

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Michael Poliakoff ([00:00:00](#)):

Good morning. It's a great pleasure to welcome Mark Bauerlein to Higher Ed Now, a crucial voice in higher education. Indeed, I should say all of education. He has contributed a number of really important scholarly works. But what we're going to talk about today is his newest book., The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults, which follows on a 2008 publication, The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupifies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future. I'm sorry to say that the prophecies all seem to be coming true in a really quite terrible way. And what I want to talk with Mark today about is the diagnosis of the problem and I hope maybe even some ways that we might get ourselves out of this.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:01:02](#)):

I think, Mark, you and I may differ in that I still think in my very optimistic, cheery way that we're 10 minutes to midnight. I think you're telling us that we're several hours past midnight, but let's explore that. I just want to tell one anecdote before we get started. When my son, who's really a very nice man, at that time he was age 27, saw the dumbest generation, he started bristling at the title. And I said, "Well, why don't you read it?" And he did, obviously not one of the stupefied youth that you're discussing, and said, "You know, he's right, but I still don't like the title."

Michael Poliakoff ([00:01:47](#)):

So what I want to do, Mark, is start with a diagnosis. You started teaching in 1989, that more than two decades of teaching cohorts of very bright students at Emory, and then you were at NEA and you played a very large role in the study of reading habits of Americans. So you have a particular vantage point. Could we start by looking at the diagnosis? Where are we and maybe as well, how do we get in there? And then let's see if there's a path forward.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:02:24](#)):

Well, first let me say how happy I am to join you, Michael, and go [inaudible 00:02:29] on this podcast because I've been using your research materials for many years. I think that the survey that you do, the What Will They Learn project, is actually a fantastic index of where higher education is. It focuses on general education. What are the things that universities require all students to learn? What must they study in those first couple of years? And I think this is a much more important factor than people often realize in higher education because the research university is all about the more advanced studies. Professors don't like to teach freshman and sophomore survey courses. And so general education is often kind of a throwaway thing in universities. And actually they're very important. And I spend a lot of time in the book talking about the changes in general education requirements, taking Stanford as a primary example, but actually it's also talking about current requirements at Harvard and Texas, Austin, a few other places.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:03:33](#)):

And what has happened to those general education requirements, which to me, Mark, an abdication of duty on the part of the mentors. What they've let happen to general education is a sign of them walking away from their responsibilities as mentors. They simply let it go and they pursue their own topics and research, and really minimize the introductory level teaching. We can get into that. But to get to your question, Michael, about the diagnosis of where we are. Today we have the Millennials that I focus on now. They're going into middle age. These are the kids born, the kids, I'm 62 so I can talk about 35 year olds as kids. They were born early eighties to late nineties, 2000. They're the digital natives, the ones

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

who grew up with no living memory of a world without computers, no living memory of TV when there were only five TV stations that you had, the three networks and then a local station and a PBS station.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:04:37](#)):

So, in that first decade of the third millennium, they were the early adopters, the digital natives, and this was web 2.0 years. And web 2.0 was hailed as a more participatory web activity. People didn't just sit back and be couch potatoes watching TV, watching videos. They could talk back. They could do blogs. They could get on social media. They could text. They could write product reviews. They could do all these things, again, as active participants in the media environment instead of just passive consumers of it. Millennials were told that they were the vanguard of this new digital age. They were going to lead America into the 21st century. They were the ones so adroit and adept and innovative with the tools.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:05:29](#)):

So a guy like me gets this handheld as it was called back then and I turn it over to a millennial and say, "How do I use this?" I still actually said the other day to my son, "Can you download this, this Uber, this Lyft app app for me?" I don't know. But I predicted that this deluge of digital tools for adolescence was a disaster. It enveloped them in youth world, peer pressure, gossip, pictures, youth culture, and that it prevented adult culture grown up stuff, the mentors, and what the mentors know from entering into their lives. They could do it 24/7.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:06:13](#)):

I couldn't. When I'm 15, there was only one screen in the house. And it was tuned into Walter Cronkite talking about Watergate. There was only one phone in the kitchen, and I couldn't get on that phone and bumble my way through trying to ask a girl for a date. It was embarrassing. My siblings and parents are around. It wasn't my phone. So I didn't have the equipment to envelope myself in this youth bubble. They did. And so they could screen out the bigger materials of history, and politics, religion, the classics, all the humanistic contents that breed humanitas in young people.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:06:53](#)):

Could I pause [crosstalk 00:06:54]-

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:06:55](#)):

Of course, of course.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:06:55](#)):

Could I pause it for a moment? And I don't want to interrupt. This is fascinating. But one of the things that surfaces in your book is that we Boomers were pretty bad, too. And what I'm trying to get at is the extent to which we Boomers bear a lot of the responsibility for the disasters that are happening now, the cognitive intellectual sociopolitical disasters. And whether the device itself, this equivalent of the nuclear weapon that we have in social media is in fact something that takes off our own misdeeds to a whole new level, such that it becomes extremely hard to remedy. Can you focus on that for a little bit?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:07:52](#)):

You're right. Michael, we have to look at the behavior of the mentors. I mean, one of the chapters in the first book was the Betrayal of the Mentors. The first sentence of this book is, "What have we done to

