

POSTMODERN DEMENTIA

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The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism
Edited by Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow
(West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015)

The Great Divide: Why Liberals and Conservatives Will Never, Ever Agree
By William D. Gairdner
(New York and London: Encounter Books, 2015)

A casual observer may be nonplussed by a review of these two books in a single essay. *The State of the American Mind* is explicitly a reconsideration of the cultural phenomenon analyzed by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow have assembled essays by a group of academics, journalists, media professionals, and such like who explain from their diverse perspectives how the intellectual decadence surveyed by Bloom in 1987 has only gotten worse despite the alarm thus raised, which was reinforced by another popular book of the same year, E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. In the words of its editors, the new collection offers "an empirical approach to the problem. Except for the final entries, which are frankly general and prognostic, we downplay culture wars sallies and skirt Grand Theses" (xiv).

In contrast, William Gairdner's *The Great Divide*, as the title indicates, is a "Grand Thesis" about the hopelessness of policy debates because of the intractability of the Culture War. There is a fundamental divide—a moral and philosophical gulf—between the competing political camps in contemporary democracies, he maintains, which is all the worse for being largely unacknowledged by the divergent parties, especially the conservatives: "In short, although we still use the flattering term *liberal democracy* to describe our political systems, we are no longer liberal in the original sense of that word—of valuing freedom from oppressive government, and using democracy as a means to ensure that freedom" (15–16). Placing Gairdner's book side by side with the Bauerlein-Bellow collection forces us to confront the question of how desperate our situation is. Will a systematic reform of our government and other public

institutions restore society, or is a complete cultural and moral renewal necessary?

The Bauerlein-Bellow volume opens with an “Introduction—The Knowledge Requirement: What *Every* American Needs to Know,” in which E. D. Hirsch Jr. revisits the subject of his seminal 1987 work, *Cultural Literacy*. This is followed by three sections of five, four, and six essays respectively and concludes with an afterword by the editors. Part 1, “States of Mind: Indicators of Intellectual and Cognitive Decline,” offers accounts of how educational and other cultural institutions are failing to raise students’ intellectual skill and knowledge to adequate levels for successful performance as citizens or professionals. Part 2, “Personal and Cognitive Habits/Interests,” looks at cultural trends with alarming effects on civic and personal morale, and part 3, “National Consequences,” provides an overview of the social and political malaise that results from these defective institutional practices and personal failings.

Although some of the contributors may be identified as conservative or neoconservative—R. R. Reno and Mark Bauerlein, for example, are associated with the magazine *First Things*—the problems are defined and tackled after a fashion that suggests a moderate liberal outlook. All the writers are preoccupied, in varying degrees of optimism or despair, with policy failures and possible solutions. From Gairdner’s perspective, they would presumably fall into the abyss of the “great divide” and thus have no firm ground on which to stand.

There is evidence for a critique of this kind in much of the writing in *The State of the American Mind*, since it exudes a tone of vexation, even exasperation, about the abandoning by the progressive left—nay, the disparaging and vilifying—of projects and initiatives that ought to count as per-

fectly reasonable by liberal criteria. This is a book that looks askance, even aghast, at the illiberalism of contemporary liberalism, which simply refuses for the most part to acknowledge the nature of the educational and cultural decline that we face, much less to accede to obviously appropriate means of addressing it.

A tone of mournful frustration is struck in the introductory essay by E. D. Hirsch, in which he recounts the “dizzying and exhilarating” experience of the controversy that engulfed the publication of *Cultural Literacy*:

But it was also depressing, because although my political sentiments fell on the left with the levelers, my research made it evident that those who attacked *Cultural Literacy* in the name of greater equality deeply missed the point. In the name of destroying cultural hegemony, the academy was preventing K-12 education from delivering the knowledge that Americans need to fulfill their democratic citizenship and that disadvantaged students need to close the achievement gap and climb the class ladder. Academic critics were so angry at the very idea of cultural literacy—that is, of a body of knowledge common to informed individuals, made use of continually in their criticisms—that they did not even try to follow the scientific evidence showing how essential that knowledge is to basic and advanced literacy. (4)

Thus does yesterday’s liberal become today’s reviled reactionary. E. D. Hirsch, a *traditional* liberal (the oxymoron is intentional), offers a typically liberal, *scientific* program to diminish inequality, and for his pains is hoisted into the academic tumbrel and carted off to the guillotine of progressive disdain.

