

Poli & Humanitie ep 8

[00:00:00.39] TOM MERRILL: Hello, everybody. This is another episode of politics in the humanities. I'm Tom Merrill I'm a professor at American University. I'm here with my colleague Sarah Marsh. Hello, Sarah.

[00:00:09.33] SARAH MARSH: Hey everyone. How are you doing?

[00:00:11.88] TOM MERRILL: Today we're lucky to have a guest, Michael Weinman. Michael is an old friend and a former colleague from a long time ago when we both taught at st. John's College. He is currently a professor of philosophy at Bard College Berlin, but he's spending a year teaching as a visiting assistant professor of comparative literature at Indiana University. He is a very prolific author, such that the rest of us are put to shame. So I have to publicly acknowledge my shame before Michael. He's written several books-- three books. The most recent full book is called "Parthenon And Liberal Education," which is very much about the topics that we like to talk about on the show. He's also just edited-- has an edited volume that's come out that is extremely timely called "The Emergence of Illiberalism." We'll put the links to both of those in the episode description.

[00:01:10.59] He also has a new article coming out, which Sarah and I have not read, so we're going to get a preview, called "Twilight of the American Idols-- Statue Politics Between Trumpism and the Movement for Black Lives," which sounds both nichey and very much of the moment.

[00:01:29.76] So our topic today is "Great Books in the Left," because great books are often associated with the right. And the question that we're really interested in today is, does liberal education have a politics? If so, what does it look like? It may not, but that's one of the things we need to talk about. But before we turn to that topic, I just feel that we have to acknowledge we're recording this on-- is today the 11th, Monday the 11th? In the wake of the events of the Capitol last Wednesday, which I guess we could call a riot, or an insurrection, or an attack. Just feels important for us to acknowledge that. And I guess I should just ask Michael and Sarah, do you want to say anything about that? Is there something that we should say? So over to you guys.

[00:02:19.64] SARAH MARSH: I've been watching a lot of footage and reading a lot online to try to understand what happened, and I think my sense of things as an academic, somebody who reads a lot of history is that in our profession, you sometimes wonder when the history will happen. And it seems that last week the history caught up with us, and something in fact happened. And I think one of the things I want to talk about today is what should academics do, what should people who read and study do to respond to what happened last week. And is there anything we can do to respond to last week in a meaningful way.

[00:03:02.76] TOM MERRILL: Right, which is part of the question of what's our stance as people who care about liberal education but are also citizens of a democracy and have obligations in that direction as well. Michael, do you have thoughts about this?

[00:03:25.48] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --I mentioned, which is in an attempt to kind of have something like a scholarly reflection on political culture in the United States in the middle of events, so it's meant as a comment on the interregnum between the Trump administration and the Biden administration for an American studies audience in Europe. And what I was moved to say there is that I thought that my sense listening to Europeans speak about the election in November and December, obviously there was a lot of worry about procedures and that what stays with me is that what happened on Wednesday. At a time there will be a time when we come to forget, I think, that it happened because of protocol. Because of the most staid, boring procedure that even people who love American politics and who are history buffs tend to ignore the confirmation. We make a big deal of the State of the Union, we make a big deal of other things, and people maybe even remember what day the electoral college votes in December. But the confirmation of the reception of the sealed votes of the electors of the states is not something I think almost any American cared about until this time.

[00:04:53.17] Yeah, so I forget what I wrote, but what I was moved to write about is that something big is going to happen. This is my feeling. Something big is going to happen, not at the inauguration, not at the time that we're all waiting for it, but in a moment that we would usually ignore in the hundreds days roughly between the election and the arrival of the new administration. And that's what I feel that we got, and I think it was a punch in the stomach to people who care about the institutions for that reason. I think McConnell this'll be the last thing that I say, that McConnell gave-- as he said, it was the most important vote that he had in 36 years, I think he said in the Senate. But not only that, it was by far the best speech he's ever given. He's not a great speaker. He's a wonderful-- he's an excellent parliamentarian.

[00:05:44.02] TOM MERRILL: Michael, we're going to put this in the greatest hits of Michael Weinman's praise of Mitch McConnell.

[00:05:48.43] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Exactly. But here it is.

[00:05:50.08] TOM MERRILL: long list-- [INAUDIBLE].

[00:05:52.15] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --the rest of my life. The partisan that I dislike the most in American politics for years gave the speech of his life before, before the whatever they are. The rioters, the vandals. My word would be the vandals.

[00:06:11.89] TOM MERRILL: The goths.

[00:06:12.52] MICHAEL WEINMAN: -roots sense. Right, the goths. Before the goths stormed the citadel. Anyway, [INAUDIBLE] I think before, and I hope that we'll remember that speech, is my feeling. This is going to be a hard period. It was an ugly day. But like in my conversations with people, I've been asking them to remember that McConnell gave that speech before it happened.

[00:06:36.40] SARAH MARSH: Well--

[00:06:36.68] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Because of how febrile the moment is and because there really is something worth preserving, but Mitch McConnell and I apparently both believe it.

[00:06:46.54] SARAH MARSH: What did McConnell say, Michael, that for you it's the most important thing for us to hang on to?

[00:06:51.79] MICHAEL WEINMAN: So I was watching that speech live, and I don't have the transcript in front of me. But he said-- what did he say exactly-- but he basically said, this will be the end of the Republic. That's what he said. What his exact words were, "if we allow Congress to become a board of electors on steroids-- American Republic." I don't know what the transcript says, but that's the sentence that stays with me. And he was furious, and he was virtually, he was-- [AUDIO OUT] as he gave the speech if you were watching it live. His voice was breaking up. Mine is now. And I felt strongly identified with Mitch McConnell, and so that's what stays with me from Wednesday. I really hate, I hate-- and I say it, my mother taught me never to use the verb hate because--

[00:07:46.72] [LAUGHTER]

[00:07:47.87] I really mean that. But I hate the people who did this because they've robbed me of what should have been the experience of the day, which is being annoyed at one-- at Cruz. Anyway, and so on and so forth. And the ugly, awkward 10 hours of senators speaking to no one. What should that day have looked like. It should have been McConnell.

