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Why have young Americans lost confidence in their country?

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The BBC this month celebrated its 80 years of television broadcasting; to mark it, critics were asked to choose the Beeb's 80 best programs of all time. In sixth place came Kenneth Clark's 1969 series, *Civilization: A Personal View*. Almost half-century after it was first broadcast, it remains a fantastic guide to the history and achievements of the Western world.

Where does civilization come from and what makes it flourish? Clark's one-word answer is: "confidence". According to his lengthier answer:

"It is a lack of confidence, more than anything else that kills a civilization. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion, just as effectively as by bombs. The best [civilizations today] lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity... The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism and that isn't enough."

Today, Westerners enjoy a material abundance and personal safety unsurpassed in human history.

But how many of us ascribe all those improvements to the triumph of the basic principles of Western civilization, including reason, science, free speech, equality of opportunity, rule of law, property rights, accountable government, industry and trade?

Increasingly few, it seems, which has potentially catastrophic consequences for the West.

Which brings me to the surveys of American college students conducted by James Pesta, associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Pesta has been quizzing young Americans about their attitudes to Western institutions, history and culture for over a decade.

He found deep ignorance and hostility.

In one survey, for example, Pesta asked his students to define "capitalism" and "socialism". Seven out of 10 students defined capitalism by using the words such as "greedy," "selfish" and "unfair".

A shocking 83 percent of students defined socialism by using words such as “fairness” and “equality”.

Yet, as I explained in my *Beginner’s Guide to Socialist Economics*, under socialism:

“...shops were often empty. As a consequence, money was of limited use. To get around shortages, many people in communist countries resorted to bartering goods and favors (or services)... In order to have something to trade with one another, people first had to “steal” from the state. A butcher, for example, stole meat and exchanged it for vegetables that the greengrocer stole. The process was inefficient, but it was also morally corrupting. Lying and stealing became widely used and trust between people declined.”

In another survey, more of Pesta’s students identified Thomas Jefferson as a slave holder than as a US President. They also overwhelmingly believed “that slavery began in the United States and was almost exclusively an American phenomenon”.

In reality, as I have discussed in a previous CapX article, slavery was a universal and eternal phenomenon, until the British banned it at the start of the 19th century.

As if to confirm Pesta’s findings, students and professors at the University of Virginia wrote a letter to the University’s President Teresa Sullivan, urging her to cease quoting Thomas Jefferson – a difficult task considering that Jefferson founded the University, purchased the land upon which it was built, and as well as designing its curriculum, governing structure and many of its buildings.

As Pesta explained to me, in recent years he had noticed a shift in the students’ responses to his questions. Before the new millennium, the youngsters were historically ignorant, but not politicized. “Their ignorance,” Pesta said, “was accompanied by a basic humility about what they did not know.”

More recently, however, he noted a “sense of moral superiority in not knowing anything about our ‘racist and sexist’ history and our ‘biased’ institutions”.

The students cannot recall many historical facts, but they are strident “about the corrupt nature of the Republic, about the wickedness of the founding fathers, and about the evils of free markets. Most alarmingly, they know nothing about the fraught history of Marxist ideology and communist governments over the last century...”

It is no secret that much of the teaching profession is Left-leaning. According to the FEC data, teachers disproportionately give to the Democratic Party.

Music teachers form the group most favorably inclined towards Republicans, but even among them, an incredible 69 donate to Democrats for every 31 who give to Republicans.

Donation ratios in some subject areas suggest near-complete ideological uniformity. For example, 97 English teachers donate to the Democratic Party for every 3 who give to the Republican Party.

Teachers of younger children exhibit less extreme donation ratios. Among pre-school teachers, 74 donate to Democrats for every 26 who give to Republicans. Among elementary school teachers, that ratio is 85 to 15. Among high school teachers, it's 87 to 13.

It is, therefore, not surprising that a majority of freshmen whom Pesta encountered reflected the attitudes of their teachers. As for the students' shift from embarrassed ignorance to strident hostility, I can only speculate that it had something to do with the end of the Cold War.

During the Cold War, teachers at all levels were expected to pay, at the very least, lip service to liberal democracy and capitalism. Outright hostility to the two, after all, was the defining characteristic of Soviet communism, and very few Americans were prepared to be openly associated with America's mortal enemy.

That moderating influence collapsed along with the Soviet empire.

Whatever the reasons for the growth of anti-American and anti-Western sentiments among America's young, one thing is clear – many Americans have lost confidence in our culture, values and institutions.

If this trend continues, Clark's dire predictions about the future of the West may yet come true.

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