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

them?" And your last point talked about how the mentors were really shirking their responsibilities before the digital age hit. They were getting rid of Western Civ requirements starting in the eighties, actually, before that, starting in the sixties [crosstalk 00:08:25]-

Michael Poliakoff ([00:08:25](#)):

'68 in Stanford, the example you give where the real shock first hits.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:08:32](#)):

And the interesting thing in that book, about that episode at Stanford, is that was a faculty led action. The students and the alumni actually were quite happy with that Western Civ requirement. And I'll go into why later, but they found it a meaningful undergraduate experience. Columbia's core is one of the most meaningful experiences for the undergraduates. And the only reason the core hasn't been done away with at Columbia is because of the alumni. The 50 year olds remember that course fondly, meaningfully, and they're going to pull dollars if they see Columbia getting rid of it, and the Columbia administrators know this. So this wasn't a bottom level pushing up against being taught this Eurocentric dead white male curriculum. These were the faculty who did this.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:09:31](#)):

And one thing, Michael, we will go ahead into the Stanford story. Stanford had this general studies requirement starting in the fifties. And what they did was require three courses, they were on the quarter system, three courses in English, and that included the great tradition of English, literature, composition, literature, and great literature. The history requirement was Western Civ, a full year of Western Civilization. Now, what did this mean to the Stanford kid, 19 years old, matriculating at Stanford? I am stepping into the ages. I am taking a great inheritance of brilliance, beauty, sublimity, deeply meaningful things by the best minds. I am looking at profound events in history with great heroism and great villainy, but it had an epic sweep to it. They felt themselves in the shadow of big pictures, capital B, capital P. What does a Stanford student see now? And you could say the same thing about hundreds of other campuses and this is one of the things that the What Will They Learn project demonstrates.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:10:59](#)):

Your first two years, you're going to be taking courses in diversity. You're going to fulfill a requirement that's going to teach you habits of thinking, critical thinking, problem solving, these abstractions or these empty social concepts like diversity. What does that tell the student? What does that mean to the student? Is there anything about the past that becomes something to absorb as part of your sensibility? Is there any greatness in your diversity requirement? There's nothing big to them about that. There's nothing inspiring. They're not feeling like, "I'm leaving home and I'm entering the big wide world. Now I'm going to college and I'm going to change. I'm going to be transformed in some way. And this is the requirement. This is the best you faculty can do." Even the students of color, means nothing to them. We talk about diversity, inclusion, equity.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:12:05](#)):

I talk in the book how many students of color organizations are demanding no diversity, we want our own. We want our own dorms. We want our own teachers. We want our own counselors who are just like us. We want our own curriculum. We're not interested in pluralism. Now, we can criticize those

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

students as you want to take us back to segregation? My point there is they want something a little purposeful. This diversity to them is so bland. It's so tepid. Inclusion, is that supposed to reach the soul, the heart of a 19 year old? I want something powerful. I want something with force, something with, again, meaning to it. I'll stop. Let you comment there.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:12:59](#)):

You have eloquently, always and powerfully diagnosed where we are. I was going to add in regard to multiculturalism, diversity, equity and inclusion, it's not just that it has completely taken out the substance of human experience, but it has no discipline, either. That's to say, I got into a real tiff with a Hamilton alum who was furious when I went after the school. Hamilton College finally established a core requirement. And what is it? A diversity course. Every major has to have a custom designed diversity course. It leaves to the imagination what that might be in say physics, but they have no language requirement. So they will talk the talk and talk the talk until we are exhausted, but they will not walk the walk. In other words, they will train people to be ugly Americans just like those tourists who say, "Why can't they talk English?" over here in somebody else's country.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:14:18](#)):

They will not do the sorts of things that mentors are supposed to do who will not say, "Kids, great cafeteria line here. You can go right to the dessert section and pick any interesting elective that strikes your fancy, Lady Gaga, Harry Potter, doesn't much matter." They won't set the requirements that mature adults ought to be setting. But getting back to my initial question, this has been going on for a long time. And are we just now getting to the point where the snowball has gotten so big that it's rolling down the hill in an impossible way? Or is this something that is really a change that's been going on for more than half a century? And in our diagnosis, can we find ways that we might still be able to arrest the progress of this terrible collapse?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:15:19](#)):

The digital age has pushed it over the edge, I think. Because what does the digital tool do for the 18 year old? Well, one of the things that it will do is diminish books as a leisure option. I've got this screen now preying all kinds of fun, and exciting, and insulting, and pornographic youth stuff. It's a draw that pulls them away from books. It also is entirely present-oriented. Social media is about now. It's about gossip from the party last week. It renders the past less meaningful. Finally, it means, as I can't remember if it was Mark Zuckerberg or Reed Hoffman who said this. Reed Hoffman was the founder of LinkedIn. He'd been in the Silicon Valley for a long time. "We're trying to make it with social media so that you never have to be alone."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:16:22](#)):

Now to be alone is essential for humanistic learning. It's also essential for religious experience. Prayer have happens in a more solitary context unless you're in church. And they don't go to church. Millennials don't go to church. Contemplation is required for you to absorb the past, reflection. You've got to be by yourself. You have to sit in a chair and read a book without interruption for 90 minutes. The digital age has killed that habit for young adults. And we see this with more and more teachers, high school and college, they just don't assign long works, Michael. The long novel is disappearing. Even Common Core emphasized short passages, focused reading of short things. The long read, the habits of concentration that go with solitary, silent, slow reading, kids don't have those anymore. College students don't have those.

