

## **Politics & Humanities - Ep 5**

[00:00:00.33] TOM MERRILL: Hello, everyone. I'm Tom Merrill. I'm a Professor of Government at American University. This is the lecture, Do Humanities-- or a conversation-- Do Humanities Have a Future? Liberal Education Between Technocracy and Radicalism. We're here with Ross Douthat of the New York Times. Before I introduce Ross more fully I need to mention some upcoming events for the Political Theory Institute.

[00:00:26.28] As you may know, we've had a series of events about contemporary politics. We've had an event on Does Socialism Have a Future and Does Conservatism Have a Future? Our third event will be Does the Middle Have a Future? And our speaker will be Bill Ghalston of Brookings Institution. The date for that will be October 26 via Zoom. And then after the election, we have one more event, which will be Fashion, Identity, and Freedom of Expression, with Gwenda-Lin Grewal or "Gree-wall"-- I'm not sure how to pronounce her name-- of the New School of Social Thought. That will be November 19.

[00:01:02.19] So please come back for those. If you want to find that, you can find them on our website. This is our annual Lincoln Scholars lecture. Lincoln Scholars is a Cortex certificate program for first and second year students at AU that I direct. We, in Lincoln Scholars, we try to promote intellectual and political diversity. We read hard texts and small seminars, and we try to build community outside of the classroom.

[00:01:28.32] Right now, some of our students, I think, as we speak, are wrestling with Adam Smith and Karl Marx. Others are reading Frederick Douglass and Henry David Thoreau. And some of us are going to wake up early tomorrow morning, to try to figure out Simone de Beauvoir. So Ross, please don't keep us too late, since we have more to do.

[00:01:46.98] If there are any high school students in the audience or their parents, we encourage you to apply to AU and to apply to Lincoln Scholars. We'd love to hear from you. So you can find us on the-- if you just Google Lincoln Scholars at American University.

[00:02:00.42] I also need to say some thank you's. I need to say thank you to Allan Levine, my colleague, who is the director of the Political Theory Institute, who organized the speaker series this year, and has done a great job. So I want to say thank you to him. I also want to say thank you to Vicky Wilkins, who was the Dean of the School of Public Affairs, who has been a big supporter of Lincoln Scholars, and without whom, really, tonight's lecture would not have been possible. So I just want to say thank you to her as well.

[00:02:28.02] Tonight is our third Lincoln Scholars lecture. Two years ago, we heard from Cornel West and Robbie George, who talked about the purpose of a liberal education. One year ago, Danielle Allen spoke to us about the Declaration of Independence.

[00:02:41.28] Our speaker tonight is Ross Douthat, columnist for The New York Times. He's the author of several books, which I'm not going to all list-- but including, most recently, The Decadent Society-- How we Became Victims-- Became the Victims of our Own Success. I think he's widely recognized by people across the political spectrum as one of the most thoughtful

commentators on American politics and culture, and certainly somebody that I've learned a lot from over the years. So Ross, I haven't been able to say this to you before, but I just want to say thank you for the work that you've done.

[00:03:14.55] He does have a lot to say about Donald Trump and other issues related to the election. But we have tried to put a moratorium on all such discussion, even though we are at American University, and there's nothing else that anybody else wants to talk about. We asked him here tonight to talk about the condition of the universities, and especially the humanities.

[00:03:34.27] So and so title of his lecture is, Do the Humanities Have a Future? Liberal Education Between Technocracy and Radicalism. So Ross, I just want to say welcome, and we're looking forward to the discussion.

[00:03:47.30] ROSS DOUTHAT: Thank you both so much for having me. It's really a pleasure to be here. And I welcome everyone in the audience to my attic, which hopefully looks well appointed and intellectual, in its sort of bare [INAUDIBLE] space behind me.

[00:04:03.19] TOM MERRILL: Ross, I've seen you now in several webinars. And I have to say, I've grown familiar with that attic.

[00:04:09.02] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, I'm very-- I'm always impressed with the people who have the highly impressive bookshelves behind them. If I did a webinar in front of my bookshelves, a small child would run across the screen at like 30 second intervals. So the attic is really the place to be.

[00:04:25.88] TOM MERRILL: So I'm just going to say one thing to the audience. We are going to have a period of Q&A. We're going to talk for about 45 minutes, or maybe a little bit more, depending on how things go. But we do want to hear your questions. If you have a question, you should put it into the Q&A box at the bottom of your Zoom screen. And when you do so, you should give us your affiliation, so that we know who you are. Give us your name and your affiliation.

[00:04:50.53] We do take questions first from students. So if you are a current student at AU, please write that down so that we'll know. We do have somebody who will be curating the questions for us. That's Gabe Whitbread. And so we will try to answer as many as we can, when we get to the Q&A section.

[00:05:09.04] Ross, I thought we would organize our conversation by just trying to go through the words of the ideas in your title, which I'm going to read it again. Because it's so good. Do the Humanities Have a Future? Liberal Education Between Radicalism and Technocracy. I think the title went through a couple of different versions. So we may be different--

[00:05:30.49] ROSS DOUTHAT: It was between technocracy and radicalism. But then the radicals won. And so here we are.

[00:05:36.01] TOM MERRILL: Right. I think we should just start with the premise that's implicit in the question, the beginning of the title. Do the humanities have a future? That implies-- and it's open ended-- that there might not have a future, that it might even be in crisis, and maybe even an existential crisis. So can you tell us what you mean when, you ask the question, do the humanities have a future? Why is that something that people should worry about?

[00:06:00.22] ROSS DOUTHAT: Sure. So I mean, to be really technically correct, the title probably should have been do the academic humanities have a future? But that's not quite as good a sales pitch for turning out on a Thursday night to hear us talk.

[00:06:14.95] But I think that's-- the humanities have a future as long as there are human beings, in the sense that as long as there are people to read and write and create art and respond to it, the humanities are not going to go away. They may rise and ebb in various contexts. But they will be with us until the very end, whatever that end may be.

[00:06:33.43] TOM MERRILL: So my job is permanent-- that's what you're telling me.

[00:06:35.40] ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, know until God calls us all, until the rapture, basically, or the alien invasion, whichever comes first. But the academic humanities are in a lot of trouble, just in sort of, independent of debates about their substance, what's actually happening in academic departments. It's very clear that institutionally, they've fallen on hard times.

[00:07:02.32] And this is, the idea that the humanities are in crisis is not at all new. You can basically, probably as long as the Modern Language Association has been meeting, there have been pieces saying, are the humanities in crisis? But if you just take, basically, student enrollment as an indicator of an academic area's health and potential longevity, then what you see is basically, there was a sort of strong dip in humanities enrollment.

[00:07:36.34] Well, there was sort of a peak in the 1950s and 1960s, for reasons that we can dig into a little later. Then there was a dip thereafter, from sort of the 70s onward. And then there was kind of stabilization. And that led a lot of people to say that whatever the crisis was, it was not an existential crisis, or the worst crisis had passed, and so on.

[00:07:58.24] But then, basically about 12 or 13 years ago, after the Great Recession, there was a new acceleration of decline. And it's happened across disciplines. It's happening in English departments, and History departments, and so on. But it's also happening in big colleges and small colleges, public colleges and private colleges. Fewer students happening at elite private institutions in state schools.

[00:08:30.91] And there are, of course, exceptions. But overall, the trend in enrollment has been down and down and down. And this has sort of coincided and helped further cause the erosion of academic job opportunities for people who study the humanities at the graduate level. So you have a sense of kind of apocalypse that hangs over the academic job market in the humanities. And I wrote a couple columns about this, that are probably one reason why you very kindly ask me to talk about it.

[00:09:07.68] Both of them were written pre-COVID. One of them worked of the analysis of a guy named Ben Schmidt, I believe, who did sort of-- who had sort of earlier, written a piece some years ago, saying actually, the crisis of the humanities is overblown. And then, by 2017 or 2018, he was saying no, it was overblown then. It's not overblown now.

[00:09:31.74] And then the more recent piece I did was off a big package in the Chronicle of Higher Education, whose title was just the word Endgame. And it was basically all about sort of debates about what the humanities should be, but all of it under the shadow of a crisis of enrollment and academic job opportunities. And again, all pre-COVID. Post COVID, at least for the foreseeable future, there, I believe, is no academic job market. And it's hard to imagine that student enrollment in the humanities is going to reverse itself in a period of so much turbulence, professional uncertainty in colleges, plus the transition of academic life to, in many cases, to Zoom.

[00:10:17.91] So that's the story of what it means. It's why we're asking the question in a structural, and rather than just intellectual sense, I guess.

