



Special Edition of The Young IPA Podcast – Interview with Mark Bauerlein

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Mark Bauerlein is Professor of English at Emory University, and has been teaching at Emory since 1989.

He has been published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Washington Post*, *TLS*, and *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He is also the author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*, a dire report on the intellectual life of young adults and a timely warning of its impact on American democracy and culture.

On 9 April 2018, Mark's article '[The Overthrow of Great Books](#)' was published by *Minding the Campus*. In the article, Mark explained how great works of English literature were being phased out of English syllabuses across America due to the rise of identity politics and the resentment of English professors.

Mark's assessment of the state of English teaching in America is concerning, and serves as a



warning to Australia.

On 19 May, Mark joined *The Young IPA Podcast* to discuss the article, why teaching the great books is so important and what identity politics is doing to our universities.

You can listen to the interview here:

<https://ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Bauerlein-For-Transcript.mp3>

Below is an edited transcript of the discussion.

James Bolt – We are now joined by Mark Bauerlein, Professor of English at Emory University. So Mark is the author of a really great article on the ‘Great Books’ and the threat that they’re under in American universities.

I’ll do a bit of an introduction just in case our listeners haven’t heard of you. So, professor at Emory University. In 2008, Mark published *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future or Don’t Trust Anyone Under 30*. And he’s a strong advocate for the teaching of the great books in western universities.

So in this article that you wrote for *Minding the Campus* called ‘The Overthrow of the Great Books,’ you talk about how famous works of English literature are under siege in American universities. So what are these books and why do you think they’ve been overthrown or are under siege?

Mark Bauerlein – Well, there is the ideological or multicultural problem in that great books traditionally have been aligned with Western Civilization, which means they’re authored by a lot of dead white males. And haven’t we had enough of them? Isn’t it time to look at other things? So they are partly an expression of a tradition that simply needed to be displaced in the eyes of a lot of people. And that project had a fair degree of resentment. Ressentiment, as Nietzsche put it, where you got people coming along who simply didn’t like the idea of calling these things ‘great’.

I proposed a program for great books once, and a colleague once said “You know, when you imply that certain books are ‘great’, then you’re implying that other books that we teach aren’t great.” Well, I just let that on the table stay because it was such a patent truth – that some books are great and most books aren’t great. The problem is that they see that you end up saying the people who teach those not-so-great books aren’t as good as the people who teach the great books. And I wouldn’t go that far, but I would say that there are distinctions in the activities going on there.

So that’s one thing: The multiculturalist resentment against this tradition that seems too narrow and identified with one demographic group. The other thing is they’re hard, they take a lot of time and effort. *Paradise Lost* is not an easy read. I think it’s absolutely fantastic. I love delving into it. But it takes time and effort. And the sad thing is that a lot of my colleagues who’ve gotten PhDs in



English or in other languages and literatures – they haven't done their homework. They've taken the easy way out. They haven't become erudite, well-read individuals. Maybe they've done too much contemporary literature, maybe they've read a little theory that allows them to spin out interpretations in a facile way. But they don't have the depth.

I mean, I have been in meetings with people working up education standards for high school English, and I when I mentioned that we've got to retain the great Age of English Satire — John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift. I said, "We've got to teach Dryden Absalom and Achitophel" I get nothing. Because they haven't read those books, they haven't read those poems. That's just another reason why people really get nervous about this tradition. It takes a lot of homework.

Peter Gregory – Mark, you've gone through a very interesting transition yourself. You used to be a Democrat, now you're a Republican. You used to be an atheist, now you're a Catholic. Has this transition fed into your fight for the great books? Has it been a thing that's happened concurrently?

MB – It really works in the other direction. I used to be a secular atheist, liberal kind of guy. I would never vote for a Republican because I thought they were all either stupid or greedy. But I was always an education conservative. And in fact, when you go back to the mid-20th century in America and England, the left-wingers were devoted to this tradition in education because they said that denying the working classes the study of Shakespeare and Homer is a way of keeping them down. Why should the upper crust get Hamlet and the children of miners not get Hamlet?

So studying the great books in the old days, used to be actually a progressive project. It was a way of giving the working classes the chance for class mobility, for climbing the income ladder. Well, that changed over the course of the 20th century, and the great books and the classics became again a kind of elite conservative project. Well, I was always committed to that simply by virtue of the fact that when I was 17 and 18 years old and was becoming a rabid atheist, I ate Nietzsche up. I read Freud, especially Freud on the psychology of faith and religion. I read Nietzsche on the fact that Jesus Christ was the greatest nihilist who ever lived. That was Nietzsche's interpretation of Jesus, as a nihilist in the sense that Jesus destroyed all worldly hierarchies. He put children first. He equated kings and beggars. For Nietzsche, this made him the great leveller of everything.