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:17:29](#)):

So all these tendencies of the digital age fit into a progressivist denial or renunciation of the past, the killing of tradition. The digital age destroyed the habits that enable one to absorb tradition. And the teachers, again, the betrayal of the mentors was they wouldn't stand up and say, "Stop. Close that phone. Shut that Wikipedia page off." Too many, Michael. And my colleagues across the country, they dove into this. We love Google. We love Wikipedia. Kids can get online and do all kinds of innovative things. I said, "You are destroying the humanity. You are destroying my discipline of English."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:18:17](#)):

In 1970, out of 13 bachelor's degrees in this country was in English. English was the core of liberal education. In 2019, the last time we got numbers from the Department of Ed, English pulled less than one in 50 degrees. The English major, not freshman comp, that's still out there, but the English major, window dressing. It's just a minor, marginal field on campus today. You guys were the ones steering the ship. You were at the helm. You were leading things. You did all the hiring. You did the curriculum decision and you guys are of course the smartest ones in the room. That's what you tell us all the time. How would you rate your performance in English in the last 30 years?

Michael Poliakoff ([00:19:05](#)):

Well, there used to be a time when an English major was a reliable hire because the employer could count on somebody with superior writing skills, and let's not use this term critical thinking, but somebody who could read difficult text, appreciate nuance, spot contradiction. That gone. Yeah. And when Audre Lord's poster is put up in the University of Pennsylvania English Department office in place of the portrait of Shakespeare, you know what the signal is, that the great master of the English language, who is no easy read, you don't speed read through a Shakespeare play, when that happens, it is signaled that it will be the political fad and fashion of the day that will override the kind of traditional discipline.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:20:09](#)):

I wanted to go something that you wrote in the book that I thought was so wonderful. People hurt each other unintentionally again and again. Orpheus and Eurydice, Aeneas and Dido, Lear and Cordelia, and social injustice usually has nothing to do with it. It made me think of that wonderful statement that Faulkner made upon receiving the Nobel Prize. "The human heart and conflict with itself which alone can make great writing worth the agony and worth the sweat." And it leapt out off that page to me that what we've done is to create avenues whereby, as you say later in the book, the only thing that matters is a personal response. Where am I in this conversation? Not what the human condition is, what can I learn from it? And with it came as well the breakdown of authority.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:21:20](#)):

Why would we look at great people? Maybe they were slave owners. Maybe they had bad values. So let's "decolonize the curriculum." And it led me back to thinking of what Allan Bloom had pointed out that Western Civ is probably unique in building into it dialogue disagreement dialectic, that you cannot read great books unless you are a turnip and not perceive that sometimes they're arguing against each other.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:21:59](#)):

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

And this is part of a great cognitive process. It's not self-glorification of the west, although we can thank the west for a great number of things. I'll be very free in admitting that it's scientific progress is what has kept me alive much longer than male members of my family typically survive. This is all Western empirical science, and there's a real rationale behind that. But getting back to the main in point. We have this extraordinary gift that trains our minds, but yet in the really perpetual adolescence of what we're seeing in the dumbest generation, however abrasive that term might be, we're kicking away our birthright.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:22:48](#)):

You're exactly right in pointing out, Michael, that the Western Civilization includes the component of self-criticism, arguing against one another, arguing against itself. Yes, this is the reflective capacity of Western Civ. It is one of the glories of the tradition. One of the glories that makes Western Civ say we're interested in other things outside the Western tradition. That's part of the Western tradition. It's not enclosed. And that is, of course, what they would say is one of the bases of critical thinking, right? What we see is when we took away from the students, Western Civ, or really any tradition of thought and creation that includes this reflective component to go along with the glorious creations that we see, it was anti-intellectual. This is not an opening.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:23:56](#)):

One of the ironies of the woke is that they say, "We've woke. We're woke. We see more clearly. We see broadly." No, you don't. You have closed your minds to so many things. And if they don't believe that, go ask those woke creatures who tore down the statues, three questions about the Civil War and see if they can answer them. They talk about the Ku Klux Klan, white supremacy. Give me the name in American history of a white supremacist and give me two or three facts about that person. Now you could name them. I wrote a book 20 years ago about the Atlanta race riot, a lot of white supremacist talk around then and leading white supremacists like Senator Ben Tillman, Governor James K. Vardaman, and writers at the time, but they don't know these things. You talk about white supremacy today. You don't know anything about the history of white supremacy when it was at its height, which was the turn of the century, 120 years ago in the south.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:25:07](#)):

So this was anti-intellectual, anti-educational. This is what the woke is. And we know this by the fact that the woke will not discuss. They will not debate. They will not debate because they don't have the equipment to conduct a debate. That's why I end the book with Malcolm X.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:25:28](#)):

Yes.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:25:29](#)):

And I say multiculturalism or Malcolm X. Now the story of Malcolm X is a great conversion story, one of the great conversion stories in all of American history, I believe. It's a great read to go through his autobiography and see what happened to him in prison. He gets arrested, part of a burglary ring. He's a thug. He's a horrible human being. He's obscene. He's exploitative. He despises women. He is violent. And he goes into prison and his first few months, he has a nickname in prison, Satan. And he kind of likes that. "Yeah, they call me Satan."