[00:10:28.41] TOM MERRILL: Right. So there's a crisis that is a real, in some ways, real job crisis, right?

[00:10:33.78] ROSS DOUTHAT: But right. It's not just like oh, the humanities are in crisis, because everyone's a postmodernists now, or something like that. I mean, that may be part of the crisis. But that's the crisis is literal and observable and quantifiable. It's not just a matter of a sort of intellectual diagnosis.

[00:10:50.67] TOM MERRILL: And it's also not just simply a matter of COVID. This is something that's deeper, longer-- and who knows how long the COVID period will last.

[00:10:56.76] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right.

[00:10:57.06] TOM MERRILL: But presumably the problems will still be there. OK, so well, so that's the problem, right? So jobs are going away. But because student enrollment is going down, and that seems to indicate, somehow, a lack of market demand, I guess one would say, if we're seeing this in an economist point of view.

[00:11:16.39] So in other words, in your title, it seemed to give us let's say competing versions of what the cause, or competing accounts of what the cause is, I think that's fair to say. Can we talk first about the radicalism dimension? There's technocracy and radicalism in your title. And I think that the-- and maybe just explain what you mean when you use that word.

[00:11:40.14] ROSS DOUTHAT: So I mean I mean a couple different things. I think that the claim that the humanities have entered eclipse, or gone into decline, or become irrelevant, because of something called radicalism is very common to political conservatives. And sometimes, since I'm kind of a political conservative, it's probably not surprising that I think there is something there. But I think it's-- what we mean by radicalism conflates a few different things.

[00:12:08.02] One is sort of particular intellectual approaches to texts that take different forms. Deconstructionism and postmodernism and so on are all complicated intellectual patterns that I'm not fully qualified to unpack. But there is a sort of common thread of a kind of, a mix of suspicion, suspicion of ideas of canonical greatness in literature, sort of readings of texts that seek to interrogate more than appreciate them, or appreciate them by interrogating them, or attempts to blow up and then transform or expand the canon to include more diverse voices, rather than just dead White males, all of which has sort of a political component, but then can be sharpened, I think into a view of the purpose of humanities as sort of more overtly political site for training people in the tools they need to revolutionize society, basically.

[00:13:22.77] TOM MERRILL: You're not just talking about, let's say, student protests, which is something that people sometimes get worked up about. But in the grand scheme of things, that's sort of what students-- that's what young people are supposed to do. I mean, aren't you talking about something that's broader, and is happening in departments, but also, maybe even more importantly, in university administration? Would that be a fair statement?

[00:13:44.89] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah. So I mean, the-- yeah, the turn-- I mean, there's sort of a cycle of these things, right, where they're sort of recurring periods where various forms of radicalism seem to rise and crest within academic life in particular. And obviously, the 60s is the original case. But then you have the periods of, again, debates over the canon, over programs on so-called Western civilization in the 1980s, sort of culminating in the PC wars of the early 1990s, where the term political correctness becomes a subject of national debate.

[00:14:23.56] And then that period sort of recedes. And now we're in a kind of third wave, where instead of PC, people would say probably wokeness, social justice warriors. These are sort of-- they've become more pejorative terms from the right. You could talk about intersectionality. You can talk about anti-racism as a frame. There are a lot of different frames, and no sort of single way of distilling this. But it is something that is-- it's sort of a vision of political transformation that is, one, very powerful in some parts of the humanities, in some English and literature and philosophy departments, and so on.

[00:15:05.27] And it's also, as you said, something that then extends into trying to-- well, trying to transform all of society, but starting by transforming the life of the university, by creating a kind of managerial bureaucracy, dedicated to, initially, sort of stewarding and protecting multiculturalism and diversity, and then, as sort of the radicalism quotient increases, towards making the interrogation of Whiteness, the overthrowing or critiquing of White privilege, patriarchies, and so on, an organizing premise, an organizing program for at least part of the university.

[00:15:50.68] And again, this isn't perfectly map onto your readings of Foucault in English departments. But it doesn't not contour it either, right? It does-- there's a connection between those sort of intellectual trends and strategies and what especially now younger activists, want the university as a whole to be about, and ultimately, society as a whole.

[00:16:17.52] TOM MERRILL: Well, that certainly fits with my experience. You get the impression from some universities that when they talk about general education, that on the one

hand, they want to say there's no single thing that all students need to read. On the other hand, everybody has to take a class on an anti-racism, right? So that's a pretty typical thing.

[00:16:33.90] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right. And anti-racism has its own developing canon. You would obviously read it from Ibram Kendi. You would read Ta-Nehisi Coates. And you would read a certain set of authors, going somewhat back in time, though maybe not too far back, too far back in time. But the point of that canon is, again, transformation, rather than-- it's-- you're not-- it's not a theory that you're reading Kendi because he's the greatest philosopher of all time. It's the theory that you're reading Kendi because he is giving you a blueprint for how to change your own life and how to change the life of the university-- which is, again, overlaps with some ideas of why you read Emerson, but is also somewhat different.

[00:17:19.64] TOM MERRILL: Right. OK, so now let's talk about the second word in your title, the technocracy. And that might be a word that some of our viewers are not familiar with. So you can you unpack that for us?

[00:17:33.12] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, I mean, technocracy sort of just means rule by experts. But in the context of the university, it means it means the idea that the purpose of the university is training managerial elites to run complex systems, to do scientific research, but ultimately, to play a managerial role in an extremely complex society in which you need a certain level of technical expertise to occupy high ranking positions.

[00:18:06.81] And I wasn't-- I mean, I wasn't joking that really technocracy should come first in the title. Because technocracy actually precedes radicalism in the history of the modern university. And you can see, I think, reasonably, much of radicalism as a reaction, not to some supposedly conservative university that arguably ceased to exist more than 100 years ago, but to be a very modern, secular, technocratic project, right?

[00:18:36.04] So the classic story, which is an oversimplification-- but we'll tell it anyway-- is that basically, starting from Harvard and radiating out to other schools, you had a program from the late 19th century on, first a sort of secularize curriculum in schools that had a religious purpose once upon a time, and then to move away from the idea of some sort of humanities core, which meant Latin and Greek, way back, as sort of the core of what an elite education meant, to an idea of an education in, again, technical expertise, scientific and managerial skill, as the core purpose of the university.

[00:19:18.03] And so the humanities were arguably, sort of arguably dethroned from their place at the center of the university a century ago. Certainly, they had been thrown by the 1950s, by the period in which you have the stage setting for the 60s, and for student protests, and so on. You had a clear sense of the university by that point as a kind of corporate entity, with a kind of academic component, but that was sort of in the business of-- in the business of creating a class of experts in science, finance, administration, and so on, with the idea of reading important texts from the past, or learning dead languages, as an optional element within that.

[00:20:08.26] And so then radicalism becomes-- it's many things. It's sort of a political reaction against the extent to which technocracy is placed into service of the US establishment, right? So

if you are against the war in Vietnam, you will react negatively to the technocratic university that's training people to run the Department of Defense. And that sort of recapitulates himself in various ways in later eras.

[00:20:34.72] So some of it is just that sort of overt left-wing anti-establishment sensibility. But part of it, I think, is also an attempt to give the part of the university that isn't technocratic a reason to exist. So if you say that the humanities have a political purpose, then you are trying to put them on the same footing, in some sense, or even a higher footing, than the economics department, and the vast sort of research apparatus attached to the school.

[00:21:10.68] So, and it's different. The third, the other strategy, which comes in a little bit in certain forms of literary analysis and so on-- but the other strategy for the humanities is to claim that the humanities are themselves a science, just as much as any other technocratic aspect of the university, right? And you're a professor of political science, right? So the idea of a science of politics is an old idea.

[00:21:41.23] But that also gets sort of brought out to say, look. The humanities have a place under technocracy, because they are also training you for a kind of mastery. But that's more available if you're reading John Locke than if you are reading Willa Cather, I would say.

[00:22:01.45] TOM MERRILL: So let's just dig in for a second on this idea of technocracy, because it seems like an important part of your understanding of this.

[00:22:08.53] ROSS DOUTHAT: Sure.

[00:22:09.70] TOM MERRILL: And first of all, this part-- so your discussion of radicalism tracks, in some ways, some familiar critiques from the conservative side of modern universities. And I think that you're not quite doing that. But you can see it as a cousin. But that technocratic part, or the critique of technocracy, that sounds like it's a cousin of some left familiar left wing critiques of the university, that the university has been taken over by corporations, that sees students as customers, that there's a kind of a vocational attitude in the university.