Well, I loved this stuff. This is where I went when I lost my faith in God. Boy, was I taken by a lot of these great thinkers. And I almost made a religion out of this tradition. This wasn't unusual. I mean, there were a lot of people in Victorian England who made a kind of religion out of literature as a replacement for orthodox Christianity.

So when I saw the Left turn against the great books, that actually inspired me to think more broadly about my conservatism. And then I had a child and realized so many liberal aspects of culture were actually quite awful for children.

JB – Absolutely. So to go back to the great books for a second, you brought up before how a lot of the opposition to the great books is driven by resentment, which was a really interesting part of



the article. I also want know if you see the influence of identity politics in American universities as being underpinning a lot of the opposition. Do you see identity politics really infecting the teaching of English?

MB – Identity politics is tearing America apart. And I'm sure you see this better on the outside than a lot of us do here on the inside. Identity politics has given us tribalism. We have lost our common 'Americanness'. In this country, we don't feel that whatever other differences we have, we're all Americans'. We don't believe in that any more. No one feels a commonality, that we're all together on some level. Of course we have differences, we have different interests and there are factions, and some of them can be charted by demographic identity. But we're all Americans deep down, and there's a brotherhood in our citizenship. Well, that's pretty much gone. And the tribalism is only getting worse.

And the humanities is one of the places, and the university is one of the places, where identity politics hit very hard early on. I gave a speech at Wesleyan University a while back, and I quoted Emerson, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. And the first question from the students was, "I noticed you quoted three white men. Do you think that's right?" I just said, "I can't believe that I am hearing this kind of thing in 2017." People said this in 1987 and it was already getting old at that time. But it has stuck, and it's so anti-intellectual, it's so obtuse. My response was, "You know, Emerson said, 'Who so would be a man must be a non-conformist.' How could a woman read this, right? Well, the fact is that a lot of very strong-minded, powerful, wilful, intelligent women in 1845 read Emerson and said to themselves, 'That's me. That's me.' Now were they wrong to do that?"

Well, of course, the audience didn't have an answer to that because they were suffering from resentment. That's an irrational condition. You can't argue that away. And when I see this kind of irrationality settle in to the humanities, I realize these are people who haven't read enough. They haven't acquired a literary sensibility that will help them take a somewhat ironic, occasionally distant, perspective on themselves and the ideas that they have. That's one of the things that a literary education does.

And the great books are the best instrument for that because if you get rid of the idea of greatness, then you can't think deeply about anything.

PG – So we touched on it a little bit there, but if we can go into a bit more detail about what this absence of the great books means for the future of intellectual inquiry in America and in the West. If students aren't learning this stuff, what does that mean for the future?

MB – Well, the first thing I would say is the human element. What a loss. What a loss for a 19-year-old not to encounter works of momentous power and depth and profundity and brilliance and comedy and tragedy. These kids are going through things like romances and they get their hearts broken. Well let me tell you, there is no greater examination of rejection than in the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas leaves Dido. And Dido is devastated and she goes through all of the emotions, yelling at Aeneas, telling him, "You destroyed me!"

He sneaks off in the night, he knows better. "I've got to get out of here real fast, and on the sly."



And what does she do? She builds a big pile of furniture on which she and Aeneas have been making love. And they're both admirable characters. We're caught up in their love affair. They're extraordinary heroic individuals. She builds this pyre, she climbs to the top, she has them light it on fire, and she takes his sword and she stabs herself with it. He encounters her again when he goes down into the Underworld, and he doesn't know she's dead. And it's a very powerful moment of realization.

These are the materials through which young people should be processing experiences. It helps give them the emotional and intellectual equipment to understand themselves and the world they live in and what's happening to them. What do we want to give them instead? Pop culture versions of how to deal with these kinds of things? What a denial we are doing to the young when we do this.

The second thing is just the power of tradition. The historic value of these materials, and the inheritance that they add up to, belongs to us and every individual should be able to take possession of this inheritance as the things that have helped produce the humanity that you are trying to grow into.

JB – But if we can't rely on universities to be teaching these books to children, do you think the children will start to discover these books themselves? At the end of your article, you had a really optimistic note about how these books continue to resonate with readers and students. Do you see the same books being read 100 years from now or do you think universities are destroying them?