[00:08:11.03] TOM MERRILL: Every other day in American politics, isn't it?

[00:08:12.86] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Right, except McConnell would have given that speech, which never ever happened before. McConnell never gave a speech like that.

[00:08:22.55] TOM MERRILL: When you say that you're talking about the protocol in the most staid boring thing, isn't that another way of saying that those formalities are actually what make us a community. And the most of the time in politics, especially in the past four years, but for a long time, we've seen each other in terms of these ideological banners and they're sort of like this imaginary identity that we can all march under. And it's kind of a dream world. And what we saw on Wednesday was the dream world crashing into the real world with terrible effects. The video of the African-American cop leading the people-- leading the protests, the rioters the wrong way. That's an incredibly moving video. But yeah, for anybody who cares about us as a community, what happened on Wednesday is a punch in the gut. if not something worse.

[00:09:14.10] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah No, and so I mean maybe this gets a little bit toward our topic, but great books are a common core. So that's what I call curricular conservatism. And what curricular conservatism stands for is exactly that, that there is a form of life, ultimately. There's a political manifestation of it, which we see in the-- it's not even neoclassical-- in the classical architecture of the Capitol, which I strongly identify with personally and unabashedly. I do believe that. I think that Greco-Roman classicism is the ideal architectural form for public space.

[00:09:58.61] TOM MERRILL: And you wrote a whole book on this.

[00:10:00.05] MICHAEL WEINMAN: And I did, for reasons which we could talk about. I could be wrong, of course. I recognize this is an aesthetic judgment, that--

[00:10:07.46] [LAUGHTER]

[00:10:07.58] --needs to be submitted. No, honestly.

[00:10:09.41] TOM MERRILL: never happened in the past, but always a possibility in the future.

[00:10:13.91] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I'm wrong, at least I'm wrong way more often than I'm right, of course and--

[00:10:18.86] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:10:20.51] I think that that's super meaningful that it has that political expression, and then I see this whatever this is, the humanist education. The quote unquote "great books," which don't strongly identified with great books in particular. But that sort of common core formulation, of course it's under attack in this generation like never before for the same reason. For the same reason that the Capitol was under attack.

[00:10:44.33] SARAH MARSH: So Michael I want to ask, what is it about the aesthetics of the Capitol and the interior space, the way sound works that makes that form particularly conducive to the conducting of the public business? Like what is it about that aesthetic? Because that's the aesthetic that was invaded, and the images from that collision of this imaginary online space that Tom's talking about with the brick and mortar and the granite and statuary, that is part of what is making the impact what it is. So what is it about the space of the Capitol that is conducive to the public good, and then what happens when that gets invaded?

[00:11:25.83] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Well, I think where the Romans clearly improved on the Greeks is the [AUDIO OUT]. And [AUDIO OUT] actually, and it has to do with the fact that somebody really cares about something. Of course, everyone's [INAUDIBLE] now. There was this absurd moment when the proceedings began and Pence needed to speak when the microphone wasn't working. I don't know if you were watching from the beginning, but I found this interesting. He actually turned off the microphones. If you care about what you're saying, it don't carry in the chambers. So that's one. I think that that's supremely important.

[00:12:10.69] TOM MERRILL: Wait, so just to make sure I understand. So the architecture of the dome makes it possible for people to hear each other.

[00:12:16.17] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah. And the Statuary Hall. And they felt that too when you walked through-- I don't know exactly what was motivating people in the moment in the Statuary Hall, but it's the circular space. But it's also the fact that if you shout the way that they were shouting, they love the way their voices were rising and echoing together. And that's a

profoundly Democratic thing. I felt it also during the protests in the Wisconsin State House. When they came to that, when people lay down on the floor of the third floor, it's powerful, the way that the space opens and closes.

[00:12:55.64] Yeah but also it's precision. And so I think that what makes the footage iconic of the view out the North side of the Capitol, for instance, is I would say the precision of the intersections of the facades of the building, with the pedestal. And people feel that. And it's what gives it that sort of sacred sense from the building to the platform on which the building sits, to the lawn that surrounds and so on. And I think it gives people a sense of [INAUDIBLE], of holiness-- OK, I'll say holiness [INAUDIBLE].

[00:13:45.23] Yeah and vandals, and that's the right word in my mind for those individuals, vandals love nothing more than violating what's holy. That's my belief. Yeah.

[00:14:03.32] TOM MERRILL: But I take it that you think that in order for us to be a political community, there has to be something that we hold high together.

[00:14:10.61] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah, and the capital of course is the top. There's no right-- it's so meaningful, of course, it's an obvious sort of thing maybe it doesn't even bear repeating. But the speech that the president gave was on low ground and he instructed people to march up the Hill to the highest point. And the people up on high, how remarkable that the President of the United States still sitting-- still office holding president of the United States sort of interpolated himself as the starving masses to charge up the Hill to the people in power. Them up on the Hill know, and Pence in particular know that we're coming for them.

[00:15:04.43] TOM MERRILL: Right, I mean the whole idea of the march seemed to have been something like from a horror movie. The call was coming from within the House. The bad guy is actually your own Vice President. It really is a dream world of just craziness. So can I say, I feel like given the moment, I want to say something sort of political, and then and then I want to talk about great books. And I guess one is my feeling right at this moment, and I might maybe I'll change. But my feeling at this moment is that impeachment is necessary, that the 25th Amendment is not enough. And that just saying, well-- as some people did-- he tried it once he's not going try it again, seems to me completely the wrong lesson to take from this. I will say that I think if the impeachment-- it needs to happen swiftly and decisively and with precision. So it needs to be against him, then the people who actually invaded need to be charged and tried and punished publicly.

[00:16:06.11] This is a political thing. It's not about individual. It is about individual guilt and blame, but it's not simply about them, it's about the health of the polity. And I think that if they wait until after the election, I think that's going to be a really awful thing. I think it's going to be like Democrats hanging around for another six months trying to beat up on Trump and trying to milk it for what it's worth. It needs to happen quickly. That's my strong feeling at the moment.