[00:22:42.10] And so it just seems to me that there's something there that needs to be a little bit more talked about. There's another word that you sometimes use in your columns, that I think is related, but maybe not the same, which is meritocracy. Can you talk about that a little bit?

[00:22:57.71] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, I mean, meritocracy is the way you get technocrats. So technocracy is ruled by a credentialed expert class, and meritocracy is technically the rule by the best, or the people who are the most meritorious. But really, it's a system for admitting people to universities to train them to become technocrats, right? So meritocracy, as a modern phenomenon, takes off as an alternative-- as it takes off, to a sort of model of education that is more aristocratic, in the old sense of reflecting certain families, and that aspect of things that's still endures to the present day, in the form of legacy admissions, but used to play a much bigger role in the Ivy League.

[00:23:51.25] It's also, though, a sort of national-- it's like a national project, right? So prior to the middle of the 20th century, even the most elite American universities were sort of regional, like the Ivy Leagues. They were crafting a national elite, in the sense that they were providing a lot of people who worked in Wall Street and in US foreign policy. But they were still Northeastern New England institutions, right? And the same was certainly true of other universities around the country. You had land grant state universities that were just attracting kids from those states.

[00:24:26.44] And what changes with the SAT, above all, with national testing programs, and college admissions that become organized around those, is this sense that at a national level, we are trying to effectively vacuum up the best and the brightest from every part of America, every walk of life. And we're going to bring them to a select group of schools that are kind of regionally concentrated, mostly in the Northeast. Some of them are on the Pacific coast, like Stanford.

[00:24:58.87] But then even if they're in the Heartland, or the Midwest, or the South, they themselves will change and become more like the other national universities, right? So you get a creation of a kind of universal national university culture, where the really good state schools-- UVA, Michigan, Wisconsin-- gradually become more like Cornell and Penn, which becomes more like Stanford than Pomona. Because they are all sort of creating a single class, whose job is then to go first to Washington and Wall Street, and do American foreign policy, but then to go to wherever the next frontier of leadership and innovation is.

[00:25:46.93] So today, that means Silicon Valley and the tech industry. But that's a big-- that's a big shift. And it's a system-- it's a system that then creates its own culture, a culture of obsessive, frantic, frantic overachievement. Because the whole theory of it is that you're supposed to-- you can never rest on your laurels. Your family name can't get you into Harvard, even though sometimes, it still can. You have to prove in every generation that you're the best.

[00:26:19.76] So meritocrats are-- whatever else they are, they aren't lazy. They work incredibly hard. And they get into these schools. And once they get into these schools, the schools are telling them-- not always explicitly, but very least implicitly-- that their job is to then become technocrat's, managers, manipulators of systems.

[00:26:39.21] And so in neither the training nor the educational peak of college and then professional schools beyond that is there are a lot of room for the idea that we are custodians of some tradition that we're passing on.

[00:26:57.91] TOM MERRILL: So what if I said to you, radicalism, that's partly the fight that we're having in the culture war right now. Because things are so-- we're so irascible for so many different reasons, a lot having to do with politics today. But it wasn't really radicalism that killed the humanities. What if we said that it was this technocratic, meritocratic ideal that, in some ways, in the 1960s, was really the heyday. You know, what would you say to that?

[00:27:25.31] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, I'd say that's very plausible. I would say that there are ways in which I think radicalism can-- has-- it's an attempt to prevent the marginalization of the

humanities that can, in some cases, accelerate it. Because I think the radical posture towards literary and artistic tradition also makes people kind of unhappy in their experiences.

[00:27:58.28] I mean, again, these are sort of exaggerations. But they get at an important truth. There are some really good pieces that have been written, I think one by a guy named Jon Baskin, who edits the magazine called *The Point*, about just the extent to which, in different ways, the culture of the modern left wing humanities area can just sort of empty the enjoyment totally out of the reasons that people want to read or encounter a great text or a great work of art in the first place. And the project of interrogation, the project of saying, in a weird way, it wants to destroy canons. But it's also parasitic on them, in the sense that you can't have a project of interrogation unless you have some kind of canonical list of books and paintings and symphonies and Wagner operas to be interrogated.

[00:29:00.29] And so as you move, and you see this as sort of a constant process in universities, at each turn of the radical ratchet moves you further from any kind of canonicity, the less interesting it is. Even radicalism, once you-- Yale, New Haven. Yale got just got rid of its big art history survey course on the grounds that it's Western art. And so it's too eurocentric and heteronormative and Christian and so on down the longer list of sins.

[00:29:33.02] And my assumption is that getting rid of that has to make the radical project less fun, because you're not overthrowing anything anymore. You're just sort of walking around in the deconstructed wreckage, picking up objects and saying, well, let me interrogate this. But the object doesn't have as much power anymore. So that's my-- that's a fairly conventional, but still, I think, correct, conservative argument about what goes wrong with radicalism.

[00:30:03.35] But yeah, I think technocracy comes first as the thing that really starts this whole process in motion. And technocracy is what initially excludes-- I won't call it conservatism. I'll call it traditionalism, the view that the purpose of the university is to transmit something, adding to it, adding to the canon as things come along that should be added. But that idea of transmission, technocracy is what drives that out before the radicals show up to finish the job, I think.

[00:30:39.51] TOM MERRILL: So I just want to ask another question about meritocracy that maybe puts these two, the radicals of the meritocracy, together, because higher education is a big part of the way that the upper classes in America reproduce themselves in literal and non-literal ways. But yet, it also seems that the people who are most attracted to the radical options that you were talking about before are precisely in those meritocratic institutions. Why do you think that is?

[00:31:07.28] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, I think it's, in some ways, a sort of repetition of a dynamic that you saw in the 1950s and 1960s, where there too, like Students for a Democratic Society, a lot of the famous student radicals of the 60s, were not necessarily working class Americans or dispossessed minorities. They were children of the post-war boom raised in privilege and given reasons to rebel against it.

[00:31:41.53] And I think, in the same way, I think you can trace a story across my adult lifetime of growing dissatisfaction with meritocracy among people embedded in it and trained by it. So when I went to college in 1998 to 2002, and that was sort of a high tide of meritocratic self confidence. And the elite that meritocracy was making could say, look, we won the Cold War. Globalization is on the march. Alan Greenspan has figured out the economy. Technocrats are winning. It's working.

[00:32:25.59] So of course, you deserve to be where you are. We've done well. You're going to do well. When I started in college, we were explicitly encouraged to go into the humanities by the humanities departments themselves, on the grounds that the economy was so good that you could get a job as a consultant for \$100,000 a year with a folklore and mythology degree, no problem. So why not? Why not go into the humanities? That was sort of the mood. That was the sales pitch at the time.

[00:32:58.89] And a lot has happened since then. And one, the elite that meritocracy made turned out to be not as competent as people thought in the 1990s. And you had a succession of things, big obvious blunders like the Iraq War, but also slow burning disasters like our economic relationship to China that have contributed to the era that we find ourselves in today, that were ideas that the meritocracy took for granted or the technocrats took for granted.

[00:33:28.53] And then you've had specific economic setbacks, the tech bubble bursting just as I graduated, and then obviously, the Great Recession that made life harder for college graduates, even elite college graduates. And then you have more discrete phenomena, where particular industries have come under real pressure, like my own industry, journalism, which used to be a place that lots of humanities graduates went into. If you spent your years in college reading and writing, you could say, well, I can always go work for a newspaper or magazine or something.

[00:34:08.07] And there are just way fewer of those jobs. Academia has come under its own set of pressures, which aren't just about declining enrollment. And so all of that means that meritocrats are less-- and then finally, the culture of meritocracy has just become more itself in this punishing, mental health crushing way. And so people are unhappy with it. They're unhappy. They don't feel like the technocrats know what they're doing in Washington or New York.

[00:34:40.66] There was a brief window with Barack Obama's election, where people felt like, OK, the problem was just George W. Bush and the neocons and so on. And we'll get Obama in there. And he's using the internet. And Silicon Valley is going to change the world. It's going to make the Arab Spring happen.

[00:34:57.31] And here we are 10 years later, and everybody thinks Facebook is destroying democracy too. So it's like Silicon Valley was briefly the savior of meritocracy. And now it's yet another reason to hate it. So all of that, I think, adds up to a tremendous amount of disillusionment.