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:26:09](#)):

But he comes to realize in his encounter with a particular man, an older man, black man, who's a prisoner, who actually speaks in thoughtful, informed ways. This guy has knowledge and he talks about things. He talks about politics. He talks about history and the other prisoners listen to him, including white prisoners. The white guards listen to him and respect him and Malcolm X, Malcolm Little at this time, says, "You know, this guy's got something." And the man kind of takes him under his wing and tells him, "You know, try to learn some things." Malcolm X tries to read some books out of the prison library and he can't understand them because he doesn't have the vocabulary.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:26:52](#)):

So he takes the dictionary and he starts with the prison dictionary. He starts copying out the entire dictionary from aardvark forward. And he's starts reading and reading and reading over years. He reads history, religion, philosophy. He becomes Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and I don't buy any of that. But he acquires a sense of himself in this process. He reads so much that he ruins his eyes. He doesn't wear glasses before prison. We see him in the glasses. He comes out of prison, he wears a coat and tie. He never swears. He said, "I couldn't say a sentence without including profanity before." He comes out and says, "I will never talk like that again." He then sits down with people, old white men whom he thinks have racial issues. He talks with them. He listens to them. He looks at them and tries to figure out what's going on inside their heads. What he doesn't do is say, "You're racist. You're sexist. You be quiet."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:27:52](#)):

That's not him because he has the inner strength, confidence that comes with this reading transformation. He says later on, "I never wanted to be without a book." Books were so important to him and that includes the Bible. He reads the Bible very carefully. He reads Shakespeare. He reads white Western Civilization because he wants to know. He's curious about this white supremacy thing that has put the black man down. He has that intellectual opening and he's out for understanding. He's not out just to denounce. He's not out to express his offense. He's not fragile. That I offer as a model for Millennials. You're 33 years old. You're not confident, happy, excited in your room. Facebook, you love, no. You're actually in an unhappy mood. There's a sour feeling racing through Millennials today.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:28:53](#)):

And one reason is they don't have that knowledge equipment. They don't have the humanistic learning that would enable them to deal with the ordinary disappointments of adulthood. You're entering middle age. You don't have kids which could give you meaning and purpose in your life. You don't have any religion. You don't have any transcendent orientation of any meaningful kind. You don't have patriotism. Only one third of them consider themselves Patriots. So they don't have any bigger thing, bigger devotion beyond their own little private lives. And you know, Michael, that's not enough.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:29:31](#)):

No.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:29:31](#)):

That doesn't sustain human beings. It leaves a great big hole in their souls. That's where they are now. And read, you guys. See what happened to Dido. Look at Macbeth hearing the news of his wife's death. Okay? Look at Anna Karenina as she's looking at that train coming. Have these experiences. It's going to

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

deepen you. It's not going to make you happier. I'm not saying that. But it's going to give you a little more firmness in your life. You're going to have some of the tools to help you manage difficulty. You might even find prayer. You might find the Sermon on the Mount, something that you want to make a part of your sensibility.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:30:19](#)):

Mark, that is magnificent. Opens up so many pathways. I do, before I go any further, want to say how important that book you wrote on the Atlanta race riots is. I hope it's still part of the curriculum in Georgia. What a revelation about the dangers of a manipulative populist and the terrible scourge of embedded racism and-

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:30:48](#)):

And the media at the time playing it up, wanted to sell newspapers.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:30:53](#)):

Yeah.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:30:53](#)):

A lot of fake news going on back then.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:30:55](#)):

No. You did a wonderful thing. It's a great work of history and it was a reminder, as I get sour about the publication mill, that there are still really important things that need to be done. And I'll give another shout out to that wonderful paper you wrote for AEI professors on the production mill students on their own. That was a warning that too many institutions are jumping on the bandwagon of trying to be Harvard, Lord knows why, and neglecting the kind of very good work that they can do for students.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:31:31](#)):

I want to move us on to a second aspect of the dumbest generation. We've looked a lot at the danger of the screens. And you mentioned in the book, the fact that many of the Silicon Valley people keep their kids away from the screens. Doesn't that say everything?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:31:50](#)):

They know.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:31:50](#)):

Yeah. But there's another aspect to it which is the sociopolitical and the ideological. In, in other words, what we're doing socially to the young people, or in this case, what we have done to them. And it made me think actually of a poem, we go back to literature that I read years ago, by Yevtushenko called Lies. Are you familiar with this one?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:32:18](#)):

I am not.



## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Michael Poliakoff ([00:32:20](#)):

"Lying to the young is wrong. Proving to them that lies are true is wrong." I'm going to skip around a bit. "Tell them the difficulties can't be counted and let them see not only what will be, but see with clarity these present times. Say obstacles exist they must encounter. Sorrow comes. Hardship happens. The hell with it. Who never knew the price of happiness will not be happy." And it goes on to say, "Forgive no error you recognize. It will repeat itself a hundred fold. And afterward, our pupils will not forgive in us what we forgave." And it makes me think back to us. I think I had, I'm sure you did, for the most part, very good mentors in college, people who challenged us, who were a tad on the disciplinarian side about-

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:33:15](#)):

They were tough.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:33:15](#)):

... What they expected. Get that reading done. Don't come in here unprepared. That's not a bad way to train people. And now of course we look at the National Survey of Student Engagement, which you mentioned in the book, and find out that on average college students spend maybe 11 hours outside of class preparing. We were taught three hours on your own for every hour that you're going to be in class. That's if you want to be reasonably successful. That's gone. That's considered cruel and unusual. So we've done something in addition to all of the problem of the screens, we've done something that weakens the will, that makes them, as you say in the book, vindictive, unforgiving. Can you talk a little bit more about that? How have we added a sociological part to this that's making it even more damaging?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:34:16](#)):

The Millennials do have a vindictive sense of life in that when social scientists ask them about their social relations, what they think of people, the Millennials score the highest on what they call social mistrust. They mistrust fellow citizens. They mistrust fellow workers. They're not sure that those people are good people or not. There is no brotherhood of citizens, just we're all Americans. That's not a conviction deep in their hearts. When asked, I quote, one of the surveys when asked about what they believe should be done to someone who does something wrong, they give a vengeful response. A microaggression requires punishment, Michael, no forgiveness, no mercy on this. A survey by Gala came out after the book came out, asked among the many questions, was Google right to fire James Damore? It's a guy who raised issues about male, female differences possibly being the reason why you don't have proportionate representation of women in Silicon Valley.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:35:33](#)):

And the standard explanation with sexism, failure of diversity, and so on, Damore says, "Well, maybe we look at the issues of the science of male, female preferences." They went after him. You know the episode, I'm sure. And this was an internal discussion taking place at Google. They fired him that people were we're so upset. And when they asked in the latest survey, Millennials came up more than 50% saying, "Fire him. Darn right." Here's a worrisome sign. Two thirds of Gen Zers said, "Fire him. Yes."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:36:13](#)):

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

In the book, I go into a Politico poll of cancel culture, and most Millennials are either, "Yeah, we need to do more cancel culture," or, "Yep. Cancel culture's good. Is going along just fine," or just shrug. The ones who opposed cancel cultures think that it's gone too far, they were a minority among the Millennials. So the cancel culture is in full sway. It's going to continue. It'll continue until the people calling for cancellation themselves are canceled.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:36:49](#)):

Well, that's happening. People who've been fired recently, often like that poor Georgetown adjunct who really was worried about the achievement gap and just happened to have been picked up on a Zoom recording. This was...

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:37:09](#)):

A Liberal, [crosstalk 00:37:09] Progressive, even.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:37:11](#)):

Not a racist bone in her body.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:37:14](#)):

No, no. And I mean, look, when the students at Oberlin College are having a collective tantrum over the racism of Oberlin College, Oberlin College is one of the most progressive little acres on God's earth, you want to say, "Oh, this is the revolution eating its own," right? It's inevitable this is going to happen because again, it's a spirit of vindictiveness. It's a joyless enterprise. They remind me of a disappointed utopian and that's what I go into into the book. I think it's a mistake to call the Millennials and Gen Zers socialists. I think they're utopians. They're utopians for this reason. When they were 15, they lived in a utopian world. It was called the bedroom. They could go in there. They could shut the door. They could turn on all the screens. They got the music going. The TV is on. They have the phone. They're texting. They have the laptop open so they can be on Facebook or they could do stuff on Instagram and pass pictures back and forth and chat.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:38:12](#)):

And what happens if in their Facebook feed, one of their friends, 200, 300 friends says something that they really don't like? Unfriend them. If a text message comes in, you don't like it, block. The Millennials have been canceling ever since they were teenagers. They created a zone in their bedrooms that was all affirmative. Everything reflected their dispositions. They didn't have to face anything disagreeable, no contrary opinions. And they spent years in that space, not just a short time, years they there, many hours, many, many hours a week, all night long in many cases. What they've done is they've grown up and they've transferred the morays, the norms, codes of that teenage bedroom into the public square, into the workplace.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:39:12](#)):

Michael, why can't our society be like my bedroom when I was 15? Why can't reality simply conform to what positive visions that I have? I mean, I'm a good person. I'm good. Why can't this be reflected? Why do I have to listen to that guy, say that thing that bothers me? Well, [inaudible 00:39:37], they're not prepared for the rigors of a pluralistic society. They're disappointed utopians and we know what a

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

disappointed utopian believes about why utopia hasn't happened, because we got some bad people out there, and if we only get rid of the bad people, we'll have the society that we deserve.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:39:57](#)):

Well, again, getting back to Yevtushenko who never knew the price of happiness will not be happy. Those who don't know what the path to freedom of the press and freedom of speech has been, will disregard it. They'll treat it lightly because it's much easier to silence than to have to engage. And that of course, gets us back to what we were talking about before, the core curriculum. What will they learn? We find about 18% only of colleges and universities have some foundational course in American history and government.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:40:39](#)):

Right.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:40:40](#)):

The level of ignorance is off the charts as our surveys show.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:40:45](#)):

Could you ask all the Millennials to find Ukraine on a map, please, next week? [crosstalk 00:40:52] Give them 20 seconds to find Ukraine on a globe and see how they perform.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:40:58](#)):

