



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume IV: An Unstable World: The West in Decline?

Introduction

One frequently hears that the West is in decline, or that the world has become destabilized to the extent that few human values remain constant. This seminar was created to enable Fellows to investigate, in a manner relevant to their own classroom disciplines, the assumptions behind this pessimistic conclusion.

The notion of “decline” is in itself rooted in Western culture. Indeed, it partakes of the biological fallacy: that nations are like organisms, that they are born, mature, decline, and die. Cultures that assume such a sequence to be true of nations also must believe that the society either grows or decays: that one must be expanding or shrinking, aggressor or aggressed-upon. Such an attitude is at the root of nineteenth century imperialism and at the heart of much of twentieth century diplomacy. The attitude is not necessarily incorrect, and the seminar was posed to ask questions inherent in the assumption itself. Thus Fellows were encouraged to write of any subject they choose so long as the subject addressed three issues: what is meant by growth, decline, indeed “maturity” or “quality” in a given activity of society? How does one society influence, or impact upon, another—that is, do views about growth, decline, maturity derived from one society change the views of another, whether in art, literature, or politics? And in what ways are our perceptions changed or manipulated with respect to these issues by the media, by the classroom, and by our personal experience? The goal, of course, was to ask Fellows to inquire into their own teaching methods while producing a specific unit on a subject relevant to their classroom needs. Thus an abstract query would be rooted to a realistic classroom situation.

The resulting units are markedly diverse. One Fellow asked why Japan had come to dominate certain aspects of modern technology despite defeat in war. Another asked much the same question of Germany. One asked about how women had been viewed in nineteenth century British literature and how those views reflected the biological metaphors by which society so often explains itself. Another inquired into images of the sea, and how as society shifted from a sea-related technology, perceptions of power and beauty were changed. Yet another inquired into the impact of African music on American music and how certain forms of jazz had developed and how those forms were viewed as “maturing.” One member studied the problem of mercenaries—the soldier who sells himself—in terms of declining and shifting national loyalties. *Soldier*, after all, derives from *solidus*, Latin for “piece of money.” And another Fellow carried this question into the realm of weapons system. The constant link was not forgotten, however: how have values changed, in whatever arena of human activity, to the point that so many of our students see the world as a place of complex, unpredictable instability?

In the end some of the questions asked were changed or not answered. The unit on Germany was not submitted; the question of women in Victorian literature broadened into a larger issue concerning power, the

industrial revolution, and nineteenth century antecedents of twentieth century literature. The question concerning Japan was narrowed to the exciting pursuit of how a Japanese art form deeply influenced a French art form. It is in precisely these transformations, of course, that learning best takes place; it is in such transformation that we can best help our students understand the questions they are really asking as opposed to the questions they think they ought to ask.

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