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Restoring American Culture

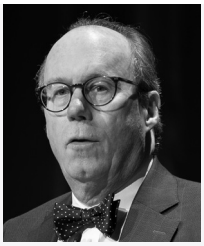
Roger Kimball

Editor, *The New Criterion*

The following is adapted from a talk delivered on January 29, 2025, at Hillsdale College's Blake Center for Faith and Freedom in Somers, Connecticut.

THROUGHOUT HIS presidential campaign, Donald Trump declared that he and his supporters were "the party of common sense." In his Inaugural Address on January 20, Trump returned to this theme. With his flurry of executive orders, he said, "We will begin the complete restoration of America and the revolution of common sense. It's all about common sense."

I agree. But what is "common sense"? At the beginning of his *Discourse on Method*, René Descartes said that common sense was "the most widely distributed thing in the world." Is it? Much as I admire Descartes, I have to note that he was imperfectly acquainted with the realities of 21st century America. If he were with us today, I am sure he would emend his opinion.



ROGER KIMBALL is editor and publisher of *The New Criterion* and publisher of Encounter Books. He earned his B.A. from Bennington College and his M.A. and M.Phil. in philosophy from Yale University. He has written for numerous publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times Book Review*, and is a columnist for *The Spectator World*, *American Greatness*, and *The Telegraph*. He is author or editor of several books, including *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America*, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*, and *Vox Populi: The Perils and Promises of Populism*.

After all, is it common sense to pretend that men can be women? Or to pretend that you do not know what a woman is? During her confirmation hearings, a sitting member of the Supreme Court professed to be baffled by that question.

Is it common sense to open the borders of your country and then to spend truckloads of taxpayer dollars to feed, house, and nurture the millions of illegal migrants who have poured in? Is it common sense to sacrifice competence on the altar of so-called diversity? To allow politicians to bankrupt the country by incontinent overspending? That's the start of a list one could easily enlarge.

In the cultural realm, is it common sense to celebrate art that is indistinguishable from pornography or some other form of psychopathology? Is it common sense to rewrite history in an effort to soothe the wounded feelings of people who crave victimhood? Is it common sense to transform higher education from an institution dedicated to the preservation and transmission of the highest values of our civilization into a wrecking ball aimed at destroying that civilization?

Like most important concepts—think of love, justice, knowledge, or the good—common sense is not easy to define. But we know it when we see it. And more to the point, we instantly sense its absence when it is supplanted.

In recent years—indeed, at least since the 1960s—our culture has suffered from a deficit of common sense. That deficit has eroded a great many valuable things, from our educational institutions to our cultural life more generally.

These days, the revival of common sense is often opposed to the rule of that coterie of bureaucrats the media calls "the elites." As a shorthand expression, it makes a certain amount of sense to speak of elites. The folks in Davos who want to vaccinate us into oblivion, encourage us to give up steak for insects, and keep tilting at windmills to battle the weather are members of that shiny, self-satisfied group. So are the products of our Ivy (and near-Ivy) League institutions—those whom the critic Harold Rosenberg called the "herd of independent minds" who all think alike, believe they were born to rule, and occupy nearly every perch upon the tree of societal privilege.

But rather than being a true elite—which suggests a quota of excellence, merit, and achievement—the apparatchiks we call "the elite" are really just the *credentialed* class. They are often clever and always politically correct. Eric Hoffer, the so-called "longshoreman philosopher" who was prominent in the 1960s, was right to observe that "self-appointed elites" will "hate us no matter what we do," and that "it is legitimate for us to help dump them into the dustbin of history."

Indeed, that exercise in large-scale institutional tidying-up is central to President Trump's effort to bring about the "restoration of America" through the triumph of common sense.

It is worth pausing over the word "restoration." The dictionary tells us that the verb "to restore" means "to bring back to good condition from a state of decay or ruin."

There are essentially two parts to this process. The first is to acknowledge frankly the state of decay or ruin for what it is. The abnormal is not the normal just because it is prevalent. For example, the mutilation of children is not "gender-affirming care." Anti-white racism is not "anti-racism." Illegal migrants are not "undocumented 'new neighbors.'" A

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bisected cow in a tank of formaldehyde is not an important work of art.

The second part of the ambition to restore American culture begins by rescuing vital examples of cultural achievement from the sneering oblivion to which the establishment elite consigned them.