[00:16:32.03] But then I want to say something else as well, which is this. In that election, the election was not a victory for the left. It was not a victory-- and especially not for the most progressive part of the left. Maybe we would have liked it if it were, but it wasn't. There was 72

million people who voted for Trump, despite all the things that the rest of us saw and thought were horrible. And those people were not all people who were marching on the Capitol. They were not all people who supported the thing that was happening on the Capitol. And so the question that we can't let go for our Democratic politics moving forward is, how does a conversation happen between the rest of the country and those people? And that's something that we can't-- in our anger at Donald Trump-- we can't let get taken off the table.

[00:17:19.31] MICHAEL WEINMAN: No, and look at the one [AUDIO OUT].

[00:17:51.79] TOM MERRILL: --completely true.

[00:17:52.45] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --all that one thing. The only other thing so far that I've noticed to come out of this is Parler being shut down. That's not good. Here's another judgment from me. I don't think that's good. It's apropos your point, Tom. This is my response to your point that it's a misreading of the election to say that like America's tired of the movement that led to the election or the sentiment. It wasn't really a consolidated movement, but the sentiment that led to the election of Donald J. Trump. It's not. And somehow no platforming-- and this is something that is in some of the stuff that I've written about this-- but no platforming is not-- when I say not right, I don't mean just or something. I'm speaking [INAUDIBLE] dialogue here. It's not expedient. This was dumb.

[00:18:59.19] The last thing you want to do is turn John Matze, Metzah, Motza, whatever his name is exactly. Forgive me-- into a martyr for free speech. He's the CEO of Parler.

[00:19:10.02] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:19:13.97] SARAH MARSH: It's this balance of trying to sort out how do you prevent future violence by removing an ability to coordinate with the other deep need for people to be able to talk about what's going on.

[00:19:27.26] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Had the Department of Justice sought an injunction against Parler and it being suspended for 96 hours while-- so I will happily stand corrected if it's demonstrated that Parler was really the way. You know what I mean? But this reeks of [INAUDIBLE] to Iran saying that Facebook is responsible for 2009. Garbage. You know what I mean? We all said that was garbage in 2009. We should all say it's garbage now. I don't want to spend time on Parler. Don't get me wrong. And I don't want to by us having this conversation make 15 million more people join Parler, which is probably what will happen now because everyone--

[00:20:15.34] TOM MERRILL: How did you know how many listeners we have?

[00:20:17.26] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Exactly, by 15 million I was extrapolating by a million.

[00:20:22.66] [LAUGHTER]

[00:20:26.50] SARAH MARSH: Fourteen people all members of our immediate families.

[00:20:30.46] TOM MERRILL: Hi mom.

[00:20:31.06] [LAUGHTER]

[00:20:34.02] Yeah we forget we have these high-minded defenses of free speech that's all about the marketplace of ideas and the best ideas going to come out. I don't believe that. We need free speech, don't get me wrong, but part of the reason for free speech is because you want to know when people have bad ideas. You need to hear them and partly for just simple intelligence reasons. People are coming to storm the capital. It would be better to know about that beforehand.

[00:20:58.33] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah, and a lot of people-- as you listen to experts on right-wing extremism and domestic terrorism, I think they say, they're following Parler for that reason. If specific coordinated plot-- if the placement of bombs is happening on Parler, then Parler needs to be shut down, and they'll find another place, and they will. And then that place will be shut down. But if it's like the concerned moms of Lancaster saying things that I find unbelievable, then-- I don't see what we think we're doing.

[00:21:35.53] TOM MERRILL: We have a bigger problem on our hands. Yeah, yeah.

[00:21:39.52] SARAH MARSH: Well, this is probably a good place to pivot and talk about great books. [INAUDIBLE] right, Michael?

[00:21:46.61] TOM MERRILL: Michael, I chose that title just to provoke you. I don't ever use the word great books in my own self-description. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.

[00:21:58.10] SARAH MARSH: Oh, no. I think one of the things that I tell myself about my own vocation is that teaching, for me, it's literature. But teaching old books and encouraging students to read with charity, with a critical eye, that these are important activities for subject formation in a functioning democracy. We all tell ourselves some version of that. And so what I'm wondering, though, is like does reading "Pride and Prejudice" help stop the sacking of the Capitol? Is that silly for me to think that? And I think that's the question I've been sitting with since last week as I write my syllabi for next week. What should I do, Michael? Help me.

[00:22:47.68] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Well, of course not. But not directly. But I think that those things that we say really are true, they're true [INAUDIBLE]. They're true in potency. They could be true. They're true, or more precisely, Aristotle's way of describing what he means, what we call potentiality. Something like that. But his way of parsing it is always, it will happen so long as nothing interferes. But of course, everything always interferes in a way. That sounds so strong, but [INAUDIBLE] claim really.

[00:23:28.03] Pride and Prejudice, OK, quite possibly. I certainly like to read that book, of course, on origins of political economy, in particular. I fight my colleagues trained in politics and economics to include that, not because it's a woman's voice and you're searching so hard to have a more representative syllabus, a more diverse curriculum. But really because it is a reflection on political economy. And a million such examples. I don't mean to say that in a dismissive way.

We could just have a conversation about that, which I think would be great. Why, in a practical way, does it make profound sense to read classics, to read great books in a broad-based education in the humanities and the social sciences for today's college in arts and sciences students in public and private institutions. I think case by case it will make sense time and time again in ways that we might not think at first.

[00:24:44.50] But what's more profoundly interesting to me and what I've tried to make the case for to my students over the last 15 years or so is that by reading the classics, not this one or that one in this context or in that context, but by reading them and speaking about them with our friends and family members, as I try to encourage them to do, and not only. As much as we can with people outside of our ordinary circles, we create the conditions of the possibility for their not being 65-year-old women marching together with the vandals. In other words, what made Wednesday possible, and we're all hearing these interviews, what made Wednesday possible is that people like these most infamous photos that we've seen people like those displayed in the most infamous photos that we've seen-- stood shoulder to shoulder with a 67-year-old woman who drove from Flagstaff, Arizona together with her 87-year-old mother.

