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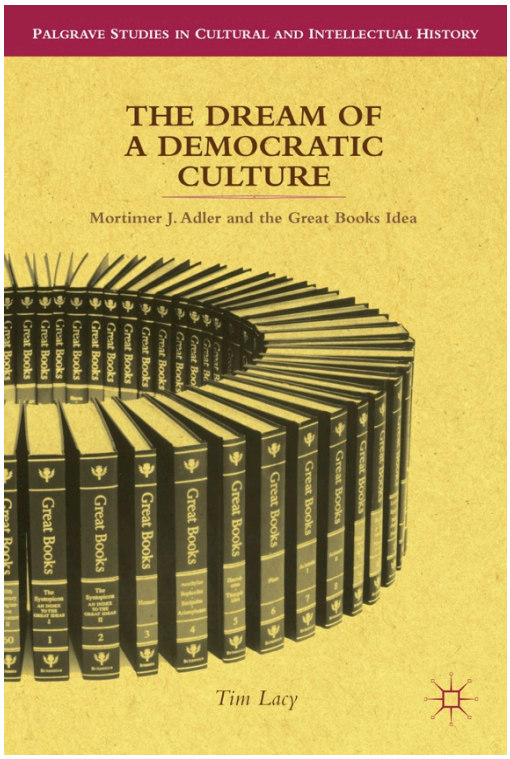

THE DREAM OF A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: MORTIMER J. ADLER AND THE GREAT BOOKS IDEA

The Background

Tim Lacy

Courtesy of Max Weismann and his generous spirit, many Center members know that I've been working—for a *long* time—on a book about Mortimer Adler and what I call the 'great books idea'. This project started as a graduate school seminar paper, at Loyola University Chicago, in the spring of 2000. Pretty quickly that became the seed for a dissertation directed by cultural historian Lewis Erenberg. I thought the project had book potential after the original seminar, but I also knew the road toward publication would a long one.

Although Erenberg's interest was in cultural history, especially popular culture, he was also interested in something called 'democratic cultural forms'. This resonated with me, as a great books enthusiast, because of Adler's and Robert Hutchins' insistence—an insistence shared by all their friends and sympathetic colleagues—that great books are accessible by all. My mentor found my correlation compelling but, like all of us, he knew the story was complicated. And that's precisely what made the history worth pursuing.

As my work progressed it became clear the a few topics and themes would absorb a great deal of my attention: Adler as the 'great bookie' and his *How to Read a Book* (1940 and 1972), the Britannica sets (1952 and 1990, particularly *The Syntopicon*), Britannica the company, book culture (especially reception), education (the practice and philosophies of, in schools and colleges), and intellectual history (inclusive of the history of philosophy and, especially, the history of ideas).

The historian does many things when trying to make sense of any topic. The number one priority, for me, was to tackle the primary resources. This meant reading through a great many of Adler's books and articles, the works of his friends, and his papers—now at the University of Chicago (all 150 record boxes!). After that came the usual activities of selection, arrangement, emphasis, and interpretation. Let me elaborate on these for a bit. Good historical thinking involves many factors: the search for causation, assessing chronology and change over time, noting all the relevant characters, making sure your citations are thorough, conjecture—creating an argument, understanding complexity as it arises, thinking about vertical and horizontal context, and finally, pondering points of contingency. Finally, after all this thinking, could I tell a plausible story? Could I weave a long tale that would sustain the interest of those mildly interested in Adler or the history of the great books idea?

The jury is out on those final questions. But, on the rest—research, selection, arrangement, and historical thinking—I think I've done the best I can at this point. There's always more thinking to do. The conversation will continue, with or without me. But it was time to get this out there.

So what is "this"? I bring before you today a book titled *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea*. My publisher is Palgrave Macmillan, and the book will appear in its "Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual

History" series. The publication date is Tuesday, November 26, 2013.

The book is closely related to my dissertation, which was titled "Making a Democratic Culture: The Great Books Idea, Mortimer J. Adler, and Twentieth-Century America." The subtle differences in the titles, however, derive from scholarly versus publisher emphases. With the dissertation I was consciously opposing my work to Joan Shelley Rubin's *Making a Middlebrow Culture* (1992), which I believe shortchanged Adler, his colleagues, and his life's work. The dissertation title also reinforced the non-biographical nature of the project by sandwiching Adler's name between the chronological time period and the phrase 'great books idea'. When it came time for publication, however, I had felt that 'dream' conveyed the unfinished, sometimes utopian nature of the work of mid-century great books promoters. And the publisher wanted to focus on Adler. Apparently biographies sell better than academic histories. Go figure.