[00:35:11.08] And it's just much more likely to be expressed through left politics of various kinds in an academic environment for all kinds of reasons. But part of it is just, again, if there isn't any kind of real conservatism left in most elite academia, then if you're looking for a

critique of technocracy, you're going to look on the left. And finally-- and the other thing is, the deal that the technocrats made after the 60s was to maintain technocracy, but always do this kind of homage to more left wing ideas to say, well, of course we believe in social justice. And of course we believe in diversity.

[00:35:52.81] I mean, this was the spirit of the times when I was in college. And part of what radicalism does is just demand that technocracy cash those checks. It says, oh, you believe in diversity. Well, where's the money? Why does the business school get all the money? Where's the money for our multicultural student center? Where's the money for our ethnic studies department? All of these kind of things.

[00:36:16.57] So in a sense, technocracy, it doesn't have enough self-confidence, necessarily, to fight really strongly against radicalism. It keeps trying to buy it off with programs and spending and rhetorical concessions down to the present day.

[00:36:38.35] TOM MERRILL: Sometimes when I read your stuff, I get the feeling that you have a lot of sympathy with the radical critique, that you think there's something that is kind of soul-killing in the meritocratic idea.

[00:36:48.98] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:36:50.26] TOM MERRILL: That the radicals are kind of on to something, even though, I take it, that you're not on board with specific proposals that they're saying. Is that a fair statement?

[00:37:00.40] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah. I mean, I think the radicals are correct, that higher education needs some kind of moral vision. I think the radicals, they're correct to see the technocratic university as soulless and somewhat cruel. To take an example that isn't about race, so debates over sex and rape on campus, and so on.

[00:37:27.46] So on the one hand, I do not favor this system of sexual regulation that I think a lot of-- I wouldn't even call them campus radicals. We can just call them campus feminists, who want to set up, that sort of removes presumptions of innocence from men accused of rape and sets up a weird kind of sex bureaucracy. And this is a term that, I think, Jenny Sigurdson, a professor, has used to describe this attempt by the university to kind of manage student sex lives. That is not the system that I, conservative observant Catholic, would favor. At the same time, it's totally true that the technocratic university was indifferent to horrific sexual behavior on campus.

[00:38:20.86] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE].

[00:38:21.91] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right. That in fact, some form of stronger sexual regulation was needed. And the technocratic university just wanted to take student money and promise them a kind of, not Animal House level, but a fun good time on their way-- so you have hookup culture over here. And you have getting into business school over here. And those are the two halves of the college experience.

[00:38:49.30] And when I was-- the one case study from my own undergraduate education, where you had one of these cases of an accusation of sexual assault within our social group, and we didn't know how to handle it. I think we handled it very badly.

[00:39:08.05] But I remember going to the tutor, the person nominally in charge, and bringing this to him. And it was so clear that he wanted nothing to do with helping us think through this situation, certainly nothing to do with either telling the young woman what she should do or what she shouldn't do. The university just didn't want to touch it.

[00:39:30.28] And because it didn't want to touch it, a lot of bad things happened among young people who did need some kind of supervision and guidance. And so on sex, the left wants a certain kind of remoralization on campus. And it's not my moral system. But at least it's an ethos.

[00:39:49.59] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, to call it the Big Lebowski.

[00:39:51.48] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right. You have to-- we're talking about the great works here. You have to get that in there.

[00:39:57.59] TOM MERRILL: Of course, no. That's right. What does that word, great works mean, anyway. That's part one of the question. So I want to pose a question, since I want to move us along to get to the Q&A. I do want to pose a question.

[00:40:09.18] So if you think that technocracy does not provide a viable or attractive model for academic life, but you also think that radicalism presents problems. And we'd have to, maybe, explore those. Is there an alternative vision? But maybe I'd like to pose the question this way. You're a parent. What kind of college experience do you want for your children?

[00:40:33.10] ROSS DOUTHAT: God. So I mean, my kids are nine, seven, four, and six months.

[00:40:38.37] TOM MERRILL: But you've thought about it.

[00:40:40.44] ROSS DOUTHAT: The idea of a college experience for them is so totally terrifying. But no, I mean, I think the college experience that I want for my kids is one in which-- and I'm doubtful that they will get it. But it's one in which you go to a school that tells you a little more what you should be studying and what you should care about in a way that is not-- that doesn't just mean telling you that you should care about taking these six classes that will help you get a job after graduation.

[00:41:16.44] TOM MERRILL: Should they want what you had going to Harvard?

[00:41:19.23] ROSS DOUTHAT: No, no. Should they go to Harvard? I mean, look, I mean, one in spite of the power of legacy admissions, I don't think there's any guarantee that they'll be getting in. But I mean, I would not have-- I wanted to go to Harvard because I was really ambitious. But I also wanted to go to Harvard because I thought-- I remember when the course catalog came in senior year high school. And I thought of it as a potential, I want to say, intellectual paradise, but as a place where you would be taught certain things that would make

you an educated person in a way that the writers who I read and loved as a teenager seemed like comprehensively educated people, people who knew who knew a lot of things about the world that were worth knowing.

[00:42:17.56] And so Harvard satisfied my ambitious side. It was a great-- if you are a ambitious person who wants to join the American elite, going to an Ivy League school is a really smart thing to do. And the stuff I wanted academically was there. And there were moments when I sort of felt what I expected to feel. But they added up to, I'd say, maybe the equivalent of one year out of four, two semesters out of eight.

[00:42:51.28] And look, college is college. You have romances and heartbreaks. And you drink too much and all these kind of things. I would never expect 80% of your college time, depending on your personality, to be devoted to the best that's been thought and said. But it seems like a good school should get it up to like 40% or 50%.

[00:43:12.22] And Harvard didn't care to try. It didn't want to try. I think that's true of, not all schools, but most schools right now. There's an assumption that what you learn in high school is the only canon or corpus of knowledge that you need. And college is about networking and figuring out what your pre-professional track is going to be. So I'd want more for my kids. I'd want 40% to 50% rather than 20% of their time to be educational in the deepest sense of the term.

[00:43:46.03] TOM MERRILL: Right. I mean, one does sometimes have the feeling, working in universities, that the students' lives, being class is only like the top, the little tip of the iceberg, and that the rest of their life-- I mean, the business model is, in a way, exactly the same as the cruise ship. You put all these people together for four years between 18 and 22, and the cruise ship has everything.

[00:44:12.32] It's got cafeterias. It's got gyms. It's got dance halls, dormitories. And it also has entertainment. And so I'm the entertainment. The professors are the entertainment for certain-- this is what I think in my darker moments. But that sometimes feels what the university-- how the university sees things, or what the common understanding is.

[00:44:31.69] Let me try to pose a-- how do you think the university should handle their role in the culture wars? If they were dedicated to forming students or giving students some kind of vision of what the university should be, or what an educated person should look like. Because that seems to me, that's really part of the problem. Universities have become players or pawns in the larger culture war. How do you think universities should think about that?

[00:44:59.51] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, there's sort of a-- I have a boring answer, which is that universities should employ more people who are right of center. And it's a boring answer.

[00:45:16.18] TOM MERRILL: That's not a boring answer.

[00:45:17.48] ROSS DOUTHAT: OK. Well, it's just a very predictable answer. I try and be a little unpredictable in my answers. But I think it is-- one of the things that's happened in

American culture is, to go back to the meritocracy issue, meritocracy creates a segregation based on education and certain talents and so on. And over time, what's happened, not just in the US, but across the developed world, is you end up with a kind of party of meritocracy and a party of non-meritocracy.

[00:45:52.22] And the party of non-meritocracy becomes very populist and anti-intellectual. It doesn't like the elites. It includes lots of rich people. But it's rich people who got rich outside the meritocracy. The interesting divide between rich people in this country is between people who get rich through the structures set up by meritocracy and people who get rich as small businessmen and entrepreneurs and end up becoming voters for Trump.

[00:46:17.87] And that's bad-- I think it's bad for the country and society. It creates this weird stalemate that afflicts all of Western politics between an elite that nobody likes and a populist alternative that everybody's afraid of and isn't really capable of governing. And it sort of makes the-- it's intended, in academia, to-- it's not just that academia moves to the left. It's that it becomes more consolidated and conformist.

[00:46:51.71] And so you see this across the board with schools, but especially in elite schools, especially in Northeastern schools. It used to be, 20 years ago, that 10% or 15% or something of the faculty would describe themselves as conservative. And then it drops to 10%. And then it drops to 5%. And again, that's not just the university's choices. That's also a reaction to populism.

[00:47:20.96] In the age of Donald Trump, if you're a professor at any major university, even if you have some conservative impulses, you probably don't want to identify with Trumpian conservatism. But this just creates a further cycle, where then, conservatives and-- I'm sorry, conservatives and populists become more alienated from the university. And in red states, they try and cut the university's funding. The university becomes more alienated from conservatives.