[00:25:51.64] Like, really? And maybe they read "Pride and Prejudice" at one point in their lives. But something's clearly gone wrong. I'm not if I'm laughing--

[00:26:05.09] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:26:06.25] I'm laughing at myself. I'm laughing to not cry, like how could it be that they feel closer to these survivalist Viking hat people than to me. How do we do this? Where did we go wrong? Anyway, so does that make sense as a response.

[00:26:27.04] SARAH MARSH: Well, sure because the power of the story, and what some people are now calling the big lie about the stealing of the election. That story became more powerful than all of the other stories that someone might identify with, that might prevent somebody from doing the kind of thing like throwing a stolen police shield through a window of the Capitol building.

[00:26:51.55] TOM MERRILL: But the big-- the story about the election is only like a variation on a deeper story of our world is being taken away from us, that we're not seen as legitimate, that somehow we're under a fundamental threat. Our very identities are under threat. That seems to be--

[00:27:13.55] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I just mean to say that of course this becomes a causal question, and then it's like a more complicated social scientific story. But it's my intuition, I guess I want to say, that the power of the big lie narrative is as great as it is-- and this is not a novel claim-- in large part because of the fracturing of the media environment. And what gets less stressed and I would stress more is the lack of a core, honestly. I mean of course it's way earlier than college and University. It goes back to middle school and high school.

[00:27:55.15] We don't read literature-- forget great or not-- we don't read literature together at all anymore. And I would even say it's important that we don't watch the same sitcoms on the three networks. I think that kept us in the same world.

[00:28:10.33] TOM MERRILL: We're not reading the same books.

[00:28:12.34] MICHAEL WEINMAN: And we're not even watching the same TV. Yeah, so this is just sort of like a Robert Putnam argument here or something. But I think there's some truth in that to, which my friends on the left don't often like to acknowledge

[00:28:27.85] TOM MERRILL: Can I pose a question to you based on-- so we have a bunch of articles that you wrote for public seminar that we're also going to put up in the episode description. You have this very interesting article about Judith Butler that was written several years ago in which you're trying to mobilize Judith Butler to oppose a certain kind of identity politics. And the question is, if we're looking for quote unquote "voices like our own," and your argument there-- and I want to contest this or I want to pose you a counterexample-- but your argument there is that we shouldn't think about voices like our own simply in terms of the demographic categories that we often do.

[00:29:04.57] So women who say I need to see more female voices in the canon, we were just talking about Jane Austen in that vein or African-Americans or gay people or all kinds of other groups. So here's my counter because, as you know, I care deeply about core text and really consider it kind of my life's work. But I also, like teaching at American University, recognize that there are certain necessities that have to be taken into account. So American University is a place that some years is 65% female in the undergraduate population.

[00:29:38.56] We could have a long talk about where are the men. I mean, they're at home watching porn and getting into QAnon and eventually sacking the captain or whatever. I don't know. But it just seems to me that to keep doing the class that's the Plato, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche as though that's our core, there's a reason why our students don't respond to that. Isn't there a kind of a pedagogical consideration, such that you need to find interlocutors that are going to be appropriate for the audience to whom you're speaking. And there's nothing that's inappropriate about that. There's nothing inappropriate about having an African-American cop in African-American neighborhoods. You might want to hire someone for that specific reason. Can you talk to me about that a little bit?

[00:30:26.93] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah, thanks for the question. This is also near and dear to my heart and kind of my life's work, I would say, certainly to find the time that I have spent-- I'll speak in the perfect, the ambiguous when it comes to the temporality of this term, but the time that I have spent at Bard College Berlin, which is a strongly-identified progressive campus sitting in not just the European capital but sitting in the capital of the third rife. And not accidentally the epicenter, the really true-- this gets to our history if we want. The epicenter of the so-called great books movement. I mean the original, where [AUDIO OUT] --three who were German-speaking intellectuals, because there were no German intellectuals yet, because they didn't have a country. Did they?

[00:31:49.53] So I'm just trying to pile on here. There are very good reasons to think that there is a highly contextualized movement to shape higher education for aspiring leaders of newly-emerging nationally-defined Democratic or Republican countries with a conservative lean. We can super-contextualize this. Started in Germany, whispered in the ear of the great intellectuals of New England, contemporary folks, certainly those with political identities similar to mine, really liked because they hated slavery. But if they listened to anything else they had to say would despise them. Or nationalists often were even in favor of the horrible expansionist war against Mexico. It's appalling if you really know what these people thought from that perspective.

[00:32:51.15] Anyway, I agree, Tom. This is their work. They gave us even the great books, ultimately. That set of volumes comes from this perspective. What I try to say in those pieces is, yes, but it turns out you want to understand why diversity is important? Read Herotodus This remains my-- I've been thinking about this for 25 years fairly actively. I know I come from a certain subject position that colors how I think about it. And I recognize that with all due respect to every voice I've heard speak to me on this issue. No one speaks to me about the value of pluralism more than Herotodus.

[00:33:42.68] And then that just turns out to be true. Now of course, as you shape your course curricula, it damn well ought to be the case that living in 2021, it doesn't look exactly like it looked like in 1931, which is why, Tom, you and I can never live at St. Johns. But maybe-- what was good in 1937, which included texts that were written 2 and 1/2 months ago, it's not like everything ended then.

[00:34:09.39] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:34:15.47] Anyway, that would be my basic reply. [INAUDIBLE], talk about that one too [INAUDIBLE] Herotodus, but, that's the basic idea. When you actually get there-- yeah, when you engage with Herotodus amazing things happen, no matter who you are and no matter where you come from.

[00:34:30.83] TOM MERRILL: So I want to talk about Herotodus a little bit more of it. But before I do that, I need to mention-- Sarah, I believe that our colleague, Patrick Jackson in the School of International Service, wrote a whole book about how the great books movement was used as a kind of nationalist patriotic and ultimately very politically scary thing. So I just want to give a shout out to Patrick, if he ever listens here.

[00:34:56.03] But they're big concerns. What's the political agenda behind the books that you pick? That's not an illegitimate question by any stretch of the imagination.