The Adler focus pushes the book to consider a large portion of twentieth century history, particularly the 1920-1990 period. That time frame involved extensive horizontal and vertical contextual reading. Every decade required solid knowledge of 10-15 histories (when available) to get a strong sense of how the goings on affected the trajectory of the great books idea and Adler's life. And those histories ranged, as I mentioned above, from cultural and intellectual history to histories of education and philosophy.

And then there were other specialized topics to explore, such as book history and political history. The last became more important as I made a number of ideological connections, especially after finishing the dissertation in 2006 and during manuscript revisions in the 2009-13 period. Over this time my own philosophy of history has deepened and expanded, requiring new reading in historical theory and philosophy. In sum, looking at twentieth-century and recent history (anything in the last 20-30 years) requires more sophistication about the past-present differentiation—a distinction even many historians take for granted because their work lies so far in the past (e.g. historians of the Renaissance, the medieval period, etc.).

Despite the publisher's title change, my book is still neither a full biography (not by any means) nor even a full intellectual history of Adler. Although I have plans to do more biographical work on Adler (e.g. on his Catholic conversion, and perhaps a longer book),

this project neglects a number of interesting things, personal and philosophical, about the man.

For instance, there is little in *Dream of a Democratic Culture* about Adler's childhood. There is nothing substantial about his 1920s and 1930s work on books like *Dialectic* (1927) or *Art and Prudence* (1937). I spent almost no time on *Dialectic of Morals* (1941), *How to Think About War and Peace* (1944), and Adler's important Thomist articles, from the 1940s, on Aquinas and democracy. The last seemed too technical for my great books-focused work. I also couldn't explore Adler's collaborations with Louis Kelso in the 1950s, nor Adler's intensely interesting 1967 book, *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes*. I was able to tackle several books from the 1960s and 1970s, but there's nothing from *Some Questions About Language* (1976). Several books from the 1980s and 1990s received a short shrift, including *Six Great Ideas*, *A Vision of the Future*, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, *We Hold These Truths*, *Intellect*, etc. All contained worthy material, but the narrative had to account for context, and I felt that Adler's educational work on the Paideia Project mattered most to the larger great books topic.

You get the point. Adler wrote and thought about a lot. This is neither a Taylor Branch-style nor David McCullough-esque, work. I didn't have multiple volumes or 700 pages to tell my story. In fact, I had about 300 pages to both be compelling and properly document my work. There were hard choices to make. As such, my formula became fairly simple: the great books idea was my topic, and Adler was my focus. I stayed true to both, at great expense.

Opportunities arose, however, to include more than I thought I might. Once I began to see, for instance, the different inflections of the great books idea (e.g. the General Honors Approach, the *Great Ideas* Approach, Great Books Conservatism, Great Books Liberalism, Great Books Pluralism, the Strauss/Bloomian Approach, etc.), I was able to incorporate most all of Adler's work related to his political philosophy or philosophy of education.

I believe Center members will be pleased with some of the detailed philosophical discussions that resulted. For instance, the chapter covering the first Britannica set takes a look at Adler's philosophy of history, especially as it would inform the construction of the *Syntopicon*. A chapter covering the 1960s and 1970s goes deep into common sense and experience as both affected Adler's political philosophy and, I believe, his thinking about the great books as an educational project. In the chapter on the Paideia project I dig

into Adler's philosophy of cultural pluralism, using works from the 1950s, 1970s, 1980s, and ending with material from *Truth in Religion* (1990). These are the portions of the book that made it an intellectual history.

Because Adler, profound and prolific though he was, did not operate in a vacuum, I spent time on the thought and writings of many of his colleagues and friends. These included Clifton Fadiman, Robert Hutchins, Jacques Barzun, the Van Dorens (Mark, Charles, John, and Geraldine), William Benton, William F. Buckley, Allan Bloom, Diane Ravitch, Earl Shorris, and others. Adler was my focus, but he operated within the confines of what intellectual historian David Hollinger called a 'community of discourse'. This was very true for Adler, even though his community experienced some painful turnover in the 1970s.