Most of the remaining essays in the book similarly expound how liberal desiderata for education and society are relentlessly undermined by the effects of liberalism on academic institutions and society as a whole—although most of the authors evidently fail to notice the connection. Hirsch, for example, beats his breast over what he now sees as a subtle tactical failure in his controversial argument: “If only I had given greater emphasis in *Cultural Literacy* to that scientific point about the fruitlessness of extensive skill drills, the practical impact of the book might have been greater” (9). It is difficult to conceive how Hirsch could believe that a slight shift in emphasis would have won over his critics, since he says himself, “Metaphorically speaking, the book was burned” (5).

In the first essay of part 1 of the Bauerlein-Bellow collection, “The Troubling Trend of Cultural IQ,” Bauerlein himself broods over the striking discrepancy between the remarkable rise in measurable IQ (intelligence defined as a “capacity for abstraction”) among Americans young and old (the “Flynn Effect”) and the lack of any improvement in their reading skills and general cultural knowledge. He attributes the phenomenon to demographic fragmentation of our society over several generations driven by educational trends, affluence, and technological innovations, which effectively isolate the young in their own subculture devoid of adult knowledge and experience or traditional wisdom.

This may be an explanation for why men of my generation find altogether counter-intuitive the mode of operation of the ingenious electronic devices produced by these brilliant young abstract thinkers, and it certainly explains why their reading and writing skills, when they turned up in my

university literature classes in recent decades, were so exiguous for all their digital acumen. Bauerlein’s remedy? “The solution is easy to conceive but impossible to implement. Parents and mentors need to spend more time conversing with youths, reading the newspaper together, going on cultural outings, taking walks, and otherwise cutting into the ample after-school hours of social life and adding grown-up affairs to the menu of adolescence” (30).

Bauerlein is aware of formidable obstacles to the implementation: “How can a parent in a single-parent home find the time and energy to do so, especially with sulky teens who relate only to one another? How can mentors curtail youth culture when the goods and styles of it form a mega-industry that showers kids with marketing and plays upon status and consumer competition?” He concludes with this rather wan prescription: “I know of no way to slow this hazardous social experiment except to broadcast as widely as possible the intellectual damage it has done and will continue to do” (30–31).

The progressive educational, political, and media elites who might do something about it, however, are already aware of the situation and hardly regard it as a problem. The “hazardous social experiment” (Bauerlein calls it “the cultural liberation of youth”) is a long-term project of progressive political and educational policy, as are easy divorce and the removal of any stigma from fornication, which are in large measure responsible for the swollen number of single-parent households. The eradication of traditional family and community norms—like the denigration of the traditional canon of great books, which so bedevils E. D. Hirsch’s efforts to spread cultural literacy throughout society—is not just a fortuitous by-product of random social forces: it is the deliberate result of progressive social planning.

The other essays in this first section of the book deal with similar kinds of specific intellectual and cultural dysfunction for which “a solution is easy to conceive but impossible to implement.” Daniel Dreisbach asserts that “Biblical Literacy Matters” and offers what ought to be an unexceptionable justification:

Many movements, developments, and conflicts at home and abroad, although not exclusively or even primarily about Christianity, are difficult to comprehend without an awareness of biblical Christianity. This includes controversies involving just war, civil rights, abortion, definitions of marriage, homosexuality, origins of life, and blasphemy. Without the biblical framework underlying those issues as they have unfolded in American history, people will not fully understand each other. In America, the biblical presence has run so deep that the deterioration of biblical literacy amounts to a deterioration in civic discussion, a cognitive failure on all parties to communicate. (44)

Dreisbach’s vindication of biblical literacy assumes, however, that “all parties” to these debates wish to engage in “civic discussion” in order “fully [to] understand each other.” The howling mobs that have taken over many college and university campuses as I write this review are, however, altogether hostile to Dreisbach’s perfectly reasonable assumption.

