



GREAT BOOKS, GREAT BATTLES

The Chicago ideal was that Americans of all ranks and levels' of education would join together to discuss the classics. After decades of controversy, what has become of that ideal?

Ted Anton

[In two parts]

HERE GATHER the old and new Chicago. On one side of the Marriott conference room, beneath a floppy hat with a huge brim, sits Elizabeth Paepcke—doyenne of old Chicago wealth and noblesse oblige. In the back a young woman with the face of a Slavic princess chews gum quietly, dressed completely in black leather, wearing embossed fishnet stockings. Here are priests and professionals and businessmen and a student, all assembled to discuss one of the great questions in the last year of a unique Chicago institution.



“I don’t want any shaky ground here!” announces Dr. Mortimer Adler, tiny but regal at the table’s head in his red bow tie. At 86 he is still the country’s premier promoter of intellect, he who indexed humanity’s best 102 ideas and greatest books and published 60 of his own (and once proposed a theory of evolution for the toaster). “Are you with me?” he asks.

They are, as this group has been since 1946. This Great Books class was first known as the Fat Men’s discussion group, named for the wealth of former members like meat packer Harold Swift and Marshall Field’s President Hughston McBain. The group is a descendant of the Chicago Great Books ideal, which made mankind’s best writings available in cheap paperbacks and encouraged all Americans to discuss them together.

Pioneered at Columbia University in the 1920s, but first widely applied at Robert Hutchins’ University of Chicago, the Great Books ideal reclaimed the masterpieces from remainder lists and dust-bins and marketed them to the world. The message—at once populist and elitist—was that great authors have engaged in “great conversation” about the nature of human life; it is our duty as free citizens to pursue wisdom by knowing their ideas, and the best way to achieve this is not by listening to a professor lecture but by reading the books ourselves and discussing them with our peers.

This ideal was no drawing room whimsy; combined with the Chicagoans’ remarkable marketing panache, it produced what James Sloan Allen, in his *Romance of Commerce and Culture*, called the

“most ambitious... education program ever undertaken,” and did so in grand Chicago style. Sit down with a group regularly and talk about the Great Books, said Hutchins and Adler. Men and women from bank presidents to bartenders did sit down together, with Plato or Hume or Freud, and partake of the palaver of big ideas across the centuries.



This faith in the classics has been controversial since it was introduced; today it fuels a national debate between conservatives like William Bennett and Allan Bloom, committed to a set program of classical thinking, and feminist and minority critics who want education to include more than a tradition they see as western and male-dominated.

Yet the Chicago Great Books ideal is on stronger ground than ever in 1989, reaching close to a million people, about three-quarters of whom are school children who participate in the Junior Great Books program, a descendant of the adult program run by the same Chicago non-profit foundation. That success has spawned attacks and argument; Dr. Adler now offers another school reform based on similar principles but more far-reaching, called Paideia, from the ancient Greek word for a child's correct upbringing. He has also begun to lay the ground-work for the first-ever revision of the revolutionary, mammoth, 54-volume Great Books of the Western World, published in Chicago 37 years ago.

Like Alcibiades in Plato's Symposium, I have been “bitten in the heart... by this sacred rage.” I traveled the country as a Great Books Foundation training instructor for two-and-a-half years. Last year I helped co-lead an Oak Park adult group that has met biweekly since 1953. I have conducted discussions with inner city students, and DePaul, Roosevelt, and Loyola university undergraduates. I sometimes question—in the best Great Books style—the value, the selections, the naiveté, and the pomposity of the

notion. What judgment can we make of a program ridiculed by Nelson Algren as “All-the-Ideas-You-Can-Repeat for a Flat \$1.50”? What is the future of the method dubbed a “mass prostitution of intellect” by *New Yorker* writer Dwight Mac-Donald? What is the method exactly, and is it now unraveling, or transmuting, or offering the best hope for our intellectual competitiveness?

DISCUSSION OF GREAT issues is no doubt as old as language. Its most famous proponent, Socrates, still creates a stir-inspiring controversy, best-sellers, and even, now, computer programs. To reflect on happiness, say, or love, or mortality, with the assistance of “the best that has been thought and known in the world,” in Matthew Arnold’s words, seemed common sense in the elite schools of ancient Greece, or Rome, or modern France and England.



In America, war forced the issue for the general public. World War I posed the question of what, exactly, we fought to defend, while the postwar years opened colleges to millions of new middle-class students. Columbia University responded with War Issues, a course in western ideals today labeled propagandistic. It grew into a study of core political philosophy texts called Contemporary Civilization, still required of all students. When English professor John Erskine proposed a similar general course in literature, faculty scoffed. Such a “greatest hits” approach would “do more harm than good,” said one faculty member. How would Erskine select his texts?

Time chose, Erskine responded. Great books were picked, not by scholars, but by entire societies that responded to them over many generations. His discussions would treat “masterpieces as though they were recent publications calling for immediate investigation” he wrote years later in a Great Books Foundation newsletter. The wisdom in these books, being universal, was valid for all times, his supporters later claimed.