And although again, as I go back to looking at our generation as well, we had that great myth of moral equivalence that we're just as bad as the Soviet union. It's just an alternative system. And we had economists like Galbraith saying, "Just wait, you'll see what a vibrant economy the Soviet Union is."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:41:23](#)):

Right. They were saying that all the way to the end.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:41:24](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:41:25](#)):

Through the 80s they were still predicting things are going swimmingly in the Soviet Union, yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:41:31](#)):

And so I guess we have to acknowledge that there was an ideological poison that was being poured in. I thought your evocation of Marcuse was really wonderful, and it appears that towards the end of his life, he recognized some of his own sins in his desire to suppress free speech and only restricted to those who had been properly schooled.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:41:56](#)):

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Well, one thing in the book that I wanted to do was bookend the arguments with the great gurus of the 20th century, late 20th century left, Marcuse and Malcolm X. In many ways, they were staunchly conservative in that they both insisted, "You must read your books."

Michael Poliakoff ([00:42:18](#)):

Yeah.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:42:18](#)):

"You got to do your homework. You've got to study history. Be quiet until you have acquired the materials of the tradition. Don't pretend you're a revolutionary long before you're ready to do so intelligently." And I would actually say the same thing for Michel Foucault. If you look at Foucault's syllabi from his teaching, Michael, you would say this is a great books guy. I mean, it's all the great works. He had no patience for people mouthing off without doing their homework. So this is a lesson that has been forgotten by the left. Your own idols would denounce you for this anti-intellectual position that you hold.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:43:07](#)):

And of course they themselves would almost undoubtedly be put to silence as well for that.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:43:15](#)):

Michael, well, Malcolm X was a staunch religious and social conservative. He would be mocked as a sexist and a patriarchal kind of guy. And what Malcolm X would respond by saying, "You got that right. Darn right I am."

Michael Poliakoff ([00:43:30](#)):

To the impoverishment of a vibrant society when we start to do this kind of thing, couple of more things that I'd love to talk more with you about as long as I'm not imposing. You talked briefly in the book about the 1619 Project, which really gives us a very interesting case study. And I like the way you shape that on the one hand pointing out that you take all the heroes away and what's left except a vapid, cynical approach to American society. Where's John Dickinson in the 1619 Project? Quaker who emancipates more than 30 slaves on his Maryland plantation at great economic loss because he believed it was wrong. Now he was not the prevailing voice, but surely somewhere it needs to be mentioned, there were some heroes that we can admire, and they actually happened to be white people.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:44:42](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:44:42](#)):

As well. And then there's of course the other issue, which is coming more and more to the fore, we just heard a wonderful speech at the Merrill award ceremony from Gordon Wood on the perverse misrepresentations of American history in the 1619 Project. But I wanted to invite you to talk a little bit more about that.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:45:03](#)):

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Well, one thing I say is that the 1619 Project really recognized correctly the need for young people to have a meaningful history. They need a meaningful background that leads up to their lives. This is a basic human requirement. You want to feel like you have a past that applies to you so that you're not just plunked down here into the world. You're going to live for a little while and then you're gone. So the 1619 Project came in and provided something to put in that space, which is empty because they've been hollowing out American history for decades. They've been eliminated. The Progressives don't want to talk about it. The main story now in U.S. History curricula is not Plymouth Rock. It's not the founding. It's not even the Civil War. It's the Civil Rights Movement. And the Civil Rights Movement is not a tale of triumph. It's a tale of failure.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:46:19](#)):

Malcolm X, dead, Martin Luther King, dead, Black Panthers, persecuted, and racism alive and well. The Civil Rights Movement was a failure. That's the myth, and I mean by that sort of the overarching meaningful framework within which America is understood today. They don't know anything about the Antebellum Period. They don't know anything about abolition. We didn't teach them the Civil War, or the founding, the Constitution. 1619 came in and gave them a story. It gave them the narrative. Now the problem is it's a negative narrative. It's a victimology tale. You know what? That doesn't help kids. What you're telling a 16 year old kid, African American kid, you know, this country raped, beat, enslaved your antecedents, and it still hates you, and it's going to exploit you. What a wonderful way to send a young person into the world.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:47:30](#)):

What a wonderful preparation for citizenship which has its freedoms and also its responsibilities. You're telling them you don't owe this country nothing. That's the idea. Defend this country? It's not worth defending. It's an awful place. So that's where the 1619 Project, I think, failed. I mean, I look at it, Gordon Wood and others quite right on the bogus facts, the omissions such as Dickinson, such as all the people who died in the Civil War to end slavery. But I also look at in terms of the emotional, spiritual condition of the 17 year old learning this. Is this doing that 17 year old any good? The only 17 year olds it is helping are those 17 year olds who are going to go into the grievance industry. That's the preparation that is being there, and you know what? That's really the intent, frankly.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:48:33](#)):

I'm afraid that is true. And it brings us back again to the point you've been making of understanding the human condition through history and literature. I think of what may be my actual favorite work of Greek literature. This is like trying to decide which of my children I love the best. But [inaudible 00:48:57], so many magnificent moments when the Furies, whose business used to be just making sure that people punished each other and got vengeance on each other, become the humanities, the ones of kindly disposition. And their blessing on Athens is that these people suffer [inaudible 00:49:18], over time will learn to be [suffron 00:49:25] which is some combination of wise and prudent. And it pulls us to the recognition that we are flawed in perfect creatures.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:49:34](#)):