And the hostility is not confined to those ensconced in the extended adolescence of university life. Recently I had lunch with one of my sons and a group of his friends, middle-aged married couples all. One lady asked what the greatest challenge had been as I concluded my university teaching career. The cultural ignorance of the stu-

dents, I said, and offered their failure even to know familiar biblical stories and figures as an example. “That sounds *moralistic*,” one man—an affluent entrepreneur in information technology—snapped belligerently. The lady, a former teacher and sympathetic to my plight, tried to explain how necessary some knowledge of the Bible was for understanding a good deal of secular literature. The enemy of “moralism” averred that in such a case it “might be OK,” but he didn’t sound convinced.

The other essays in the first part of the book are similar in orientation. Gerald Graff, in “Why Johnny and Joanie Can’t Write, Revisited,” points out that “no consensus has ever existed among educators about how to teach people to write” (50), and that writing programs in American colleges and universities have been a miserable failure for decades; maintains that, despite the assertions of progressives like Diane Ravitch, “‘we’ *don’t* in fact know what works” (52); and then offers, nonetheless, his own writing program as expounded in a college textbook cowritten with a colleague.

I have no quarrel with his method; I used similar strategies when I was teaching. But Graff fails to explain how he will get those who have turned composition classes into indoctrination sessions to sign on to a program that might lead students to question the political correctness the teacher is offering. Even more telling, he does not so much as mention the real scandal: that university students are in need of remedial instruction in the fundamentals of their own language.

“College Graduates: Satisfied, but Adrift” is Richard Arum’s summation of the two well-known books he has written with Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift on College Campuses* (2011) and *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates* (2014). The language in which Arum frames

his conclusion is troubling: “The evidence above, considered as a whole, suggests that U.S. colleges and universities underperform with respect to developing human capital for recent cohorts of college graduates” (73). It is a pity that Arum has evidently not heeded C. S. Lewis’s remarks about the importance of how we use language in *The Abolition of Man* (“boys likely to be worthy of a commission are now ‘potential officer material’”). The conservative meaning—too many college graduates have not become educated, responsible adults while “earning” their degrees—is undermined by the jargon of liberal progressivism (“developing human capital”).

In the final essay in part 1, “The Anatomy of an Epidemic,” Robert Whitaker points out that recent decades have seen an enormous rise in the number of Americans on prescribed psychotropic drugs (opiates are now the “opium of the people”), despite massive and mounting evidence that they “do not fix any known biological abnormality” and that “the dramatic increase in their use over the past twenty-five years has been accompanied by an astounding rise in the number of disabled mentally ill in American society” (77–78). In noting that these drugs are all approved, indeed encouraged, by the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association, Whitaker sums up the dilemma of virtually all the authors in the Bauerlein-Bellow volume: the problems they identify are all the result of deliberate projects of the institutions presumably in charge of solving them, and these institutions show no signs of acknowledging their complicity in creating or exacerbating these problems or relinquishing their destructive institutional practices. Critics who point out the anomalies and their obvious solutions are ignored, disparaged, or harassed.

Most of the remaining essays, especially

in part 2, take up issues of particular interest to the author, but of only marginal importance to the larger malaise that has provoked the book’s publication. Paradoxically, the narrower focus does not keep many of them from vagueness. David T. Z. Mindich laments that “A Wired Nation Tunes Out the News” and wants the FCC “to incentivize greater news and public affairs programming, the kind that promotes young people to be more informed and muscular voters” (107). He also thinks “Jon Stewart’s jokes are designed for an intelligent, politically savvy audience, suggesting that those who watch the *Daily Show* are also consumers of other quality news outlets, too, like the *New York Times* and NPR” (104). Has Mindich read the other essays in the volume?