MB – They will be read 100 years from now because they're too good to go away. And there will always be a small group. In the Middle Ages, it was the Benedictine monks who kept these great works alive. There will always be a small group, at least, who keeps them alive.

You're also going to find in the next few years, because we're seeing this a little bit already, great books programs springing up in universities that are outside the normal English department or the comparative literature department. They're these centres or these special programs run in a different way, and the students are going to gravitate there. Because when students major in English or the humanities in general or art history or music history, they don't do it because "It's going to teach them critical thinking" – who cares? – they do it because they had a high school teacher who made Jane Austen come alive. They read *Great Expectations* in 11th grade and they said, "I want more of this. This stuff is great. This stuff hits me hard. It's meaningful to me."

If you want to reach the students, give them works that are going to stay with them for their lives. Make them listen to the first five minutes of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Make them look at paintings like the *Raft of the Medusa* and think about them. These are going to stick with them when they're 18 years old. But for now kids are leaving the humanities. In higher education today, they're leaving the humanities. The number of kids taking humanities courses and majoring in the humanities is going down. And one reason is identity politics. Because identity politics is a downer. "Wait, wait. You're going to sit and talk about Emerson and how racist he is? I don't want to take this class! I don't want to hear so much negativity." Which is what you get in so many of



these courses. And identity politics is a negative. It's not a positive formation.

So they're leaving that but they will go to places where they can get inspiration. They will go to a place where teachers are going to make the materials meaningful to them and they're going to feel like, "I am in conversation with historic geniuses. That's what I want. I am 19. I've left high school. I'm on my own heading out into the world and I want guides who have stature. I don't want to take courses in Harry Potter, which is what a lot of English teacher think are going to bring students back. No. I want to take courses on Satan spying on Eve in *Paradise Lost*. It's extraordinary what happens in that episode.

I want to think about St. Augustine going with all those boys one night and destroying the pear orchard and then spending five pages wondering, "Why did I do that?" That is the greatest rumination on peer pressure among adolescents ever written. It is so modern and, to use their word, 'relevant'. This is going to keep the humanities going. This is going to keep great books – the classics – going because the material's too good to be lost. And the sad thing is too many students are not going to realize they can get it in higher education.

We need to have more humanities teachers telling students, "In my class, you're going to get something so much better than pop culture, youth culture, rap music, Facebook nonsense. You're going to get something that is fantastic here and it's going to change who you are.

PG – Terrific. Mark, you've probably inspired a lot of our listeners to read a lot more of the great books. A few of them probably missed out on the education that you're talking about. Where is a good place to start? Give us three books that they should read to start off with.

MB – There are a lot of really good places. First of all, just introductory materials. Lectures on YouTube. You've got great books programs that you can get through the web. You can order CDs that have lectures on them. The great courses program. People can look those up.

Now, for people who are interested in, say, different issues like religion or politics, there are the familiar names. I mean, if you're young, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, these guys are going to grab you.

I think the first book that grabbed me was *The Brothers Karamazov*. I was 18 when I read it. It was in a freshman class in college at UCLA. And Ivan Karamazov hit me very hard. Ivan is the brother who's lost his faith. He no longer believes in God, but he's not a happy atheist. He's a miserable figure who understands his own plight. His own condition of being without God is a horror to him. But he has too much intellectual honesty to delude himself, in his terms, into believing in God. He was someone I identified with. And you want to look for the books that you can make an identification in some ways. So that was one book that hit me. It hit me very hard.

Jean Paul Sartre's novel, *La Nausee*, is a portrait of nihilism, of a nihilist trying to come to terms with a meaningless world, a world that is entirely factitious, in which every experience he has is just gratuitous. It's just there. There's no deeper meaning to anything. And how he tries to cope with that, that was a powerful book for me. People of faith who are looking for inspirational stories of faith, they would look elsewhere, obviously.



But I would say to young people, “What is your emotional and psychological condition? And what are the great books that can answer to that?” And you know what, your listeners, they can email me. I get emails. You know, I wrote this book insulting 93 million Americans, *The Dumbest Generation*. I get emails from young people a lot. And many of them say, “What should I do? What should I read?” And I write back and say, “Tell me what your interests are, and then I’ll give you recommendations.” And your listeners can certainly contact me. I’m always available. I respond to every email I’ve gotten, even the ones with four-letter words in them. And we try and have a good, fruitful exchange.

And my email, you can just look me up, Mark Bauerlein, Emory University, and my contact information will come up and people should feel free to ask me questions.

JB – Brilliant. Mark Bauerlein, thank you so much for your time.

MB – Thank you, gentlemen!