Erskine taught his course. In the 1920s a constellation of intellect passed through as students, teachers, or both—including Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Adler, future Modern Library Editor Clifton Fadiman, future New Deal architect Rexford Tugwell, future St.

John's University President Scott Buchanan, historian Jacques Barzun, and historian Gilbert Highet, among others.

This only began, rather than settled, the academic debate. In arguing for the existence of a single wisdom with a capital "W," the Great Books proponents had launched an attack on the new social scientific, objective school of educators, who argued for a pluralism of knowledge: The social scientists sought to divide knowledge into disciplines, confront differing cultures on their own terms, and withhold any judgment based solely on the criterion of something as slippery as a "universal good."

To the Great Books proponents, the social scientists were "technocrats" who had been seduced by modern science into a dangerous relativism.

To Columbia philosophy professor John Dewey, a leader of the social scientific movement, the Great Books method was medieval, "perpetuating the confusion and conflicts of the world." Mortimer Adler, then an undergraduate at Columbia, responded by saying that Dewey showed "nothing of the love of God" in his approach to education. Adler left notes under Dewey's door, and attacked him in class until Dewey stalked out, grumbling, "No one is going to show me how to love God."

One unlikely audience for Adler's eclectic postgraduate writing was a 28-year-old acting Yale Law dean. Robert Hutchins had read little literature when he invited Adler, who knew less of the law, to New Haven. Hutchins wore tennis ducks, Adler, a heavy black suit. Their lifelong crusade together detonated American education.



At 30 Hutchins became University of Chicago president, bringing Adler with him, beginning his own crash course in the humanities under Adler's tutelage. His zeal for the Great Books came from this introduction and conversion. (Finishing *The Brothers Karamazov*, Hutchins exclaimed: "After this I don't see how anyone would dare write a novel!") At Hyde Park in the 1930s he assaulted the entire system, eliminating departments and the four-year B.A. and electives, leading discussions himself with freshmen, then students at the university high school.

American schools had become too departmentalized, jargon-ridden, and devoted to dubious technical sciences, Hutchins declaimed.

“Democracy has much more to fear from the mentality of its teachers than from... Hitler,” Adler added.

Hutchins’ and Adler’s support at the university was shaky. Students on the whole supported them. Many faculty members did not. Some prominent faculty members, like sociologist George Mead, resigned.

Despite this apparently pitched battle, however, the University of Chicago continued to accommodate both views. Hutchins supposedly deplored the technocrats, yet permitted Enrico Fermi to start the world’s first atomic reaction beneath his abandoned football field. Adler adored the ancients, but invited modernists like Gertrude Stein to co-lead discussions with him. (Imagine being a student in that class!) Even John Erskine, Adler’s mentor, criticized those who tried to model whole universities on his one course.

Back then only the bankrupt St. John’s University in Maryland adopted the Great Books curriculum in its entirety. The ideal never caught on with universities the way Hutchins and Adler had hoped it would. With the start of the Second World War, Hutchins and Adler despaired. They had battled for a decade and lost, they felt. Even the great war signaled the ascendance of the technocrats.

However, like the first, the Second World War opened vast new markets for the classics. Their promoters simply needed to get off campus. A former Marshall Field’s executive, Wilbur Munnecke, gave Hutchins the idea. Businessmen could hire all the managers they wanted, he said, “but they couldn’t hire anybody to read and understand for them.” The remark grabbed Hutchins, who was looking for ways to further his ideal of cultural reform. Why not with businessmen? Taking its name from the undergraduate epithet, “Great Men’s Fat Books,” Chicago’s “Fat Men’s Great Books Class” held its first meeting in October, 1943—with Hutchins, Adler, Swift, McBain, advertising giant William Benton, and, shortly, Container Corporation of America President Walter Paepcke and his wife Elizabeth, among others.

Commerce and culture united in unique partnership in that group. The Fat Men were wealthy, civic-minded, and committed to advancing the arts. They represented an old unity of power—mostly Protestant, driven, moralistic—that got things done.

Their biweekly discussions of the classics attracted a good deal of publicity and, within a couple of years, 34 imitator groups started

in the Chicago area under leaders trained by Adler. By 1946, 5,000 people in groups across the country were meeting to discuss the Great Books. The publicity caused applications to the University of Chicago's extension program to reach 20,000, far beyond capacity. In 1947 they established the nonprofit Great Books Foundation, with Hutchins as chair. The Fat Men idea had sparked a movement, and tapped a national need.

Across the nation a variety of curricular reforms, including the Harvard Red Book, were seeking a core of liberal arts readings that might be used to educate scores of returning GIs. But no one packaged and marketed the books with the Chicagoans' style. The new foundation caught the wave of the paperback revolution sweeping American publishing by bringing out its own collections of the classics in paperback format. More than that it urged Americans to form discussion groups and grapple with the texts together, working an intellectual pyramid scheme with missionary idealism and offering to fill what a pamphlet of the time called the businessman's "greatest need... broad understanding and right purposes."