[00:35:09.33] SARAH MARSH: I mean even someone like Austen who is sometimes held out as an exemplar of maybe an early kind of limited feminism. If you think about the colonial circulation of that work, there are lots of ways of saying that Austen was herself deployed as part of the British colonial project. And exported as a way of teaching other people in other places how to be the right kind of woman. So the question is, what are these books doing in themselves,

and then what are their afterlives, and how do they get deployed politically? Which the curriculum is an example of, and we should think about it that way.

[00:35:51.72] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I agree. So I would always say a common core-- and one other thing that I like to say about this is that, what I time and again, every day, any day, whenever anyone likes, ready to go to the floor for, that is to say to wrestle about is the how not the what. So this is why I resist great books. I don't think they're Great Books, big G, big B. All the same, I think when we want to talk about pluralism as a value, I'm going to fight for Herodotus, not because it's a big G big B big Great Book, but because he happens to articulate something. And I do share in my German intellectual heritage that I acknowledge, way I share an appreciation for origins.

[00:36:41.79] And that means the hideous and the appalling together with the good. If it's up to me, I'll never build the class without the Hebrew Bible in it. Not because I think everyone should identify with the God of Hebrews or worship the God of the Hebrews at all, but because it's an origin. Now of course, it's an origin that has origins, but it nevertheless has come to be an origin for all kinds of things. And I think we need to encounter that. But again, it's this how. You it's like the argument for that wouldn't be, because the origin is so great-- no. Because that's where we are. We live in that world. This is the Capitol that was built, and you have to-- this is an Arendt point, OK.

[00:37:26.88] This is exactly the way that Hannah Arendt defends the tradition, and I agree with her. That you defend the tradition because it happens to be the tradition you're born in, and because the preservation of this makes her a conservative culturally. And that's hard for her friends on the left. She was politically left, obviously. I think sometimes that comes into question somehow. It's not. She was politically left. But she was culturally conservative, and this confounded a New York liberal establishment. They genuinely, profoundly didn't understand her.

[00:38:03.54] SARAH MARSH: So Michael, I want to ask you more about this how. Because this is what we're doing with students in class. And so what is it about Herodotus or any of the little G, little B, great books. What is it about the how of those texts? The way they take up ideas, the way they demonstrate perspectives and their conflict or relations to one another that makes the books important to keep on reading? Like what is it about Herodotus or sort of anything in general [AUDIO OUT]?

[00:38:41.76] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --it's like, these people need a shout out. So I'm going to give a shout out to Homer and to Plato because they deserve it. And this applies to [INAUDIBLE], which, of course, never existed. Just like there were no Germans in 1841, no matter how much they wished there were, there weren't any. There weren't Greeks, in the sense. There weren't ancient Greeks, but what they have-- what you find, I would argue, when you carefully engage with the Iliad-- I'm thinking of the Iliad, and the Republic, and Herodotus is this idea. I'll quote it now from the first sentence of the Republic, which nobody really pays that much attention to despite how famous it is, where Plato has Socrates emphasize that the barbarians have brought this new goddess-- the Northerners, the Crazy Horse riding people-- and that they brought this new goddess to Athens. And they did just as well as the Athenians. And he

doesn't call them the Athenians. He calls them the natives of Athens. And so that's the idea. So I think that's it.

[00:40:00.43] TOM MERRILL: Just to make sure that we get-- so there's a cosmopolitanism in that. That we contemporary readers might just easily just breeze right over. There's a critique of the natives might actually not be that good.

[00:40:11.95] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Probably the crazy horse-riding people might have been better. They're innovating, they're bringing new gods and they did at least just as well as the natives. And he doesn't identify as an Athenian. But I would push back against cosmopolitan, because I don't see this as cosmopolitan, really. I mean Socrates is a dyed in the wool Athenian, ultimately, but what he loves about Athens, I would say, like Heracles, that's the [INAUDIBLE] reference, is that you're from somewhere and you're a patriot. In this model, you are a patriot because you happen to be born in that place and not somewhere else. Even Herodotus is some kind of a patriot for his ionic borderland experience between the Greek cities and the empires of the East. Not even in some way, he's a patriot. I think it's pretty clear. The great passage on the climate of [INAUDIBLE]. He is a patriot and he means it, but he's not like those scary right wing nationalists who mobilized-- no, I mean it-- who mobilized the great books to promote the American way before and during the Cold War. They're Patriots in the sense of what's great about the place I come from is that we want to know people from everywhere.

[00:41:33.34] So that's the cosmopolitanism. So that's where the how comes in. So there's a what. OK, there is a what. Because you couldn't do this with just anybody. But the what is not like someone has a template for how to live. It's just, this is a body of literature evolved over centuries that is listening to people from everywhere. And it's distinctively its own and is not hiding that. And that's the thing. And I think that defines what we wish to be as America, in particular now I would say, but in general what we kind of wish to be as the modern global exportation of European culture. We're from somewhere, we're proud of where we're from, we're trying to build something where we are, and we're listening to voices from everywhere.

[00:42:33.10] TOM MERRILL: Can I [? interrupt ?] for a second? So the distinction between the how and the what. Because you went pretty fast from the experience of the classroom to American identity. My view is always-- and I'm not sure if this is the right view, and I'm not sure where I picked it up. So it's kind of like one of those opinions that I have that-- but what you're trying to do in class is you're trying to allow students to participate in an activity and to share in a certain kind of ethos. And that that's really the core of what you're trying to do. Now it happens that there are certain instruments that allow you to do that or make it easier to do that. And that's where the books come in. And you need to have something that's in common. If you live in a University that's a complete smorgasbord, it's easy to get lost. It's easy to get spiritually lost that you're not sure where you're going, or what the trajectory of your story is. And you don't have anything in common just to talk to other people.