Maggie Jackson argues that the Internet, with its promise of “instant gratification,” is eroding our ability to observe carefully and patiently, and offers a painstaking meditation of a familiar painting as an antidote. Jonathan Kay suggests that the Internet has fomented “conspiracy-mongering” but offers the hope that Google’s search engine has curbed it. Jean M. Twenge worries about “The Rise of the Self” and urges us to “communicate to young people that self-belief, although pleasant, does not actually lead to superior performance,” which is more likely to result from self-control and perseverance (132). One might ask, “Who can disagree,” except that most contemporary progressive liberals do?

The most contrarian essay in the Bauerlein-Bellow collection is the last, “The New Antinomian Attitude,” by R. R. Reno, who, like many of the other authors, is revisiting a notion that he has often discussed before, “the empire of desire.” By this he refers to the way contemporary society and politics are organized to serve the pursuit of self-

fulfillment no matter where it may lead: “Life is better, more humane, and more just to the degree that we succeed in relaxing the grip of traditional morality over our interior lives so that our desires can be more freely satisfied, so that Charlie can become Charlene” (227). And Reno is not hopeful: “There is no revolt building against this regime” (229).

He thus directly contradicts the conclusion of the editors in their afterword, who “await with eagerness the next Federalist Papers and *Leaves of Grass*, another Trust Buster and New Deal, ‘A Time for Choosing’ speech and an eloquent martyr in a Birmingham jail” (242). No wonder Reno is pessimistic. However one rates *Leaves of Grass* as poetry, it is unquestionably a celebration of the empire of desire, of individualistic narcissism (its first and most famous poem is “Song of Myself”); and its vision of America is not merely different from but opposed to that of the *Federalist Papers*. The sigh is almost audible in Reno’s prose:

The best one can hope for, I suppose, is to detail the havoc that desire’s metaphysical priority produces—broken families, broken relationships, social pathologies. With this sober truth in front of us, we’ll become like most upper middle-class Americans, the praetorian guard of the Empire of Desire: people who are disciplined enough to make sure long-term self-interest prevails over short-term desire fulfillment. This will be a more functional world, but it will remain a soulless one that has lost its capacity to dream of something higher than desire—something *to* desire. (229)

The implication of Reno’s lamentation is that our current malaise is not merely the result of liberals failing to be good liberals; it is, rather, an inevitable and, for most contem-

porary liberals, a desired outcome of their cultural and institutional ascendancy.

This observation brings us back to William Gairdner. Like the essayists of *The State of the American Mind*, Gairdner is alarmed by the way political correctness has constrained open discussion of controversial issues. Indeed, in his afterword he asserts that the purpose of his book is “the hope that it will encourage readers to turn their backs on the rhetorical devices of emotion, invective, and hostile silence, and then to search out and speak up about the deeper reasons for holding the views they do” (257). But discussion and debate are not an end in themselves. “Most of all, I hope that individual citizens will take courage, leap into the Great Divide to discover the truth or falseness of their own ideas, and resolve to speak their minds openly, and unafraid” (258).

To discover the truth or falseness of their own ideas... “The great divide” is substantive, not merely procedural. It is not the result of a misunderstanding. In great part, Gairdner’s book is devoted to discussing in detail the fundamental differences between the worldviews of conservatives and liberals and then tabulating them at the end of each chapter. And a basic premise of his argument is that when two ideas are contradictory, one of them is true, the other false. Although under the right circumstances and with the right participants, free-ranging discussion is enjoyable, it is not an end in itself. We listen and speak, consult and debate, in order to discover, articulate, and embrace the truth—even if it is never given to mortal man to grasp it purely or entirely.