[00:47:52.16] And you just get this really unhealthy polarization. And it's conservatives' responsibility to do something about that, to try and fashion a political conservatism that isn't just anti-intellectual and it's just conspiracy theories and nonsense. But it's also the university's responsibility to try and create the possibility of an intellectual conservatism within their precincts.

[00:48:15.56] And that means taking ideological diversity as seriously as you take racial diversity. And universities don't really do that. And their excuses, there really aren't that many great conservative candidates for every postdoc position and every tenure track job. But no one would accept those excuses if you were talking about race or gender.

[00:48:35.33] You wouldn't be able to get away with saying, oh, we just can't find African-American applicants. You have to work-- the logic of diversity on the left also applies to ideological diversity. And so that's, I think, the simplest way that universities could push back against the position that they've locked themselves into in the culture wars, while also moving themselves towards what they again, theoretically, claim to be, which is zones for intellectual engagement and free argument and serious debate.

[00:49:09.71] TOM MERRILL: Right. OK, thank you. So I'm going to turn, now, to-- because we do have a pile of questions here. And since our audience also--

[00:49:16.46] ROSS DOUTHAT: I've got a pile of answers.

[00:49:18.89] TOM MERRILL: But are they the right answers to the-- OK, so I'm going to read the first one. This is from Josh Cotlar, who is a freshman, who is in the Lincoln Scholars Program. And so he's, I think, sub tweeting me here. But hello, and thank you Mr. Douthat for coming. My name is Josh, student enrolled in the Lincoln Scholars Program at AU. You mentioned radicalism is supplanting the liberal arts. But couldn't one say that what has been considered the liberal arts has always evolved throughout the centuries? To specify my point, why does including a new diversity of perspectives in liberal arts constitute a degradation?

[00:49:54.72] ROSS DOUTHAT: It doesn't at all. And one of my frustrations with the way radicalism has sort of-- the way radical or left wing movements have played out in academia, is that you can imagine a alternative narrative of the last 30 years, where the left said, canon are good. Canons are important. We support canons, we just want to add to them and change them.

[00:50:21.90] And that has happened to some extent. But the dominant effect of radicalism has been toward deconstructing canonicity rather than expanding canonical-- you don't have a strong radical push for great books programs. Great books programs aren't perfect. And there's sort of a fetishization of great books.

[00:50:45.23] There's a perfect approach to the humanities by any means. But we would be-- when I was in high school, I had very nice progressive liberal high school teachers, whose view was basically the view of the question, that they were custodians of a tradition of American and English literature. And they were also really eager to make sure that we were adding a Toni Morrison, at that point. This was the 1990s. So she had just become the big figure.

[00:51:21.62] And we're adding a Toni Morrison. We're adding a comparable list of female, black, and so on, writers. And there's always challenges with that. Ultimately, if you're an American university, and you're trying to do a canon, you need to have some sort of boundaries. And you need to figure out, well, what is an American tradition? And we're teaching that primarily. And then we also have the global tradition.

[00:51:52.67] This is always going to be a messy process. But the idea that the point of the humanities is to transmit a tradition is fully compatible with the idea that you need a greater diversity of voices that you're transmitting than just what Columbia would have taught in 1947. And it just strikes me as insane that people in the humanities, more people in the humanities, don't want to say that.

[00:52:23.45] So in that chronicle of higher ed end game package that I mentioned, that I decided in the column, they had a debate. They staged a debate between a professor named Michael Clune from Case Western, who said the humanities must offer a judgment on what is worth reading. You have to offer some kind of judgment to students.

[00:52:47.27] But then Gabrielle Starr and Kevin Dettmar from Pomona said no, humanists are just teaching disciplinary procedures and habits of mind. We model a style of engagement of critical thought. We don't transmit value.

[00:53:01.04] And it seems to me that the Starr Dettmar position is just like suicide for the humanities. How do you attract students by saying, well, we're teaching you a mode of analysis that, oh, by the way, is not actually going to help you get a job at Apple or Google or anything like that. You don't-- anyway, I'm going on too long.

[00:53:23.84] But the baseline is, you can have a left wing humanities. You can have a kind of multicultural canonicity. There are a lot of ways to approach this that aren't just [INAUDIBLE] and only the dead white males. But ending up with an approach that says, we're just teaching critical thinking, and we don't transmit anything of value, is I think, insane.

[00:53:50.59] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. OK, another question. This is from Tom Cleveland of the Jack Miller Center. Some conservatives at places like the Heritage Foundation and the Claremont Institute have argued that it would be best for the academy, as it now exists, to collapse. Perhaps some help with the government-- and we think about the executive order that just came down-- so that less radical and more humane institutions could replace it. What do you think of that kind of argument?

[00:54:13.51] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, the academy is not going to collapse. Now, the humanity-- if by the academy, you just mean humanities departments, you know, yeah, I mean, you can say, maybe if some combination of bad thinking and bad incentives have led the humanities to this path, then maybe there isn't a reform agenda right now. And you need to let things go further and get a little worse before you can have renewal. That's always plausible in any situation of decline.

[00:54:49.88] You may pass the point where reform works, and you may have to go all the way to the bottom. But I think conservatives deceive themselves a little bit with the idea that, in broadly speaking, as big institutions, that universities are just going to collapse because there will be too many tenured radicals, and people won't send their kids there. They'll send their kids to online alternatives and so on.

[00:55:12.79] And again, maybe COVID changes this and changes the dynamics of online a little bit. But basically what's going to happen in the academy is that there are fewer kids. We have a birth dearth in the US and population decline around the world. So a bunch of schools are going to close over the next 15 or 20 years, maybe on an accelerated pace because of COVID.

[00:55:38.41] But what that will mean is something similar to what's already happened in my business, where lots of newspapers have closed, because the internet killed newspapers. But has that made the New York Times and the Washington Post less powerful and important? No, quite the opposite. As the smaller places close, the big players become more consolidated and more powerful. And I would expect that to happen in universities as well.

[00:56:01.42] There's a reason that the top of the US News & World Report Rankings just don't change. They change a little. Universities rise and fall. But nobody-- there's been no startup university that rivals Yale and Stanford in the last 20 years. And the online alternatives are effectively trade schools, not rivals.

[00:56:21.37] So basically, conservatives who want a different academy either need to figure out how you change one or many of those institutions from within. Or they need to figure out how you actually set up a rival. And that means-- if I were running the next Republican administration, if such a thing ever happens. I might say, well look, we should have, just as we had state land grant universities, we're going to set up five national universities. And they're going to be run-- we're going to have faculty appointments done by a bipartisan staff appointed by Republicans and Democrats in Congress both.

[00:57:07.88] And we're going to build them to be cheaper alternatives to existing higher education. And we're going to-- you can imagine the spiel. And maybe that's a crazy idea. Certainly it would prompt very strident reactions about academic freedom.

[00:57:22.25] But that's-- you need some kind of-- there's no entrepreneur out there who's going to set up the conservative Harvard or the next Harvard. If you're going to have some radical change in the academic landscape, again, your options are transformation from within or some sort of political project to build literal institutional alternatives with the weight, not just of whoever funds the Heritage Foundation, but the weight of the federal government behind them.

[00:57:53.24] TOM MERRILL: Can I just add-- just to go back to the Heritage and Claremont thing for a while. I mean, those efforts might well have precisely the opposite effect right, that they're going to entrench anti-racism or whatever into the university. So that might be something to take under consideration. I don't need you to respond to that. I just wanted to say. Another question. This is David Palmer. He's actually an old friend of mine from the Federal Reserve.

[00:58:15.12] ROSS DOUTHAT: I won't hold that against him.

[00:58:16.71] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. How much of a role does the astronomical rise in university tuition over the last half century play in the decline of liberal arts enrollment? Are students forced to study subjects with a higher return on investment given their outlay? Would changes to student tuition funding have an impact on this decline?

[00:58:36.35] ROSS DOUTHAT: So I assume it would. I mean, clearly there has to be some effect here of being asked to pay so much money for college on the willingness of students to go into fields that-- or to make undergraduate studies that don't have an immediate cash in value. And if they're doing graduate work, to go into fields that definitely don't have an immediate cash in value. So yes, presumably, figuring out doing something about college cost inflation would have some effect on the viability of the humanities.

[00:59:12.56] You want to add a couple of caveats, though. I mean, one is that sticker prices have gone up much faster than average cost per student, which has gone up too.