This brings me an important point: the narrative gets hard for Adler's fans in 1990. The discussion of race that surrounded the 1990 release of Britannica's revised *Great Books* set did neither Adler nor the great books idea any credit. I found Adler to be inconsistent with his own prior thinking and writing on the subjects of pluralism and race. While Adler would recover to write thoughtful work after even his ninetieth birthday, the events of 1990 left a stain on his legacy. I will be anxious to see how this part of the narrative is received by fans and admirers.

That's probably enough prologue, warnings, and explanation. What of my argument? Why, in sum, should Center members read the book? The best way for me to answer both questions is to relay my chapter abstracts, along with the subheadings/outlines for each. Here goes:

Introduction

A reader with no prior knowledge of great books or Mortimer Adler should obtain enough from the opening pages to decide whether she/he wants to learn more. After introducing both topics, a discussion ensues of key terms, people, my argument, theory, and historiography. In its simplest form the book's thesis is as follows: **Mid-century intellectuals who promoted the great books idea shared a cosmopolitan dream of cultural democratization**. Stated another way, **the dream of great books enthusiasts was that all Americans, all Westerners, and all those living in democratic societies would benefit from a strong connection to the "great ideas" contained in great books**. To support this argument

I offer up my philosophical sources on culture, democracy, citizenship, cultural capital, consumption, communities of discourse, education, cultural politics, and cultural hierarchies. The historiography section addresses a few noteworthy dissertations, plus books and articles by Joan Shelley Rubin, W.B. Carnochan, Katherin Elise Chaddock, and Alex Beam. My acknowledgments conclude the introduction.

Breakdown:

a) Teaser: Differences of Opinion on Adler
b) What are 'great books'?
c) Intro to Great Books Idea and Adler
d) Book Thesis Explained
e) Theory
f) Historiography
g) Acknowledgments

Chapter 1: *The Great Books Movement, 1920-1948*

This chapter explains the pre-Britannica development of the great books idea in relation to Mortimer J. Adler—before the *Great Books* set became the dominant representative entity. Adler's early adult years are explored briefly, especially in relation to his work at the People's Institute. The focus of this chapter is Adler's *How to Read a Book* (1940), but it begins by offering brief introductions to Adler's early influences and community of discourse, especially John Erskine, Everett Dean Martin, Scott Buchanan, Mark Van Doren, Clifton Fadiman, Arthur Rubin, and Robert Hutchins. The chapter thesis is this: The ideas they exchanged, as well as the tone and tenor of *How to Read a Book*, determined—for better or for worse—the trajectory of the great books idea for most of the twentieth century. Adler's book exemplified the General Honors Approach to the great books idea. A close look at the construction and reception of Adler's *How To Read A Book* (1940) reveals how great books became a national sensation in the 1940s—how, in other words, there arose a Great Books Movement. Adler's book and its reviews show how he connected the great books idea to achieving the American dream.

Breakdown:

a) Intro (Chicago's Great Books Week)
b) *How to Read a Book*: The Inspiration
c) *How to Read a Book*: The Production

d) *How to Read a Book*: The Reception
e) Conclusion: The Great Books Movement

Chapter 2: *Building Britannica's* Great Books of the Western World*, 1943-1952*

The focus here is on Britannica's Great *Books of the Western World* (1943-1952). The reader will see the thought processes and practical decisions behind the conception and production of the first edition of the set. The argument is this: Exploring Adler's thinking reveals the roots both of the set's popularity and later criticism—many paradoxes and ironies inherent in the Great Ideas Approach to the great books idea find their home in Adler's philosophy of history. The chapter opens by analyzing the rhetoric of the 1952 kick-off banquet for the set. Before getting there, Senator and Britannica publisher William Benton is introduced. Although Robert Hutchins was the set's chief editor, Adler has been widely acknowledged as Hutchins's chief intellectual advisor. The deliberations of the Advisory Board and the work of the "idea index," or *Syntopicon*, show how philosophy, friendship, history, and collective hopes for America's future went into the production of the set. Adler's philosophy of history is then explored in relation to the *Syntopicon*'s construction. The first at-large thinking about the set is explored via reviews by intellectuals. The chapter closes by returning to the kick-off dinner's rhetoric.