The Great Divide is an argument in four stages. Part 1 comprises three chapters: “The Background,” “On Liberalism,” and “On Conservatism.” The first chapter locates the origin of the current divide in the Enlight-

enment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The next two chapters describe the liberal and conservative responses to the Enlightenment project, which took shape and sprang into action in the French Revolution. In “On Liberalism” the author points out that what is now called *liberalism* is in effect a curious blending of libertarianism and socialism. The chapter is largely devoted to explicating the myriad ways that the “libertarian-socialist regime” has come to dominate the developed world. This assessment is driven home in the following chapter by the systematic exposition of conservative positions, because most of them have so little effect in contemporary political discourse.

Part 2 consists of a single chapter, “The Forces at Work,” and it contains the most important discussion in the book. Here Gairdner considers the causes of the peculiar trajectory of Western civilization, which, its moral energy depleted, now seems to be sinking ineluctably into decadence. He explains the tension among the different levels of governmental and social organization; draws important distinctions between power, authority, and self-control as modes of maintaining social order; and, most important, turns our gaze to “the tension between our egalitarian political philosophy and the *necessarily* antiegalitarian nature of a flourishing civil society” (51).

The third part of *The Great Divide* deals with the perennial questions about which liberals and conservatives contend, “Themes That Divide.” It includes chapters on such matters as human nature, reason, democracy, freedom, God and religion, and so on. The concluding part 4 takes up “Issues That Divide” and treats current controversies in chapters on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, abortion, and euthanasia.

Every chapter in the book concludes with a table, in every instance but one, under the

rubric “Where Do You Stand,” listing in parallel columns opposing views on various aspects of the topic considered in the chapter. For example, in the chapter “On Morality and the Self,” beside the heading “The basis of morality,” the “modern liberal view” is specified as “individual choice and personal values” in contrast to the “conservative view” that morality is rooted in “transcendent standards and community mores” (155). Similarly, at the end of “On Abortion,” the liberal notion that “the fetus is not yet human” is set against the conservative conviction that “the fetus is human from conception” (231).

Tables are not a precise means of rendering subtle intellectual and moral discriminations, and, as a rule, they are merely banal. Nevertheless, Gairdner’s tables prove effective because of—shall we call it the *state of the American mind*? There is hardly any place for a subtle debate in a situation where the magisterial voice of the federal government commands local school authorities to allow boys who wish to be girls to share locker rooms and bathrooms with students who actually are girls. Gairdner’s tables, by beginning with the challenges to the norms of Western civilization centuries ago and proceeding through larger moral and political principles to the controversial issues of today, provides a starkly graphic account of where we have arrived and how we got here.

Gairdner is a Canadian and his data seem to be mostly derived from political and social developments in Canada. This is a useful admonition for those of us in the United States, since Canada was a more conservative polity early in the twentieth century and has moved farther and faster than we into the fever swamp of progressive utopianism. The comparison of Gairdner’s book to *The State of the American Mind* also gives rise to a small instance of melancholy irony: writing in the latter, Dennis Prager maintains that

“We Live in the Age of Feelings” and finds meager the prospect that we might reverse degeneration of our society brought on by the leftist domination of politics and culture. He finds hope, however, in the emergence of Stephen Harper, the prime minister of Canada, “a religious man and a conservative,” as “a great moral leader in the world” (202). A few months after Prager’s essay appeared, Harper was voted out of office in favor of Justin Trudeau, son of Pierre, one of the most flamboyant politicians of the previous generation, whom his son seems to have equaled in progressive panache.

The title of this review essay alludes to a verse in Virgil’s second eclogue. The shepherd Corydon burns with lust for the beautiful Alexis, his master’s darling, and has nothing to hope for. Despite knowing that Alexis scorns him and continually exhorting himself to be content with his lot and attend to his pastoral duties, Corydon cannot rid himself of his desire: “me tamen urit amor: quis enim modus adsit amor? / a, Corydon, Corydon, quae te dementia cepit?” (vv. 68–69: nonetheless love burns me; for what limit might there be to love? / Ah, Corydon, Corydon, what madness has seized you?).