[00:59:28.23] TOM MERRILL: The sticker price is the price that the really rich people.

[00:59:30.86] ROSS DOUTHAT: The really rich people are the ones paying. Well, I mean, it's not just the really rich people. It is the mass upper class, not just the 0.1%, but the top 2% or 3%. But still, that's a pretty-- that's a lot of people the people who are applying and sending their kids to elite schools. But it's a pretty small fraction of the population.

[00:59:51.59] But yeah, so you have the sticker price and the real price. And the real price hasn't gone up as much. And in the same way, you have some people who are really buried by student loan debt. But the average student loan debt in the US is not as high as Bernie Sanders' jeremiads would make you think, which is one reason why Bernie Sanders is not actually the Democratic nominee for president.

[01:00:17.15] TOM MERRILL: Wait a minute, let's not get off into-- OK.

[01:00:20.20] ROSS DOUTHAT: Sorry, I let electoral politics intrude.

[01:00:24.20] TOM MERRILL: We've been pretty good about avoiding.

[01:00:25.85] ROSS DOUTHAT: We're doing good. We're at 8:00 PM without mentioning the November election. So anyway, that's just the caution that I would say, that yes, the cost of college and the cost of the larger high school, if you go to private high school, college, graduate school experience, clearly has to play some role in all of this. But there are-- the immediate figures you read about that cost increase are not the full story of what's going on.

[01:00:59.63] TOM MERRILL: I mean, look, I would just say, as a teacher, the cost distorts the entire educational experience, because people are so-- it's all part of that world of anxiety that our students live in for--

[01:01:10.56] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right. It's a weird mix of anxiety. Anxiety, but also the expectation of, as I think you said before, the university as playground. It's like, you're paying so much, and you're anxious about it. But you also expect more in the way of gyms and pleasure domes. And I mean, it doesn't-- the reality is the academic part of the university, apart from the research component, is really cheap. That's the-- I mean, maybe a little too cheap from the point of view of professors. But the para-academic stuff, the stuff, not just administration, but everything that's built up to make the experience seem worthwhile is a lot more expensive.

[01:02:01.72] TOM MERRILL: Right. So I think we're almost out of time. But I'm going to ask one last question, which is from my colleague, Alan Levine. He writes, perhaps the most living and widespread aspect of the humanities today is film and TV, about which you write as film critic for National Review. Please don't talk about Star Wars. That's what we ask of you. What might movies do to re-energize the culture of the humanities. And what are the best handful of films you've seen in the last few years? We're looking for advice for our Netflix.

[01:02:31.00] ROSS DOUTHAT: This is a sustained problem in my professional life, which is that when people ask me, what are the good movies you've seen in the last few years, my mind

just immediately goes blank. But I will try. So two things, one challenge, in my own analysis at least, is that the movies have been overtaken by their own form of what, in my last book that you kindly cited, I called decadent, which is not that they're gross festivals of nudity and orgies and people eating grapes. It's that they are stuck in this cycle of blockbuster repetition, where you're not going to find renewal for the humanities in-- I won't say Star Wars, but in the endlessly cycling Marvel movies. You're not.

[01:03:25.78] I mean, there's a sense in which all of pop culture has become trapped in a 13-year-old mentality, [AUDIO OUT] pretty sexual, somewhat self-aggrandizing, slightly childish mythosis, which can be very entertaining. I enjoy Marvel movies. I enjoy the Harry Potter saga.

[01:03:54.28] But they're sort of, they're like weird simulacra of what the humanities are supposed to be. So the whole-- I think young adult fiction is really bad. It's bad. It's sort of an anti-humanities in this weird way. Anyway, you've taken me off on a tangent. But that's a very curmudgeonly tangent to close things out here.

[01:04:19.39] But I think that's the challenge right now. That's sort of the pop-- one of the things that people trying to rescue the humanities will do is say, well, we need to be more accessible. We need to get more into pop art. But pop art doesn't offer the material right now that it offered in the 70s and 80s, and even down to the 1990s.

[01:04:37.76] So basically, to revitalize the humanities with film, you just need to study the last great year of film, which was 1999, maybe, coincidentally, the year I was 19 years old and saw a lot of movies. But that was the last peak of non-superhero cinema. So instead of recommending movies from the last two years, I'm going to recommend that you go to, I think, [theringer.com](http://theringer.com). The Ringer has a list of the best 100 movies of 1999, which tells you something about-- yeah. No, no, the 50 best movies. I'm exaggerating, the 50 best movies of 1999.

[01:05:14.68] And that, rather than parsing-- well, there are no movies coming out now. But parsing the last few years, if you watched-- those 50 movies are, if you want movies that are not from the 40s or the 70s, are relatively accessible, Fight Club, The Matrix, Office Space, Magnolia, The Talented Mr. Ripley, Election, The Blair Witch Project, The Sixth Sense, Eyes Wide Shut. It was just a tremendous year for movies. It was the last peak of Western civilization. Any modern movie canon should start there. So that's my recommendation, the movies of 1999.

[01:05:57.92] TOM MERRILL: This is what we pay you the big bucks for.

[01:06:01.11] ROSS DOUTHAT: Indeed.

[01:06:02.20] TOM MERRILL: I hate to tell you this, but I was joking when I said that was the last question, because we're actually going until 8:30. So forgive me, my mind is--

[01:06:10.66] ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, I can list all of the movies of 1999.

[01:06:14.92] TOM MERRILL: OK, back to the actual humanities. Jeffrey, who is a graduate student at UCL-- I'm not sure what that is. Are there any genuinely radical changes you would

like to see in administrative decision making? What does it take to save slash revive the liberal arts?

[01:06:35.10] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, I guess this-- I'll try and think of something that's a little different from what I said before. I mean, I think the challenge-- there's a question of, in academic governance, there's an interesting debate about whether-- is the problem that the administrators have taken over and that the professors no longer govern the university? Or is that or is that a copout and an excuse? Because the administrators are mostly drawn from the ranks of the professors, to some extent. And administrative governance, maybe, is what professors want, even if they don't say they want.

[01:07:16.90] But I think somewhere resolving that question might be useful. Do we want a university run by its professors or not? And is it better-- you can imagine an argument that actually, like, [AUDIO OUT]. You want an administration that is not like the professoriate, because the professoriate should be devoted to pedagogy. And the administration should be devoted to administration.

[01:07:46.74] But you could also imagine a world of, no, you want the professors literally running university, because that's the only way that you will prioritize what they do. But certainly, I mean, I guess another-- so yeah. So somewhere, there's an uncertainty there that is worth thinking about, as you think about what you want the administration to do.

[01:08:08.91] I mean, I think also, at a more basic level, you want to hire-- I mean, again, you want to hire teachers. And part of how technocracy defeated traditionalism was that it said that the purpose of the university, the primary purpose is research. The teaching is secondary. We hire research scholars because we want output.

[01:08:32.28] And that, in turn, also feeds certain radical modes and the humanities, because to generate output, you need to-- you can't just write appreciations of great books. You need to interrogate them. To justify your place in the research university, you need to have a novel idea about Huckleberry Finn.

[01:08:50.10] And that's-- you want people doing research. Research is good. You need research universities. But I'd say at a lot of places, that's gone way too far. And you want more hiring based on whether people are good at teaching undergraduates.

[01:09:07.11] And again, I'm biased, probably, because I went to Harvard, a school that's famous for not teaching undergraduates and only hiring superstar faculty to do research. And there are plenty of smaller colleges that do a better job of this. But in general, nothing saddened me more in my encounters with academia than watching professors who I thought were really good at teaching not get jobs, not get tenure, not advance because they weren't publishing on the schedule that the system of outputs requires.

[01:09:36.74] TOM MERRILL: I have a lot of thoughts about these things. I'm trying to restrain myself. But the only thing--

[01:09:40.57] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, I'm talking a lot. So you're-- please.

[01:09:43.70] TOM MERRILL: I mean, there's a story that I think has been underreported, which is that there's a whole group of people who are basically hired as teachers on non-tenure track.

[01:09:52.29] ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, right.

[01:09:52.49] TOM MERRILL: And that's really changed the character of the institution. But I think it makes people less likely to be very daring in the classroom. And so it inclines to a certain kind of conformity just because that's the incentives of the situation. But some universities, including ours, are almost 45% or 50% non-tenure track, but full time faculty. And that's a real class issue that I think is--

[01:10:18.23] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right. And that's-- in my undergraduate years, my best, not all, but most of my best teachers fell into that category. And I'm incredibly grateful to them. At the same time, it was no way to make a living. I mean, not always. Obviously, there are universities that treat those faculty better than others. But in general, having this two-tier system, where you're still telling people that the teaching is less important than the research.