Breakdown:

a) Prologue (1952 Waldorf Astoria Banquet)
b) Introduction and thesis
c) The Conception
d) The "Non-historical Study of Ideas": Adler's Philosophy of History
e) The Proposal
f) Production and Appearances: The Advisory Board and the Idea Index
g) The Reviews
h) Conclusion (Return to Banquet)

Chapter 3: *Making "Seventy-Four Corpses…Pay Off": The Context and Commerce of the Great Books, 1952-1968*

These years, I argue, constitute something of a high point for Britannica and the great books idea in terms of access and positive

publicity. To understand how and why, the larger cultural context is covered first: the Cold War, cultural politics, family and social norms, and education. The Western cosmopolitanism of the Britannica set remained relevant (if not more so) in the Cold War context, and this attracted conservatives in a conservative age. Next one must explore very public intersections of culture and commerce enabled by the set. One of the important points is that, in these years, the story of Britannica's set becomes the story of the great books idea, for better or for worse. Exchanges between William Benton, Britannica's sales force (particularly Kenneth Harden), and Adler reveal how the Great Books were commodified—how they were promoted, marketed, and sold in the fifties. After a brief, three-year lull, sales skyrocketed in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. Adler's role in this context is reduced, but he's still active with Britannica.

Breakdown:

a) Intro (Boom Times, Forbes, and Playboy)
b) Context: Early Cold War Political Culture and Politics
c) Context: Education
d) Context: Social Norms
e) Britannica's Sales Efforts: 1952-1956
f) Britannica's Sales Efforts: 1956 and Beyond
g) Conclusion (Harden and Fadiman)

Chapter 4: *"Mixing Vice and Virtue": Adler, Britannica's Cottage Industry, and Mid-century Anxiety*

Here the Britannica story turns toward its ongoing effort to transform the larger great books project into a sustainable commercial venture. Although Adler's involvement in Britannica's 1950s sales efforts was minimal, in the Sixties he becomes an active player in the creation a great books cottage industry (even while the Great Ideas and General Honors Approaches coexisted). The argument for this period is that the vices and virtues, of both Adler and Britannica, coexisted with the solidification of the great books idea in America's educational and cultural life. Adler's personal life is explored (affairs, divorce, remarriage) because that it sheds light on his movements related to Britannica. He was a part-time gadfly who never ceased talking about the great books' virtues, even while his work lay primarily in promoting a public philosophy through his Institute for Philosophical Research. The articles Adler wrote for *Playboy* symbolize his unsteady personal life, engagement with consumer culture, and continued support for the great

books idea. Finally, analysis of a 1962 Great Books "Awareness Study," commissioned by Britannica and conducted by Marplan, reveals much about the audience and future prospects of the movement.

Breakdown:
a) Intro (Adler and Playboy, 1965)
b) Adler in the 1950s
c) The Cottage Industry: Great Books Subgenres
d) The Audience: High-Profile Criticism, Notoriety, and Admiration
e) The Audience: Middle-Class Anxiety, Conformity, and Intellectual Life
f) Conclusion (Fadiman, Adler, and Playboy, 1966)

Chapter 5: *The Common Sense of Great Books Liberalism, 1965-1970*

Alongside his work with Britannica in the late 1960s, Adler also conceived of his own philosophy of common sense. Three of his books—*The Conditions of Philosophy* (1965), *The Time of Our Lives* (1970), and *The Common Sense of Politics* (1971)—reveal the main and subordinate points of Adler's system of common-sense philosophy, as well as his views on contemporary philosophy, politics, race, and education. Although *The Time of Our Lives* contributes to this system, in that book Adler prescribes a dose of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as a cure for wayward, radical youth. *The Common Sense of Politics*, however, links Adler's mid-century liberalism to liberal education and reveals his Great Books Liberalism. Reviews of these books are briefly examined, as well as Adler's reputation among philosophers in relation to the same. The chapter concludes with a look at Clifton Fadiman's pessimistic reactions to both Adler's project and the state of American society and culture.

Breakdown:
a) Intro (Editing Lives with Charles Van Doren)
b) Common Sense: General Considerations
c) Adler's Philosophy of Common Sense: *The Conditions of Philosophy*
d) Common Sense in Lives and Politics
e) Common Sense "Socialism"
f) Common Sense, Race, Cultural Differences, and Justice
g) Common Sense and Education Reform
h) The Reception of Lives and Politics

i) Conclusion (Fadiman and Seventies Pessimism)

Chapter 6: *Diminished Dreams: Great Books in an Age of Crisis, Fracture, and Transition, 1968-1977*