[00:43:28.20] So one of the great things about the St. John's model-- I think we share some criticisms-- but is that everybody's reading the same thing on the same night. And that it's a very communitarian place in good ways and bad. But it's at one extreme, our contemporary universities at the other extreme where we have nothing in common, and so therefore everything

feels like it's just transactional. But we need to have something that we hold up, even if the Republic is the best available means. It might not be the best possible, but it's the best one that I have. And different times might require different books. And the Republic for various reasons might be a good place to start with some people, but not a good place to start with other people. Does that does that sound--

[00:44:13.07] Sometimes I think about the books that we read in class is sort of like different machines at the gym that are working out different muscle sectors. But the exercise is the key thing. It's not the machine is not the end. So what do you think about that?

[00:44:30.29] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I feel like I've been talking way too much. But I think yes, basically. That's what I was trying to say. Sorry. [AUDIO OUT].

[00:44:45.65] SARAH MARSH: --fitting. This is another one of your essays, your public seminar essays. You talk about a concept that you call perspectivalism without relativism. And I want to just read the definition you provide for that concept, and then I want us to talk about it with relation to this idea about the gym and the different--

[00:45:11.94] TOM MERRILL: Present Michael will have to confront past Michael--

[00:45:14.36] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Who is that idiot?

[00:45:15.85] [LAUGHTER]

[00:45:19.56] SARAH MARSH: I think it's very smart. Say that there's this problem with saying that there all these different books or all these different ways that we could get ideas because that is a slippery slope toward the kind of intellectual or moral relativism. And then you say that what we really need is this thing called perspectivalism without relativism. And you say that the perspectivalism without relativism would be the need for sensitivity to multiple points of view coupled with an insistence upon acting on the basis of taking up just one. And that's the hedge against relativism. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

[00:46:05.10] TOM MERRILL: That's a mouthful.

[00:46:07.69] MICHAEL WEINMAN: And this is what I associate with Butler, so I like to cite her as an ally on this for reasons that are in part strategic, of course, but they're not only strategic. And I see her work as illustrative of this. Take it or leave it. Which is to say that her general intellectual attitude, with which I've strongly identified since I read-- I first read the essay "Contingent Foundations" when I was going through my own great books education at Shimer College, which what was then called Shimer College, now called the Shimer Great Book School of North Central College. My shout-out to Shimer which continues to exist somehow, hopefully. It was for the duration of our conversation and maybe a bit longer. A place I love dearly.

[00:47:12.72] So you're right. I've been reading-- it had been that. So Shimer is super similar to St. John's. If one of the 14 listeners is familiar with St. John's but not Shimer. They're completely the same and entirely different is the way that I always like to say it. But the curriculum is about

85% the same and I read Butler-- to come to the point-- I read Butler for the first time having gone through like the 85% of the curriculum that's identical to the St. John's curriculum. We read Euclid, and we read Lavoisier, like all these things that you would never be studying as a student of the humanities. And then I took a-- this is where the difference comes in-- I got to take an elective my junior year and it was on feminist political thought, and I read "Contingent Foundation."

[00:48:02.19] So here's the essay. Here's the citation. "If you want to know what I mean by perspectivalism or perspectivalism without relativism, I would say we could start with 'Contingent Foundations' by Butler or others of her works where she describes the idea that she resists or pushes back against the idea that one can simply inhabit existing categories." You don't start every sentence as a Jewish cis white male from New York or something like that, in my case. To put my identifiers in order of their greatest importance.

[00:48:45.41] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] help to understand what you're saying.

[00:48:49.14] MICHAEL WEINMAN: But nevertheless one adopts a perspective that one acknowledges, so one has this ironic-- and you could do this with other thinkers other than Butler, obviously. But you adopt a somewhat ironic-- Richard [INAUDIBLE] presents a similar picture in a different register. You adopt an ironic register, but you nevertheless inhabit a place. And I think that's what we're missing. And then Wednesday it's [INAUDIBLE]. But it's like Wednesday morning, not even Wednesday morning. Wednesday 1:00 PM until, or even 11:35 AM. Once Pence was done feeling really awkward, the rest of the boring part up until around 2:25 PM or whatever was a moment where one could experience that. Where there's a kind of understanding one's place in the world because of some formality, because of some social occasion where you say, oh yeah, that's who I am.

[00:49:50.95] But you recognize that you could just as easily be something else. But it requires you to have some critical distance from that identity that you inhabit. And that's what it means to be like someone. I guess that's the idea. All those other things are true. I also am Jewish. I also am a New Yorker. I also am whatever politically progressive. But I am an American, and that means something. And it means something to me to have a community of Americans that we recognize one another as Americans. And I think-- [INAUDIBLE] tells me I'm wrong, but that has to do with her thinking, but I see that as part of her first amendment activism, which is real and is costly to her in terms of her usual audiences.

[00:50:37.11] SARAH MARSH: Yeah and that saying that one is an American would sort of mean roughly the same thing to everyone saying that. That's the follow-on idea.

[00:50:47.26] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah and we can profoundly disagree about whether Israel is a settler colonial state and still be Americans. But somehow that's been lost. Just to take one example. It's like Butler says that, and she's un-American. What does that even mean? You know what I mean?

[00:51:03.20] SARAH MARSH: All the categories are linked up to one another, and then they move to--

[00:51:07.86] MICHAEL WEINMAN: There's no irony whatsoever. There's no critic-- irony not meaning like ha, ha. That's funny or whatever irony means to most people, but critical distance as you were saying earlier.

[00:51:20.08] TOM MERRILL: Isn't it-- if you think, just to go back to Herodotus for a second, people-- so I don't read Herodotus in class, and I should, but oftentimes students will react to text by saying, well so-and-so is just a white male or so-and-so is just this. And I think what they don't always realize is that they're kind of re-enacting racism. And they're kind of saying that-- now, those are important facts. It's important fact that Herodotus is male, but I don't think he understands himself as white. Do you? It's not like a category that exists for him in Ancient Greece. There are like ethnic boundaries, and there are things that you could think of that would be equivalent. But they're not the same thing. But that somehow to think that people have layers and that they have identities, but they're not entirely those identities, that seems to be the point that you're really driving at--

[00:52:10.54] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:52:10.66] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --reasons why it's great is that we don't have to just read them from outside. We also can read from outside. And we can engage in the serious sort of also archaeological work of understanding the material culture of Ionian civilization, and the ways in which it was European, and the ways in which it was Asian, and the ways in which it was Eurasian, and the ways in which it was none of those. Things like that. But Herodotus himself thematises this. That's one of the reasons why I like it so much, where he himself is not participating in a euro-centrism that he recognizes as nascent. He's telling mainland Greeks, and he's telling Athenians really, but he's telling mainland Greeks, get over yourselves. First of all, everything good in your civilization comes from Egypt anyway.