Nowadays the English word *dementia* usually refers to the degeneration of mental faculties brought on by old age or disease. For Virgil and the ancient world it meant, literally, being out of one’s mind as a result of rage or desire. A man was *demens* who was deprived of mental clarity and voluntary agency by *passion*, by what subjugates and takes hold of one: Corydon has been *seized* or *taken* by dementia arising from the passion of lust. And the same phrase is applied to the daughter of King Minos of Crete, whose desire for a bull results in her giving birth to the monstrous Minotaur. Perhaps all we need know about modern society is that

“passion” and “passionate” are now almost universally terms of approval.

Contemporary society is aiming for a world in which no Corydon will ever be frustrated in his desire for any imaginable Alexis—whatever bizarre, impossible object of lust that delirious fancy can demand must, somehow, be accommodated. This is the realization of R. R. Reno’s “Empire of Desire,” as he has expounded the concept in *The State of the American Mind*; and Gairdner’s view of the matter is compatible. Gairdner also maintains that the truly vital “clash” in our time is not between civilizations but within Western civilization itself (40). His thesis resembles Zbigniew Stawrowski’s in *The Clash of Civilizations or Civil War* (see “Transatlantic Conservatism and the Dilemma of Tradition,” *Modern Age* 57.3, 40–48); and it is probable that Reno would not disagree.

But it is not simply a battle between conservative and liberal progressive forces for the soul of the West; there is, in addition, a quiet, desperate, internecine struggle within the souls of individuals. For the most part we have succumbed or are hopelessly compromised by the regime: “We have accepted the bargain,” Reno writes, “a public culture of petty regulations and forthright economic discipline in exchange for freedom to live in accord with our private, intimate desires” (229). In explaining the paradoxical alliance of socialism and libertarianism, Gairdner strikes the same tonic chord: “To achieve it, the unspoken trade offered as a lure was the understanding that people would not bemoan their diminished real, political, and property freedoms, nor the permeation of their lives by high taxation and minute regulation, if they were allowed more sexual and bodily freedoms and pleasures in exchange” (24).

The essays in *The State of the American Mind* are uneven, as one would expect, but they are in the main thoughtful and informative. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the book is limited, because the authors have, with few exceptions, failed to acknowledge the “great divide” analyzed by Gairdner or to confront some of the principal sources of the current cultural malaise. For example, the word *divorce* never appears in the extensive index of the Bauerlein-Bellow volume, although there is a plentiful literature detailing its devastating effect upon the social fabric as well as the lives of both the children and adults involved. Even Gairdner only mentions it once in his chapter “On the Triumph of the Will” (166, and again the table at the chapter’s end, 171). The significance of conservative squeamishness about such issues can be judged by considering how the witness of a Kentucky court clerk against the Supreme Court’s same-sex marriage decision during the summer of 2015 was compromised by her multiple divorces.

To stay with this example, it is telling that the United States, nominally at least the most Christian of First World countries, is also the divorce capital of the world. Although divorce is the subject of a striking denunciation in the Gospels, I am aware

of no Protestant communion with a firm policy forbidding divorce; and, although the Catholic Church has maintained the teaching that a valid marriage is indissoluble, both the cynical and the devout in large numbers think that the annulment process has devolved into little more than de facto divorce. The Vatican synod on the family, recently concluded as I write, has done little to assuage this perception.

There are many other symptoms of moral and social decline upon which the conservative protest is at best muted, when not problematic. William Gairdner’s *Great Divide* provides a thorough account of the fragmentation of our polity, but he admits that he only hopes to persuade us to acknowledge its seriousness. *The State of the American Mind* offers a series of reasonable solutions to grave social and cultural problems, which—sometimes the authors ruefully concede this—have been repeatedly ignored or disparaged by the very elites positioned to take action. Perhaps the question we ought to be asking is not which candidate should we elect or what policy should we embrace, but rather, are individuals unable to govern themselves capable of constituting a people fit for self-government. †