Some of us embrace religion to try to confront the fact that we are and want to be better. You don't have to be part of a religion to recognize that human beings are frail, weak, they often err and sin, but that we try to progress over time, that we try to create institutions that make us better. And that's of course the real history of the Civil Rights Movement, that movement from depravity into light. We're

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

not perfect, but we are trying to form a more perfect union. Is that so hard to be able to share with young people?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:50:18](#)):

You know, Michael, that is a tragic sense of life of human nature that is very difficult for Millennials to accept because everything they heard was the opposite. What did the digital age tell them? Make your Facebook page? What did YouTube tell them? The motto was Broadcast Yourself. You are a wonderful thing. You deserve to be recorded, to be photographed, to be disseminated, and you deserve to have unlimited affirmation at all times. This is what the digital age said. Progressivism added to this, this philosophy of original sin, you know, from Russo onward is a fake. It's a hoax. It's a denial of human potential, of human perfectibility. Marks despised this as simply an ideological formation designed to keep working classes down. So that tragic sense of life strikes the young Progressive, and that's what most of them are, strikes the young Progressive as almost an insult.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:51:30](#)):

It is a bitter insistence on evil. That's what they see it as and it's an acceptance of limits. It's an acknowledgement of death. They don't like that. They want to be young forever. They don't want to settle down. They don't want to get married and have kids at nearly the rate Boomers did. They want to live like those those characters in that 90s comedy show Friends, 30 year olds who are still living as if they're 19. You articulated a vision of things that seems so disappointing. It's a painful acknowledgement of finitude. And again, they've been told, "Follow your dreams. Follow your passions. You can be anything you want." And the web, all the tools prove it. Now they don't really prove it. That's why they're so unhappy. It's not working for them. You need this tragic wisdom, actually. It's going to make you, again, not happier, but you'll be more secure.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:52:46](#)):

Well let's-

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:52:47](#)):

You won't be as distressed. You may be sad but you won't be so doggone reactive like when that orange haired monster got elected and you had this tantrum. You think you never get to lose?

Michael Poliakoff ([00:53:04](#)):

Right, yes.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:53:05](#)):

This is politics. Things go up and down.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:53:08](#)):

Actually on both sides.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:53:09](#)):

Yeah, of course, of course. I mean, look, the world is unpredictable. Things come and go. But don't put all your trust in worldly things. This is the lesson.

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Michael Poliakoff ([00:53:24](#)):

You know, our friend Sam Abrams, I'm sure you follow Sam Abrams, wonderful columns, just did some survey work and pointed out I would say with a certain mischievousness that college students who register Democrat also show a greater level of unhappiness than college students who register as Republicans.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:53:48](#)):

And intolerance.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:53:49](#)):

Yeah. And I thought to myself, there's something in this that's very revealing and I think you did put your finger on it with the utopianism, that I can't have it the way I think it should be and therefore my angst will lead me to need therapy, to need pharmaceuticals, whatever it might be. It takes me back to a moment when I was researching a column I published in Forbes about the way Princeton was mistreating Joshua Katz. I called around. I was trying to do my journalistic duty and I spoke to a Princeton classics major, and the student wanted to remain anonymous, which I will respect.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:54:30](#)):

Sure.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:54:30](#)):

And one of the questions I asked is, "What incidents of racism have you encountered on the Princeton campus? Because you just told me that Princeton is a thoroughly racist institution." This was before the Department of Education threatened to take back all their Title IV funding because they had declared that they were a racist institution. And the student paused for a long time and then said, "There was a party on campus where the students wore sombreros." And I thought to myself, as a journalist, I couldn't ask and that made your institution thoroughly racist? And it just occurred to me that this was exactly what you were talking about in your book. This school with such extraordinary, extraordinary resources that's been working so hard to be inclusive to the point really of doing illegal things, [crosstalk 00:55:32]. I will say as the father of two Asian daughters, Princeton really gets under my skin in terms of the way they approach the number of extremely qualified Asian applicants that they have and how awkward they find that. Some of these things have appeared on record. New York Times talked once about a leak from a graduate admissions meeting in which one of the professors said, "We got enough of them already."

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:55:58](#)):

Oh yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:55:59](#)):

Just change the minority group and see what would've happened.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:56:03](#)):

And we know that if they eliminated affirmative action, this is not the re-institution of white supremacy because most of those spaces would not go to whites. They'd go to Asians. Anyway.

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Michael Poliakoff ([00:56:15](#)):

And schools are, I think, properly recognizing that a healthy mix of backgrounds, ideologies, that of course they don't do, religions, that's again perhaps something they don't show so much interest in, this does a lot for campus. When I found out my freshman roommates at Yale, one of them was a evangelical Christian. I had never met, coming from a Jewish home, somebody that was so completely immersed in his religion. We got to be the best of friends. I visited his home, went to a church ceremony with him. I think one of the reasons that I, actually in my position as ACTA, can be so effective in helping conservative religious institutions is that I acquired what is supposed to happen at college, the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds, to learn about them, to understand, and to be able to internalize that. I don't think that happens anymore. If the whole emphasis now is on identity and the fragility of people of different backgrounds, how does this happen?

