, classes that were small, elective, limited in discipline, varied in subject matter. In a phrase, they were the antithesis of general education. The Study of Education at Stanford concluded,  

General education, as epitomized by the Chicago curriculum of the Hutchins era and the Columbia two-year sequences in Humanities and Contemporary Civilization, is dead or dying. The Harvard general education ideal, as defined in the famous Redbook of 1946, did not ultimately flourish in its own birthplace. . . . The general education ideal is totally impracticable as a dominant curricular pattern in the modern university.

Someone has said that all curricula are essentially religious. At Stanford—and many other locations as well—faith in the religion of a common learning broke in the 1960s. "General education in America is now a disaster area," lamented the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1977. Today, as noted at the outset, educators are attempting to unify the curriculum again. Educators too,

91 David M. Potter, department memorandum, January 29, 1968, SA, HDP.  
92 Seaver, letter of September 10, 1968, reproduced in SES, 2: 75–76.  
94 See the Report of the Committee on the General Studies Program of the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, 1967, printed in SES, 2: 85–89.  
95 SES, 2: 9, 24.  
however, can return from a revolution having learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The curriculum cannot be ordered back together in the old way. Compulsion was inherent in the old idea of a common learning: what all educated men should know, all students should be required to study. Critics have described this as a philosophy of “education without students,” a utopia of the academic mind in which the young are molded to a faculty image of “the educated man.” When, in the last century, the elective system first gave students a voice, they swept away the old classical curriculum; when they spoke again in the 1960s, they nearly demolished the general education curriculum as well. Now, in reaction, wiser faculties are reviving general education in forms less rigid and doctrinaire. Observers at Harvard, for example, have noted that the new core curriculum there is neither a core curriculum nor even very new, but rather a more coherent pattern of electives.97 Inevitably, this transition to more flexible forms of general education involves a transition as well to more varied forms of freshman history.

Thus arises again what Charles Homer Haskins described in 1905 as “the most difficult question which now confronts the college teacher of history”: the nature of the first-year course. Here all thinking must begin afresh. “There is, as I see it,” Harvard historian Giles Constable commented wisely at the AHA session on Western Civ in 1976, no ideal survey course, of which the model has somehow been lost in the confusion of the past decade and which is waiting to be resurrected for the next generation. Western civilization succeeded admirably for the period for which it was designed, but each generation must construct its own introduction to history in terms both of the scholarly nature of the subject and the needs and interests of students at that time.98

Nostalgia is likely to remain. The fathers of Western Civ will be venerated for resisting the fragmentation of knowledge, for calling specialists to the task of teaching general history, for involving freshmen in discussion of source materials, and for implanting history in a paramount place in undergraduate education. But it is easier to bury the course than to praise it. Most historians have long concluded that the world has outgrown the old Western Civ ideas. Others will be so instructed by the story told here. Truly those who do not learn from the history of this wilted course are doomed to repeat it.

98 McNeill et al., “Beyond Western Civilization,” 532. Historians discussed the introductory course again at the 1980 annual meeting.