[00:52:56.46] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:53:01.12] I'm going to tell you why the Asians and the Europeans fought. I'm going to buy into this clash of civilizations narrative, but first I'm going to talk to you for about three and half hours about every cool thing in Egypt just for this. Just for this I like to teach the text. It's like, what's book two-- you could quiz the students-- what's book two about? Oh probably it's about how the Greeks started fighting in Troy-- No. And it's like a catalog of every cool thing about Egypt.

[00:53:33.08] TOM MERRILL: Right, you remember the book "Black Athena" that was a big controversy in the 90's. That's Herodotus. It's that [? they're ?] not from Egypt.

[00:53:41.99] MICHAEL WEINMAN: But, of course, that doesn't make the black Athena and decolonizing movements wrong in my mind either because it's a projection-- many intellectuals, in the course of the Cold War and after, did put up this European. So it's a reaction against something real, just not the Greek texts. And that's a big part of his message.

[00:54:09.90] TOM MERRILL: Well, I also just want to make the point that if you think about the canonical thing-- first of all, the very word canon is a religious term, as though we're part of

some kind of church. I guess part of what we're saying is that we do need to be kind of something common, and so that there is some sort of church like elements to that. But I'm not sure the canon is the right model. But if you think about many of the thinkers of the tradition, they were all like the critics of their time. They were the like the weirdos and-- I think about John Locke, for example. Locke was the secretary to this guy Shaftesbury who basically tried to lead a coup d'etat. If there's anyone that he's closest to with a weird mix of Marx and Lenin. He's the guy who's overthrowing the-- literally overthrowing the regime.

[00:54:58.96] And so to read him as somehow-- well, you were like the partisan of the shopkeeper and the Bourgeois is a very weird and the shopkeeper is part of Locke for sure, but it's not the whole thing. And it's just sort of a weirdly reductive-- only in terms of our own political allegiances or dis-allegiances. Seems to me to be true.

[00:55:22.65] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:55:23.19] TOM MERRILL: Can I raise another--

[00:55:24.42] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --as you say that about Locke, I just have to throw in the course that I've never taught that I most want to teach is Locke, Lenin, and Luxemburg. So I completely agree, and I mean it sincerely. I think that that's a super-- that would be an example perspectivalism. If I really wanted to get the whole spectrum or something, we could throw in who? But you know-- [INAUDIBLE].

[00:55:52.92] TOM MERRILL: John Lennon. No. Yeah. Yeah, no. Rosa Luxemburg is somebody that we should read more in this context. Yes. Yeah, a lot of the revolutionaries across history where people have--

[00:56:12.74] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:56:12.89] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --with my arguments with my friends on the left. How can you seriously occupy a left intellectual space if you wish to-- no one needs to, but if you want to think of yourself as a left and intellectual, how can you not know anything about all these things that everyone is quoting on every page? You read Marx chapter and verse as though it's the Bible, but you genuinely have no idea what he's talking about and you know it. Because he's quoting Aristotle everywhere. You've never, in a million years, would think [INAUDIBLE]. So there's that too. [AUDIO OUT].

[00:56:46.60] TOM MERRILL: --the most classically, liberally educated people ever.

[00:56:51.66] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I don't think that stuff-- these would not be like main arguments in any way, but I do think there's some of that too, where simply to avoid being a vandal which is the easiest condition for human beings. Yeah you familiarize yourself-- that would be a more canonical justification for a particular common core. I would never use the term canon or I'd certainly try to avoid it, simply because it also has that sense of rule like Torah for instance. There's a law. There's an instruction that was found in here, you're going to get it. But in the other sense, like this is the liturgy. This is the book of common prayer. If we're going to

call it the book of common prayer, I'm actually OK, to be honest. We're not a church, but we are a community, and we need-- why the book of common prayer if we're not going to kill each other anymore, if we're not going to have another Oliver Cromwell, which is like-- we need a book of common prayer, and now, I mean [INAUDIBLE]. We obviously need a book of common prayer. Case in point, this.

[00:57:56.32] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:58:01.82] TOM MERRILL: --integralist Catholic.

[00:58:03.44] MICHAEL WEINMAN: We need a hymn, though. We need a hymn, though.

[00:58:07.46] TOM MERRILL: That's right. [INAUDIBLE]. Can I bring up another phrase that strikes me as illustrative sort of from the other side. You guys all know this phrase, "check your privilege," which feels like it's deployed in class as a way of shutting people down. When somebody says something that you think is offensive, you're like, check your privilege. You are white, cis-gendered etc, etc. And to that extent, I oppose it. I think it's a bad thing. I think it shuts down conversation. But if you think about what the meaning of it is-- isn't it sort of a synonym for, know yourself? And if you think of what the Socratic injunction to know yourself really means, it doesn't mean go to the therapist and talk about your feelings and talk about how you hate your mom or something. It's really know this political and social structures that make you who you are because you're not an atomistic individual in a void, that you participate in all kinds of structures that have histories. Those histories are often very creepy and have unjust things, and it's not illegitimate at all. In fact, it's the opposite. It's what we're supposed to be doing, is to be checking your privilege in that sense. If you can do it without hating yourself and turning into some, as you say, vandal. But that seems to me-- that is the liberal education vocation, right?

[00:59:31.37] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Yeah, I mean in another way that's humility. So folks probably wouldn't like that, folks who use that I would say to play. That locution probably wouldn't identify with it being said. What you're saying is, be humble. They wouldn't like to see those as functionally equivalent, but we do have these conversations in my classrooms. Or we have had these conversations in my classrooms in Berlin a lot. And I welcome them. Yeah, and that's exactly what I say, that I hear you reminding me to be humble and, in this particular way, to [AUDIO OUT]. material opportunities that I had because of where I come from. And I agree, insofar as you will check your-- we're all privileged if we ended up in this classroom in Berlin.