[01:10:54.02] TOM MERRILL: absolutely. A lot of it comes out of the larger technocratic orientation of the university. And so the stars of the department are off doing something else. And they say, well, we're going to allow these other people that we don't think as highly of. That's the message of the institution. I want to be clear, that's not my opinion. But that's, I think, the message of the institution. But it might help if they were not on year-to-year contracts, for example.

[01:11:15.56] ROSS DOUTHAT: Oh, yeah. And it would help them, to pick up a different obsession of mine, it would help them have families. I mean, this is--

[01:11:22.83] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, correct. And also combined with the fact that the only way that modern universities can evaluate teaching is through Yelp reviews, basically.

[01:11:30.98] ROSS DOUTHAT: Right.

[01:11:31.64] TOM MERRILL: Which turn out to be racist and sexist and horrible in all the predictable ways. So here's another question. This is Donald Antonin, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing this right, who is an alumnus of St. John's College in Annapolis. Leo Strauss argued that the liberal arts served to nurture an aristocratic spirit otherwise absent in a democracy. F.R. Leavis said the purpose of the academic study of English was to develop an elite core of readers, such that new great writers could be recognized and understood. Does either rationale still make sense?

[01:12:03.55] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, yes, but with a couple-- there's a couple of ways of looking at it. One is that, yes, Strauss is right that you want-- that there are ways in which the study of the humanities is inherently elitist and inherently aristocratic. And in that sense, it's

defensible on Tocquevillian ground, because Tocqueville talks a lot about how aristocratic elements can endure in a democracy and why, by implication, it would be too bad if they all disappeared. So to the extent that universities are training grounds for an elite, then they can become places where a genuine aristocratic, as opposed to purely crassly meritocratic spirit, can endure.

[01:13:09.94] And that is still a reasonable case for the humanities. I also, though, am sort of drawn to a different mid century perspective, which was the democratization of the humanities was a big part of their, I think, their success and flourishing in that period, in the period of highest English department enrollments in the post-war era. So it was not just the idea that you want a secluded community of scholars and you want the university as a place where the philosopher can be protected from the perils of the demos of the city.

[01:13:51.86] I think you can also make a case that you protect the philosopher from the demos by making the demos more sympathetic to philosophy too, which again, doesn't mean that you expect every single American to read Plato. But I think more Americans can read great books and appreciate them than do. I think more philosophy, political and otherwise, can be transmitted to a mass audience than is.

[01:14:22.39] I mean, if you go back and watch Bishop Fulton Sheen, the Dr. Phil or Joel Osteen of the 1950s, give his blackboard talks on TV in the 50s. No, he's not the world's greatest philosopher. But he is doing some really impressive popularization of complicated theological and philosophical ideas in a way that maybe you get on the occasional podcast nowadays.

[01:14:49.30] But that goes away, in part, because of changes in the media landscape, fragmentation. It's something that, to some extent, is only possible in a particular kind of mass market environment. But I don't think you want to give up on that aspiration. I think the two ideas are actually compatible with one another, that American democracy, at its best, has sustained both an aristocratic element in various places, but also had some aristocratic aspirations among the common man, as it were.

[01:15:27.07] And that's something that does, with the decline of the humanities and universities, you also clearly just have the decline of museum going. And book reading has declined, fortunately not as steeply as some people feared. And the Kindle hasn't replaced the book, thank god. But still, people are reading less. The internet has changed the way people read, sometimes for the better, mostly for the worse.

[01:15:52.39] Anyway, there's just, I think, a larger story where the aristocratic and the Democratic appreciations of great literature are not completely separable. They actually have some connection to each other. And it's not a coincidence that you have Strauss starting his teaching career in the US at the same time that Book of the Month Club and those that sort of-- the slightly absurd but kind of impressive, like Shakespeare for everybody kind of things are going on too. And I mean, the cliché, which is still true, is Shakespeare was mass market entertainment. There's no world where Henry James is mass market entertainment.

[01:16:37.93] TOM MERRILL: There's a lot of dirty jokes in Shakespeare.

[01:16:39.68] ROSS DOUTHAT: There is a world where Shakespeare is-- yeah.

[01:16:44.17] TOM MERRILL: OK, I think the next one is sort of more of a comment than a question. But I'm going to read it. This is from our friend Laura Field, who writes, "does Ross Douthat not watch TV? I mean, movies now are bad. But this century has been the golden era of TV." And she instances *The Wire* and *Fleabag*.

[01:17:06.03] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, *Fleabag*. *Fleabag* is pretty good.

[01:17:08.39] TOM MERRILL: I'm not going to--

[01:17:09.49] ROSS DOUTHAT: I do. I do watch TV, and I agree that some of the talent that was in the movies and has been sort of crushed and out by the dominance of the blockbuster has migrated to television. I do think, though, that the golden age of TV is somewhat in the rearview mirror and that you can describe [AUDIO OUT] the late 1990s, coincidentally when I'm coming of age, but a peak that runs from the late 1990s and the premiere of *The Sopranos* through the late 2000s and *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*.

[01:17:52.71] And what you have now is, basically, overproduction of TV. So once people realized that people would binge watch endlessly, endless shows, the opportunities for auteur-like achievements on TV diminished, because there was such a demand for TV talent that instead of having a team of six great writers all working on *The Sopranos*, each of those writers gets hired to do their own Netflix show. And the shows just aren't as good, which doesn't mean there isn't any quality out there, *Fleabag*, *Atlanta*, if it ever gets a third season.

[01:18:34.80] I was a big-- I was the right wing interpreter of Lena Dunham's, *Girls*, which I thought was a tremendous, tremendous dark achievement. So there is good TV now. But if you sit and watch 10 Netflix and Amazon shows in succession, not that I've done this, what you notice is, they're all 40% to 50% as good as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* or *Deadwood* or something.

[01:19:04.98] And they all seem to be running off some percentage of the talent that you need to make a really great TV show. So that's my sort of-- yes to the Golden Age of TV. But right now, I think is more like the Silver or Iron Age.

[01:19:26.57] TOM MERRILL: OK, some more student questions. Alex Rabinowitz, who's a student at AU, asked, do you think that the framework of technocracy in American education has also magnified STEM fields to the point of giving them a moral or expert authority over the humanities?

[01:19:42.36] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yes, sure. I mean, it's not-- well, it's not so much that they have authority over the humanities. It's that they have an authority that the humanities just can't claim. So it's not so much that STEM fields get to tell you what you study in the English Department. It's more that STEM fields get to tell you that what you said in the English department isn't that important.

[01:20:10.17] And if you are a prominent academic in the humanities, you don't have the same kind of authority as-- well, I mean, to pick a current example, Dr. Anthony Fauci. And you know, Dr. Anthony Fauci deserves to have authority. It's not bad to have scientific technocrats in positions of authority, especially when a ravaging pandemic comes along.

[01:20:37.92] And you can see, in certain aspects of our current president, what happens when you don't have that kind of authority. So you don't want to be-- science is good. But it is-- the idea of science as a resolver of disputed questions, the idea that we can just trust the science on given things, even with the pandemic. There's a lot of questions around the pandemic that are just political questions or moral questions or questions of balancing competing goods that can't be resolved by science.

[01:21:14.61] And science has a lot to say about the pandemic. It has less to say about ethic debates and bioethics, to pick something close to your own background, Tom. But Neil Degrasse Tyson cannot, in fact, tell us all that much about the morality of euthanasia or something like that. But science also runs into its own problems, where technocracy, this thing we were just talking about, where the university demands output, you get into things like the replication crisis in science. Where if the goal of science is to generate research in order to prove that you are doing things, in order to get your grants, in order to maintain your position in a meritocratic system, that's not necessarily the path to incredibly impressive innovation.

[01:22:04.17] And so one of the ironies of the last 50 years is that even as science has sort of ascended in public prestige and has sort of become the only part of the university that really has self-confidence. STEM fields really do have self-confidence. Actual scientific achievement, it's not what I think people expected it would be in the 1940s and 1950s. It's concentrated in internet technology. This is a separate argument that's not really about the humanities. But there's been more stagnation, more academic fraud, and more bad, churn it out, churn out unreplicable findings in science than the reputation might suggest.