Corporate heads like Paepcke wrote testimonials, Hutchins gave speeches, Adler traveled the country, training leaders. Ten thousand enrolled in discussion groups in Chicago in the first year of the foundation, 50,000 nationally the next, according to Allen's *Romance of Commerce and Culture*. In 1948 the City of Chicago designated a Great Books week; Adler lectured to crowds in department stores, and he and Hutchins packed Orchestra Hall (1500 were turned away at the door) for... a discussion of Plato!



Time magazine ran cover stories, first on Hutchins in November, 1949, then on Adler in 1952. The president and governor praised them. Commerce vitalized culture, fueled by a sense of destiny and world leadership, and advertising bravado. "Doc. A.:" wrote Nelson Algren of Adler, "is the fellow for a fast turnover, a saintly distributor and a distributor's saint?"

That wasn't all for Hutchins and Adler. They also produced the most definitive hardcover set of the *Great Books of the Western World* in history, so they claimed. But how to sell the expensive, Tower-of-Babel, eight-years-in-the-making, 54-volume sets pub-

lished by Chicago's Encyclopaedia Britannica? Adler provided the marketing hook and invented a new word. His two-volume "Syntopicon"—which indexed mankind's "102 Great Ideas" with page references—provided the software to accompany the weighty hardware. It fed "people the data... and let the human mind do its own thinking," Adler said. Hyped with the same advertising numerology as Heinz's 57 Varieties of Spices" or the "and so" store, the Syntopicon's 102 Ideas helped sell 150,000 sets of the hard-cover Great Books between 1952 and 1955 alone.

Membership in the discussion groups of the Chicago Great Books, though, reached a high point at decade's end and then ran out of steam. These adult discussion groups, based as they were on volunteerism, were difficult to maintain. They met for a while, usually, then disbanded. The climate of the '50s may not have helped, either; retired Great Books Foundation President Richard Dennis recalls fearing his bags would open in an airport and his collections, including Karl Marx, would tumble out.



Ultimately Adler and Paepcke left to pursue the arts in Aspen, which ended up a profitable ski resort. Ever more quixotic, Hutchins examined press ethics, then world government. Great Books sales plateaued, then plummeted. By the early '60s, they needed a jump start.

Children provided it. By 1961 some 200 high-school groups had been formed by parents and teachers, including one of the most famous at New Trier East in Winnetka. Young people were not only capable of discussing Tocqueville or Aquinas but they flourished when given this opportunity. Schools, moreover, had a captive audience, always new, always growing. School programs could be monitored. Teachers could be required to take the discussion training considered essential for the program's success. Schools had big budgets.

=====

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

Sometimes my job is really interesting. I managed to convince Washington to give me \$50,000 to open an American Center in Vientiane, Laos. I just got the money last week, and must spend it all

by the end of this month, so have been busy buying furniture, computers, periodicals, and, most importantly, books.

All the books must somehow be about the United States—about American society, people, culture, history, government, literature, foreign policy, and so on. Adler's *We Hold These Truths* is a natural to include in the library, but I'm also going to add to the general nonfiction section of the library *The Common Sense of Politics*; *Desires Right and Wrong*; *A Guidebook to Learning*; *How to Read a Book*; *How to Speak*, *How to Listen*; *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*; *Six Great Ideas*; *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*; *The Time of Our Lives*, and *A Vision of the Future*. The American Center will cater to young adults and the general public. Most of them do not speak English well and will be discovering the subjects that these books address for the first time in their lives. But, I think, Adler's books can be read with profit by just about anybody, from the least to the most educated.

You might remember that I once mentioned that the first book I ever read by Adler was *The Time of Our Lives*—and that I read it at the American Center library in Bangkok, Thailand in 1986. That library was shut in 1993. In the early '90s, Congress closed American Centers and American libraries around the world because "the U.S. government doesn't fund libraries for Americans, so why should it fund them for foreigners?" The answer is that in many countries if the USG doesn't provide accurate and comprehensive information about the U.S., then it is simply unavailable. In Laos, for instance, almost no one has access to the Internet, and foreign books are far too expensive for most people to purchase. Most people know about the U.S. only what they read in the Lao media, which is owned by the Communist government.

However, the USG is now beginning to realize the value of making accurate information about the U.S. easily available to young people in other countries, and at the same time the government of Laos is a bit less suspicious of the activities of the U.S. Embassy than it has been. As a result, I'm able to open the first American Center in Laos since the Communists took over the country in 1975—and to ensure that works by Mortimer J. Adler have a prominent place in it.

Best regards,

James A. Warren
Public Affairs Officer
U.S. Embassy, Vientiane, Laos

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Charles Hewitt, Singapore

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.