[01:00:40.99] I tell my students. We're all privileged. We're sitting here. It's a privilege to sit here. It really is, I'll say [INAUDIBLE]. And if we can all check our privilege, then it should be fair for me to accept that from you if you can accept from back an admonition to be here. And I'm not even repeating that admonition to you. I don't think you need to check your privilege, actually. But if you're reminding me that I need to check mine, vis-a-vis, the power differential in the classroom because I'm the professor, then fine. Absolutely. I think it's important, so long as you can hear me out. I'm going to hear that as an admonition to be humble, and I accept it.

[01:01:27.88] TOM MERRILL: Right. It sometimes feels like the people who say, check your privilege, are often not very clear [? about the ?] road to privilege would be the--

[01:01:32.64] MICHAEL WEINMAN: That may also be true. But I don't feel like it's my place. In the past, in particular right? So you tend to insist on them. To me it's a move within the game of differentiated power that my role [INAUDIBLE] institutional representative in the room, or as I put it. the only person being paid to be here. As the only person being paid to be here, I just need to hear it. And I will. I'll just allow myself to say that I'm going to hear it this way, and I ask you to accept that because even the checking of privilege itself as you're saying has ramifications within that general system.

[01:02:17.33] TOM MERRILL: We have a more important obligation as it were to be aware, to be humble, and indeed to check our privilege and that sense than the students do, just because of differential subject positions.

[01:02:29.45] SARAH MARSH: Right, and at the same time an obligation to demonstrate that no system of power is absolute in the classroom can be a model for how that works. If the only person being paid to be there is willing to exemplify intellectual humility in light of the other subject positions in the room. So the call to check your privilege is not a call to be quiet. It's a call to contemplate something.

[01:02:58.95] TOM MERRILL: Right. That's right. You could pull that off by getting people to have that interpretation. It would be great. Well guys, we're coming to the end of our time. Should we close the circle? Do we need to say anything else about-- does liberal education have a politics? Maybe that's too big of a-- what's our obligation in this moment? And maybe I'll say something a little bit controversial. Sarah, you brought up the justification for liberal education, that it's going to make us better citizens. And I think that's true, sort of, but I think there are a lot of reasons to doubt that. Because it seems to me that it introduces a kind of higher sense of transactionalism into the understanding of what liberal education is, that maybe we're doing liberal education because we think it's the right way of life and not simply for our alleged benefits. And as Michael just reminded us, there are many liberal educated people who are horrible, not good citizens. But that still leads me of the question that I have obligations as a citizen to think about. So, I don't know, do you guys have any final thoughts about but this issue? Wrong answers only, please.

[01:04:16.15] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Well, mine is a strong, yes. This would be like the "Parthenon and Liberal Education" book. It is a book on the Parthenon, so I'm not saying anyone's going to make it through all 200 pages if they're looking for an answer to Tom's question from my perspective, which they can agree, degree, dissent, and revise or whatever. But that is what that book is trying to say, and we tried it. The title says liberal education because that was ultimately the decision of the press. We sort of fought a war. I would call it "Liberal Arts Education" because I think that it is a humanistic education in the arts. And the arts in the most expansive sense of politics is an art. Medicine is an art, etc., not a science. Even mechanics is an art.

[01:05:08.93] TOM MERRILL: Mechanics is not a science? [AUDIO OUT]. very end, so we can't-- yeah, OK. [AUDIO OUT].

[01:05:44.77] MICHAEL WEINMAN: --needs to identify that way, but it does have a politics. And if you're advocating, in my mind, for a liberal arts education in some serious way, and not in some sort of instrumental way, as you put it, then what you're arguing for is some sort of sense of a civic commitment that [INAUDIBLE] civic duty, and no other in particular. Not a disciplinary. It's not training disciplinary specialists. It's not equipping people for the workforce. It's fulfilling a civic duty of a kind, and then [INAUDIBLE].

[01:06:25.18] TOM MERRILL: But there's considerations about the politics of liberal education within itself. And then there's considerations about how you act towards the larger-- because we can't survive without a larger political community. It's not good for us if we're going to have a Civil War of QAnon people versus Black Lives Matter or something.

[01:06:42.81] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Oh, where possible because we're keeping it together, and we're keeping it together to make it possible. That's the way I feel.

[01:06:53.26] TOM MERRILL: So Michael, I just want to make sure you consider yourself to be keeping it together.

[01:06:57.28] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Not intransitively. Intransitively I am not keeping it together these days. And transitivity, I'm sure as heck trying.

[01:07:10.74] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, OK. All right.

[01:07:13.40] SARAH MARSH: I don't have-- the only thing I want to say is that I'm going to sit with the question we started with about the people who decided to go into the Capitol and I don't know what to [AUDIO OUT].

[01:07:31.52] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] people down and giving them copies of the Republic right this second.

[01:07:34.67] SARAH MARSH: A serious person wants to know what to do about that. And I don't know. I don't know. And I think it's important to say that I don't know.

[01:07:46.48] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, well it's a different question than the question of what we should do and how we think about ourselves in the classroom, unrelated. Well guys, I think our time is up here. Michael, it's been really wonderful, and we're just so happy to have you on. And I certainly remember fondly our time together back at St. John's College. So I think we still have a book of common prayer.

[01:08:10.48] MICHAEL WEINMAN: [INAUDIBLE].

[01:08:17.62] TOM MERRILL: There may be some inappropriate parts in our common book of prayer [INAUDIBLE].

[01:08:21.54] MICHAEL WEINMAN: I'd rather have those problems.

[01:08:22.78] TOM MERRILL: Anyway--

[01:08:23.69] SARAH MARSH: Michael, this was a lovely-- it was wonderful to meet you.

[01:08:26.17] TOM MERRILL: --to have those problems.

[01:08:27.48] MICHAEL WEINMAN: Likewise. Thank you, Sarah.