[01:22:53.94] TOM MERRILL: OK, so here's another question. Actually, I'm going to put two questions together. One is from Jack Guipre. I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that correctly. Do you think that these radical ideas, like the questioning of the canon and the humanities, as fundamentally a tool for remaking society are merely the continuation of the modern project of the last 500 years, I think, meaning, going back to Descartes and Bacon and people like that. And if so, was the difference merely the continued success or proliferation of those ideas? Or is the current mood something different?

[01:23:26.12] ROSS DOUTHAT: I don't know. That's a very good question. You guys, you had-- your last event with Patrick Deneen. And I think Patrick argues, generally, that what you see on the left today is a self-- sort of an inevitable extension of liberalism. That it's liberalism becoming more itself and becoming more-- liberal hostility to-- there's a liberal turn against free expression and free speech.

[01:24:03.87] It's not the betrayals of liberalism. It's the final fulfillment of it, that liberalism was always pointing to this end point. I'm not completely sure that's right. I go back and forth. Sometimes, I think that should see certain elements of today's radicalism as what the cultural

critic, Wesley Yang, has called a successor ideology that doesn't fully have a name the way Marxism had a name, but is playing kind of the role that Marxism wanted to play, and was saying, liberalism carried us this far. But we need to set aside some of the naive liberal ideas about rights and freedoms in order to fundamentally remake society, in order to make it truly anti-racist or truly gender egalitarian and so on.

[01:24:50.29] That's one way of looking at it. Another way of looking at it is that liberalism in the modern age began as sort of an offshoot of Christianity, but was also kind of infused with Christianity for a very long time, and that liberalism is a set of procedures that claims not to make as many normative moral judgments as prior systems. But in fact, it needs some kind of religious consensus to settle some questions, to create a framework. Like what we were saying earlier about sex on campus. You can't actually have procedural liberalism as the way you deal with relations between the sexes. You need some norms. You need some rules that aren't just like, oh, we're two free agents contracting sex.

[01:25:32.65] And if in that way, maybe what we think of as the left, right now, is a kind of post-Protestantism. It's a kind of no longer Christian, but still more moralistic movement that's trying to re-infuse liberalism, technocracy, meritocracy, whatever word you want to use, with a moral system. And that moral system is different from what the Protestants of the 19th century would have infused. But it's like, all right, here are rules when you can have sex.

[01:26:06.10] Here are rules for consent and power imbalances in relationships. Here are rules for how to talk about race. Here are linguistic rules, the fact that the current left is so focused on linguistic rules and poly tests, and how should a white person address a black person and vice versa. That sort of suggests to me that there is this way in which it's trying to not supplant liberalism, but infuse it from within. To say, OK, we have our liberal procedures. But then in everyday life, you need some more explicit, more rules. And anti-racism and feminism and a few other movements are going to supply those moral rules. So that that's another possibility.

[01:26:47.77] TOM MERRILL: You seem to you seem to see the successor ideology, or however, whatever you call it, as maybe the right paradigm is the Great Awakening, rather than Marxism or something like that.

[01:26:59.55] ROSS DOUTHAT: Yeah, that would be the second view. I mean, the idea of woke-ness is, itself, a sort of secularized version of awakening. So the second view would be, this is what a Great Awakening looks like in an America where institutional Christianity has just faded too much to be its embodiment.

[01:27:15.10] And if you wanted to push that further, you would say, and it's not a coincidence that this left wing political awakening coincides with weird pantheistic pagan new age stirrings, like the fact that the woke astrology is a thing. No one was into astrology when I was in college. It was like, [AUDIO OUT]. Literally no one ever mentioned their sign to me across four years of college. And now, my much younger publicist when my last book came out, the second email she sent me was like, oh, I'm such a Virgo. That's why I didn't get back to you. There's just been a shift towards some kind of pseudo-supernaturalism that has coincided with this political shift.

[01:27:59.33] TOM MERRILL: That's our equivalent--

[01:28:00.82] ROSS DOUTHAT: Again, it doesn't-- sorry?

[01:28:02.56] TOM MERRILL: Our equivalent of the horoscope as the Myers Briggs. That's what you say when you're in the bar trying to impress somebody, or at least I'm told.

[01:28:10.06] ROSS DOUTHAT: Anyway, yeah. But yeah, there's something possibly religious as well as political going on. And it's not clear, it's just not clear to me whether Marxism or post-Protestantism has more explanatory power as a framework.

[01:28:28.02] TOM MERRILL: Great, OK. But it'll be a vindication of the view that human beings are somehow naturally religious or have a religious--

[01:28:33.88] ROSS DOUTHAT: Oh yeah, I mean, well, that view is just right. Secularism is a myth. And I mean, yes. And that, I mean, the one thing we haven't brought up that is worth mentioning, and it's an essay in that Chronicle of Higher Ed package that I keep mentioning, is the idea that part of the crisis of the humanities is a crisis of faith, that the humanities became for a version of that Leavis Strauss elite, a kind of substitute for Christian religion, that you believe in the great works and the encounter with the great works as a kind of numinous transcendent experience. And so the decline of the humanities traces a similar process to secularization in the 19th century. And that's, I think, a really interesting and provocative idea that's worth thinking about.

[01:29:18.94] TOM MERRILL: I feel critiqued. I'm going to just end with one more question, since we really are out of time. Are there any books that you would recommend to us to read in the spirit of liberal education, things that we might read with first year students that would be good for expanding our imaginations and helping us think more fully about the world?

[01:29:41.43] ROSS DOUTHAT: I mean, the book I read is a first year student that had the biggest influence on me was Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*. And I think Lasch is a writer who has a strong fan base that sort of waxes and wanes. But he was someone I encountered who was a critic of meritocracy, who articulated ideas that-- he'd sort of describe things that I was seeing that I had no way to describe myself, and came at it from a kind of unconventional left wing conservative perspective that synthesized left wing and right wing ideas.

[01:30:14.97] And he has a bunch of books, *The Culture of Narcissism* and so on. I think if-- he has readers. But more readers for Lasch would be good. On a different author I like to recommend, who is not writing about meritocracy at all, is the Polish author, the late Leszek Kolakowski, who is most famous for writing a three volume book about Marxism called *Main Currents of Marxism* that is, like, 17,000 pages. And so I can't claim to have read it.

[01:30:43.17] But he wrote a bunch of smaller books and essays, a lot of them about religion and Christianity. And again, to go back to my last point, there is an entanglement between the decline of humanities and the decline of religion. And Kolakowski is, I think, in the position-- I think he

took the position towards his ancestral Catholicism that a healthy humanities would take towards religion, which is not a full scale, you must believe in God in order to be a humanities scholar. But more a, you must take religious questions seriously and take religious truth claims seriously and ponder.

[01:31:20.40] There's a famous story that Kolakowski was giving in an essay and it was called something like, The Devil in History. I'm getting it wrong. And two of his fellow scholars are sitting there. And midway through, one of them turns to the other and says, I think he's talking about the literal devil. They'd come expecting some sort of symbolic thing.

[01:31:39.21] And this is-- you read Kolakowski, you're not sure what he himself believes. But you can tell that he's really interested in and engaged with religious questions in a way that I think not enough humanists are today. So Lasch and Kolakowski are my two recommendations for you.

[01:31:58.35] TOM MERRILL: Kolakowski had a wonderful essay on reasons not to garden.

[01:32:04.74] ROSS DOUTHAT: He has an essay, also, with the greatest title of, My Correct Views On Everything. I want to write a column with that title someday.

[01:32:12.24] TOM MERRILL: Isn't that the title of all your books? Ross, I think we're out of time. It's been wonderful. It's just really-- you bring a perspective that I think is really different from most of the things that we hear, all the things we hear on campus. So it's a breath of fresh air.

[01:32:26.28] I'm sure we're going to be chewing this over and arguing with each other. My students will have lots of things to say to me tomorrow morning when we should be talking about Simone de Beauvoir. So I will blame you in advance for that.

[01:32:37.50] ROSS DOUTHAT: I apologize to Simone de Beauvoir in whatever plane of the afterlife she finds herself.

[01:32:44.43] TOM MERRILL: This conversation will be up online. And there will be-- as soon as we can get a transcript, which sometimes takes a little while, but it will be on our website for anybody who wants to come back and rewatch and hear the Ross Douthat list of 15 movies or whatever it was. So Ross, thank you very much. It's been great.

[01:33:01.44] ROSS DOUTHAT: Thank you, Tom. I really appreciate it. And thanks to everyone who tuned in or will tune in days to come.

[01:33:06.79] TOM MERRILL: Yep. And thank you to our questioners. And especially, thank you to the ones who we didn't get to. Ross would love to get your emails I'm sure. So with that, we're going to call it a night. Thanks, guys.