

Western Civ: it's not just for white people anymore

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When the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation generously offered to fund 'Western Civ' courses at Australian universities, critics at the ANU and University of Sydney inevitably expressed their gratitude with accusations of racism. They say that Western Civ. has no place in a multicultural society. Teaching Western Civ. is somehow construed as an insult both to indigenous and immigrant Australians, which, when you think about it, really includes just about everyone.

Racism doesn't seem to be such a problem for the University of Wollongong, which has agreed to host the first Ramsay Centre degree, to be called the Bachelor of Arts (Western Civilisation). In fact, it will create a new school within its faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts just for the occasion. That's right: to find Western civilisation in Australia, head to Wollongong.

But the idea that Australians of Chinese, Indian, or Aboriginal backgrounds are somehow congenitally non-Western is itself racist. The idea that Chinese, Indian, and indigenous students of any nationality would not want to enrol in a Western civilisation course is worse than racist – it's patronising.

There's nothing racist about teaching an Australian medical student of Chinese descent Western medicine instead of traditional Chinese medicine, Australian law instead of Chinese law. A course in Western civilisation is no different. It's not racist to offer Western Civ. It's racist not to offer it – if multiculturalism is offered as the excuse.

Australia is indeed an extraordinarily multicultural country. More than 28 per cent of the population was born overseas, and roughly half have at least one foreign-born parent. The top two source countries for current immigration to Australia are India and China, both with very different cultures from Australia's traditional Anglo-Celtic majority. As many immigrants come from Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan as from the United Kingdom and New Zealand. And of course Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have flourished on this continent for tens of thousands of years.

Australian society has accepted, embraced, and sometimes fallen in love with many non-Western cultural practices, from acupuncture to yoga (if anyone can think of a 'z', let me know). But the national institutions in which Australians live their cultures are almost entirely Western in origin, and remain Western in substance to this day.

So if Australians really want to understand their own country, they have to look back to ancient Greece and Rome, not to ancient China or India or even to ancient Australia. Modern Australian literature is derived from Homer, Australian theatre from Aeschylus. Australian

democracy is inspired by the example of ancient Athens, not by Aboriginal custom, no matter how ancient that custom may be.

The Analects of Confucius and the Upanishads of India are fascinating and certainly worth reading, but they contributed very little to the governing philosophy of modern Australia. By contrast, any Australian who reads Plato's Republic or Aristotle's Politics will be amazed by how much contemporary Australian thought has been shaped by the ancient Greeks.

That's why Australians, especially the university students who will be expected to lead the country in the future, should read the great books of Western civilisation. Non-Western civilisations have produced profound, historically important ways of knowing. But educated Australians need a strong grounding in Western thought in order to understand their own institutions.

The great books programs being funded by the Ramsay Centre are fundamentally about an education in our own society. In fact, that's how Western Civ. courses got their start: as American university programs designed to teach young soldiers about their own civilisation, the one they were charged with saving in the first world war.

As it should be needless to say, Australian soldiers also played their part in that war for civilisation. University of Sydney academics don't have to go very far to find the remembrance plaque in the main portal to the university's famed Quadrangle. Just around the corner, Gallipoli, Jerusalem, and Villers-Bretonneux are memorialised in stained glass. The University of Wollongong wasn't around in those days, but Wollongong's Memorial Arch in McCabe Park remembers the conflict, as do hundreds of other memorials throughout Australia.

At the time of the first world war, Australian democracy was still in its infancy, but Australia's parliamentary traditions were already 700 years old. Australia's Parliament is a direct descendant of the mother of all parliaments – the one in Westminster.

No (civilised) person today would dream of excluding Asian or Aboriginal Australians from Parliament, or denying them the vote. Why not? Because Australia's 'Western' democracy belongs to them just as much as to a First Fleeter.

Australia's universities are just as Western, whatever some of their professors might think. The University of Sydney's official motto is *sidere mens eadem mutato* – 'though the stars may change, the life of the mind remains the same'. Now largely scrubbed from the university's official communications in favor of the anodyne 'leadership for good starts here', the old motto stands for the intellectual umbilical cord connecting Australia to the West.

Instead of being ashamed of their Westernness, or acknowledging it only as part of some Maoist exercise in self-criticism, Australian universities should follow Wollongong in embracing their Western identity. The University of Wollongong says that it 'stands for purpose'. Its embrace of the Ramsay degree suggests that maybe it really does.

Australian universities certainly should celebrate Australia's – and the world's – many cultures. Everyone should study a foreign language, admire the world's artistic heritage, travel a bit, and sample as many as possible of the world's distinctive cuisines. Australia is blessed to be a country of many cultures, and they are all worth experiencing. But our

universities should teach our own civilisation, first, foremost, and perhaps even exclusively. After all, it's the only civilisation we have.