As to the first, the state of decay or ruin, I suspect that we are all familiar with what the "long march through the institutions" wrought in American culture. The phrase is a bit of Marxist jargon popularized in the early part of the last century. Its basic idea is that the best way to achieve the longed-for revolution is through a process of cooption. Take over a society's schools, churches, and other cultural institutions, marinate them in a broth of liberationist ideas drawn from Marx and other left-wing intellectuals, and pretty soon you have taken over the commanding social, moral, and political heights of that society.

In a 1973 essay, "Utopianism, Ancient and Modern," commentator Irving Kristol touched upon the conservative indifference to the claims of culture. "For two centuries," he wrote,

> the very important people who managed the affairs of this society could not believe in the importance of ideas—until one day they were shocked to discover that their children, having been captured and shaped by certain ideas, were either rebelling against their authority or seceding from their society. The truth is that ideas are all-important. The massive and seemingly solid institutions of any society—the economic institutions, the political institutions, the religious institutions—are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions. The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will—perhaps slowly but nevertheless inexorably—twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape.

Kristol was talking more about the humanities than about art. But his point applies equally to the attitude of the elites who manage the affairs of our society regarding art and culture. They did not think or care much about art—it was something that went on, as it were, behind their backs. But then one day they woke up and found the art world, including the formerly staid world of museums, was awash in sexualized garbage, postmodern inanity, and race worship.

This process was part and parcel of a larger cultural rebellion against bourgeois values that got going with the advent of modernism. Today, we are living in the aftermath of that avant-garde: all those "adversarial" gestures, poses, ambitions, and tactics that emerged and were legitimized in the 1880s and 1890s, flowered in the first half of the last century, and live on in the frantic twilight of postmodernism. Establishment conservatives have done nothing effective to challenge this. On the contrary, despite little whimpers here and there, they have capitulated to it.

From the moment Donald Trump was shot at a rally last July, people have been speaking about a "vibe shift," a shift in the zeitgeist of American culture. That revolution in sentiment picked up speed with Trump's election in November, and it began barreling down the main line with his inauguration. We always hear about the "peaceful transfer of power" when a new president takes office. The usual procedure is for the old crowd to vacate their positions while the new crowd slides in to take their places. The institutions remain inviolate. Nothing essential changes.

Trump's ascension was the opposite. He was elected not to preserve the status quo but to remake it. On January 20, he moved quickly to show that

his administration would not be a colloquy of words only. It would be a locomotive of deeds. Within hours of taking office, he had issued some 200 executive orders and proclamations, affecting everything from immigration and the border to taxes and the cost of living. He ordered that the U.S. withdraw from the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization and directed that federal employees return to working full-time and in-person. With the stroke of his pen, he obliterated DEI operations throughout the government. The exhibition of energy and self-confidence was extraordinary.

Trump has repeatedly said that his common-sense revolution would usher in a "new golden age." In the context of unleashing the economy and technological innovation, we can understand this to mean literal gold. But a large part of our new golden age will be aggregated under the rubric of normality. The return of common sense is also the return of the normal. What would that look like in the realm of culture?

Let me touch briefly upon three examples. One of the most popular and one of the best BBC productions was *Civilization*, a 13-part series that aired in 1969. Hosted by the eminent art historian and museum director Kenneth Clark, it was a masterpiece of studied deliberateness. Clark ranged widely among the monuments of Western culture, beginning in the dismal, barbarian-filled years after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and ending with what he called the "heroic materialism" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Clark frankly admitted that his cultural itinerary was "a personal view." But it remains a refined, well-informed view. "What is civilization?" he asks in his first episode, standing on the Pont des Arts across from the Louvre in Paris. "I don't know," he admits. "I can't define it in abstract terms," but "I can recognize it when I see it."

One of the hallmarks of *Civilization* is its absence of chatter. Clark is a gracious historical guide, but he does not go in for small talk. He is genial but also serious. An abundance of glorious music often commandeers the audio. Clark says his piece and then lets the camera pan slowly over the art, architecture, and landscapes he has assembled for our enjoyment and edification. "Throughout," as one reviewer noted, the show "maintains a majestically slow pace. Luxuriously long moments where the visuals are completely unencumbered by any commentary whatsoever."