Even while Adler solidified a philosophical system behind his great books activities, by the mid 1970s the great books idea had experienced a precipitous reversal in fortune. This decline begins with declining sales of Britannica's set. But the larger decline in interest for the idea is related to larger political and ideological shifts. The shift was from mid-century liberalism (with conservative overtones) to what has been alternatively called multiculturalism, postmodernism, or just personal liberation. America's democratic culture existed in a period of crisis and fracture—accompanied by economic and cultural dislocations. Between all these phenomena, the dreams of great books promoters were diminished. Even so, Adler's great books liberalism is clearly evident in new publications such as *The Negro in American History* and the 1972 rewrite, with Charles Van Doren, of *How to Read a Book*. A kind of Great Books Pluralism, or even relativism, is evident in both and other 1970s Adler writings. Britannica's corporate activities in the mid-1970s are again explored, demonstrating how the great books idea became "sacralized" and "ossified" via the Franklin Library. The chapter ends with an examination of "EB 20," the reception of Adler's *Philosopher at Large*, and the passing of Robert Hutchins.

Breakdown:

a) Introduction (Rubin's Seventies Sales Strategies)
b) "Negro History" and Great Books Liberalism
c) *How Read a Book*, Revised
d) Gilded, Sacralized, and Ossified: The Franklin Library
e) The Britannica-Adler Symbiosis: "GB 20" and the Vicissitudes of Promotions
f) Epilogue: Hutchins' Passing and Postmodern Pessimism

Chapter 7: *"The Poobah of Popularizers": Paideia, Pluralism, and the Culture Wars, 1978-1988*

In this period the popularity of the great books idea increased, ironically, alongside a wider awareness of the idea's weaknesses as a democratic cultural form. The great books idea was alive, paradoxically, because "the multiculturalists won the canon wars." Even

so, expanded great books reading lists were less a part of the center of America's broader shared culture. Adler's personal contradictions were woven into the fabric of the great books idea itself, and his trajectory in the 1980s embodied the trajectory of the idea. Interest in his popular 1978 book, *Aristotle for Everybody*, aided by interviews on shows like William F. Buckley's *Firing Line*, helped Adler became something of an 'Educator for Everybody.' In this era one clearly sees competing, though sometimes complementary, forms of the great books idea in Adler's thought. Even so, it is a Great Books Liberalism-Pluralism that appears in the Paideia education reform group. Paideia was implemented by a number of public schools, in spite of criticism about the Group's goals. Adler spent a significant amount of time in the 1980s promoting and explaining the program. Finally, during this period an increasing number of higher education institutions began to utilize great books curricula.

Breakdown:

a) Introduction (Adler's renewal)
b) The Culture Wars: An Overview
c) "Flogging the Great Ideas": The Popularizer on TV
d) Building Towards Paideia: The Background
e) Paideia: The Group, The Proposal, The Schools
f) Paideia's Critics
g) Paideia's Expansion
h) Conclusion: Great Books Renewed in Higher Education

Chapter 8: *"The Most Rancorous Cultural War": Bloom, Adler, Stanford, and Britannica, 1988-2001*

Adler played only a bit part in the Culture Wars until 1988. At that point Adler reacted negatively to a series of public controversies related to the great books idea. Those reactions caused a reversion; Adler went from espousing Great Books Pluralism in relation to Paideia, to hi being a defensive Great Books Ideologue who advocated only the Great Ideas/Syntopical Approach. The chapter opens with an examination of Adler's reactions to, and thoughts on, Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. Despite Bloom's advocacy for great books, Adler connects an "elitist" Bloom to Leo Strauss and finds much fault with both. Then the story shifts to the controversial "Stanford Debates." The high-profile, intellectual conflict of ideas at Stanford put the Culture Wars about the canon on full display. Adler attended to those events, but responded to them indirectly, and poorly, with the publication of Britannica's

second edition of the *Great Books* (1990). Substantial attention is given here to Adler's defensive, borderline racist rhetoric, and reactions to the same. After Adler's death in 2001 several thoughtful reflections addressed Adler's strengths, weaknesses, inconsistencies, and complexities.

Breakdown:
a) Intro (Adler's accruals of conservatism)
b) Bloom, Adler, and the Straussian Approach
c) The Rhetoric of Reactionaries: The Stanford Debates
d) Revising Britannica's *Great Books*
e) The Release and High-Profile Reactions: The Beginning of the End
f) Lower-Profile Consequences: Avoidance, Denial, and Adler's Passing

Conclusion

The breakdown here says it all here:

a) Earl Shorris
b) Big Picture Reflections
c) Personal Epilogue

Appendices (14 total)

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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