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:57:33](#)):

You know, when I started UCLA in 1977 and my brother and I lived in the dorms for a couple of years, Michael, our best friends were Mexican, Chinese. A good friend, Chinese guy, he came out of south central LA. We went over to his house. His mother couldn't even speak English. And they were total working class people, first generation immigrants. Let's see, Guatemalan, several of us were infatuated with a girl down the hall, Black, because she was cute. Her being Black had nothing to do with it. Korean, I'm thinking, Iranian, had a roommate who was Iranian. We didn't care. No one said, "Oh, I congratulate myself on being in such a diverse environment." We didn't even think about it. It just didn't come up. And UCLA was like that, very diverse.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:58:34](#)):

But again, no one talked about it. No one cared one way or the other about it. And it was only when I got my academic job and had all these colleagues from the Ivy leagues, Northeastern prep schools, they talked about diversity all the time. And I wanted to say, how many different ethnicities, or races, or backgrounds, nationalities did you go to school with? I mean, these were people who lived in such a tiny, elite, White bubble. And why are you sitting here pontificating about how much you care about diversity? To me, it was just a fake. You guys are all fakes. And I was a big Liberal back then. I was in favor of affirmative action. I was Democratic party. I thought in 1992 that all Republicans were either evil or greedy or stupid. So I was fully on board with Liberal academia. But I find-

Michael Poliakoff ([00:59:33](#)):

Mark, you're still Liberal in the best part of the word.

Mark Bäuerlein ([00:59:36](#)):

Freedom, you know? A Liberal requires a little bit of a thick skin. We live in a society that has free speech, an open society. You're going to encounter things. Come on. But one of the things that actually pushed me to the right was seeing that there is some deep dishonesty here in the Liberal Democrat outlook especially on social matters. You guys are fakers. You're posers. You don't really mean it. And I actually think that it went deeper than just hypocrisy, just people playing it both ways. I think there was something in Liberalism, I mean, contemporary political 20th century, early 21st century Liberalism, that is dishonest. And I think it's only gotten worse in the last few years. The dishonesty of seeing Nancy Pelosi and other Democrats putting on the African scarf and kneeling and the Capital Rotunda. What a bunch of fakers you guys are.



## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Michael Poliakoff ([01:00:42](#)):

Mark, I want to take a few moments. Last question. This may be a hard one for you to answer. What's the way forward? What can we do? We are clearly in a quagmire. Every day there's some untoward campus incident. And as the economists, our classical Liberal friends across the pond have pointed out, our elite universities have basically allowed all this illiberalism to move into the world of journalism, government, the corporations. What are the remedies? How can we turn this around?

Mark Bäuerlein ([01:01:21](#)):

For your audience, you know Millennials and Gen Zers in your lives. They may be family members. They may be coworkers. You might even give them the story of Malcolm X, but you tell them if you once a week go through the Sermon on the Mount, read a few of the proverbs, couple Psalms, if you go watch a version of the Trojan women or you read the episodes of the Sack of Troy in the Aeneid, go ahead and read a few Cantos of Dante, watch a great film like Bergman's Wild Strawberries or Antonioni's L'Eclisse. If you start exposing yourself to these things, you're going to feel better. You're going to feel better. If you take some time to be alone with a few poems by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. Don't talk politics with them. Don't berate them for their stupidity like title of these books.

Mark Bäuerlein ([01:02:41](#)):

You got to give them the positive way forward for them. You got to promise them this is good for you. That music you listen to, it's not good for you. Go listen to Mahler's Adagietto in the Fifth Symphony. Go have some fun with *Così fan tutte*, the Mozart's opera. This is better for you. You're going to become a more interesting person. You're going to become a more contented person. Again, not I'm not promising happiness, but I am promising the benefits of contemplation. Go take a walk through the woods and listen to someone reading from Thoreau, reading from *Walden, Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, chapter two of *Walden*. We've got to put the materials of tradition back into their lives and promise them, do it with conviction, that you admire Malcolm X. Look at what Malcolm X said. You got to read books.

Mark Bäuerlein ([01:03:52](#)):

It's got to become so important to you. You can change. You must change your life, Kierkegaard famously said. You can become better. You become smarter. You can become wiser if you spend some time, create a program for yourself. Formation can still happen. You're 33 years old. College is long gone. This can still happen. Malcolm X did it in prison when was in his late twenties. This can happen to you but you've got to stop doing what you're doing. You've got to get out of the network. You got to stop making politics into so important a part of your life. That's what I would push. There is greatness out there and it's yours. It can belong to you. You can take it in and you'll change. You will change for the better.

Michael Poliakoff ([01:04:56](#)):

Mark, that is wonderful. And I guess all I can say is I envy those many classes of students that had you as a mentor at Emory. I hope they were listening and listening carefully. The biblical verse that came into my mind as you were talking is, "Let us rise up and build," from the book of Nehemiah. We've got a lot of rubble to clear out of the way but let us then rise up and build. Thank you so much for this wonderful, wonderful conversation.

## MARK BAUERLEIN – Higher Ed Now Podcast – March 2022

Mark Bäuerlein ([01:05:27](#)):

Well, thank you to ACTA. Thank you for the work that you do and continue to do because I rely on it. I need it. I need you guys.