Prominent in his first episode is Skellig Michael, the craggy, windswept island off the southwestern coast of Ireland. Named for St. Michael the Archangel, it was there, between the sixth and eighth centuries, that Gaelic monks took up residence and helped preserve the guttering embers of Western culture against the rising tide of barbarian invasion. The fragility of that culture is a leitmotif of *Civilization*. The first episode is titled "The Skin of Our Teeth." It was by such a slender margin that those monks and a few other scattered groups managed to preserve the intellectual deposit of the West.

All the artists Clark names in his wide-ranging tour are male. Most if not all are white. Are these things deficiencies? Today's BBC clearly thinks so. When they broadcast its successor in 2018, they were studiously multicultural and accommodating to feminist sensibilities. One of the three presenters is female. Another hails from Nigeria. When the current King Charles was still Prince of Wales, he said that he looked forward to being "Defender of the Faiths," plural, unlike those fuddy-duddies of yore who styled themselves Defender of the Faith, singular. By the same token, the successor to Clark's program was called *Civilizations*, plural, to show that no special claims were being made for the West.

The original *Civilization* was pitched at a high level. It was also meticulously

accessible. The treasures Clark toured were allowed to speak for themselves, and so speak they did. The elites didn't much like *Civilization*, partly because they found it insufficiently multicultural, partly because they objected to Clark's unstudied air of competence and cultural mastery.

But *Civilization* is a good example of what it might look like to restore culture in an age that has abandoned common sense. If it seems old-fashioned and out-of-date to a generation weaned on social media, special effects, and incessant lectures about the evils of capitalism and the West, that tells us more about the quality of our times than it does about Clark's achievement in this series.

Something similar can be said about Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts. Bernstein began the concerts in 1958, just two weeks after he took the helm of the New York Philharmonic. These marvelous concerts—with commentary by Bernstein—aired on television, first in black and white and then in color, until 1972. Bernstein organized each concert around a theme—the meaning of music, musical modes, orchestration—drawing on the orchestra's current programming for suitable illustrations. In 2005, a new nine-disc selection of the concerts was released, some 25 hours of music and commentary.

As with Clark's *Civilization*, there was no small talk. The music was central. Bernstein not only introduced a new audience to classical music. He also introduced a number of fledgling musicians to their future audiences. The pianist André Watts was just 16 when he made his debut in 1963 at one of the concerts.

Unexpectedly, the Young People's Concerts were a huge popular success, in Europe and Asia as well as in the U.S. For three years, CBS broadcast the concerts during prime time on Saturdays and the series eventually garnered more than 20 million viewers. Parents scrambled to sign up their newborns for concert tickets a few years down the road. Despite Bernstein's success as a conductor and composer, some commentators judge this long-running concert series to be his greatest musical achievement. He might have agreed. Looking back on the concerts years later, he said they were "among my favorite, most highly prized activities of my life."

One can point to other triumphs of cultural common sense from the recent annals of American history. The Book of the Month Club, brainchild of the ad man Harry Scherman, debuted in 1926. Beginning with 4,000 subscribers, the operation grew to nearly 900,000 by 1946. But the club was as much an educational success as a commercial one. As described by Scherman, the club "establishe[d] itself as a sound selector of good books and [sold them] by means of its own prestige." This was true. Subscribers were introduced to novels by Ernest Hemingway, Margaret Mitchell, J. D. Salinger, and John Steinbeck, and histories by Barbara Tuchman and William Shirer. Bertrand Russell's *History of Philosophy* was a Book of the Month Club Selection, as were two big books by the philosopher George Santayana.

The point is that all these initiatives bore witness to a culture at one with itself. It was a culture innocent of the self-loathing that has been such a disfiguring feature of elite American culture since the 1960s. From our perspective in early 2025, it is a culture of common sense—affirmative, forward-looking, and normal.

Throughout *Civilization*, Kenneth Clark hailed "energy" and "confidence" as hallmarks of a vibrant civilization. In his last episode, he identified "lack of confidence, more than anything else," as that which "kills a civilization." The spectacle of Donald Trump's boundless energy, and the energy he calls forth from others, is heartening. Among other things, it makes us appreciate how his "revolution of common sense" might not only spark a political restoration, but also a new cultural golden age. ■