

Interview

Jacques Barzun

AT THE AGE of ninety-two, Jacques Barzun has hit the best-seller list again with *From Dawn to Decadence*, a magisterial interpretation of the last fifteen hundred years of history. Born in Creteil, France, Professor Barzun came to the U.S. as a young man and immediately joined the faculty of New York's Columbia University, where he served as provost and spent his entire career. Barzun lives in San Antonio, Texas.

TWQ editor Charlotte Hays talked with him about the state of civilization, why artists try to be immoral, and whether women have been oppressed throughout Western history. The answers may surprise you:

TWQ: You propose in *From Dawn to Decadence* that our civilization is decadent. Why are we decadent?

BARZUN: Because so many of our institutions and purposes are falling away from their original intention. The nation-state is splitting up and its sovereignty is breached everywhere. Repre-

sentative government is stagnant. It's very difficult to get anything done, and even when a law is passed, after much wrangling, its enforcement is often nil.

The public school is a wonderful idea, but we've lost that idea. The universities are in turmoil over irrelevant things, and the offerings that they make to students are often ludicrous.

The notion of individual rights has gone so far that our rights get into a tangle with the rights of others. We, in short, are in a condition of confused effort and small result. Nobody is particularly enthusiastic about anything except scientists and technologists, because they have a realm of their own where they can do a good deal without interference and where the material, not being human material, yields to their efforts.

TWQ: Is this decline irreversible?

BARZUN: It is irreversible in the sense that you can't just pull a lever or make a resolve and go backwards. But, of course, it's possibly very temporary, or it may last a century or two centuries. There's no telling. In the past, deca-

dence of this sort has come to an end often because of a sudden twist in the course of events. The fifteenth-century decadence was reversed, you might say, by the discovery of America, which opened up all sorts of possibilities and turned peoples' minds away from what they felt were hopeless ways of life.

TWQ: Why have we turned against the glorious achievement that is Western civilization?

BARZUN: The hostility to Western civilization is due to several types of feeling. One is utopian: The defects of present-day society are attributed to the aims and ideas of the Western world. Another is historical: the "crimes" of the past—slavery, colonization, and so on. These are taken to be uniquely Western and unparalleled. For example, the American Indians are "massacred" by the Europeans. That the Indian tribes massacred one another and that some had slaves is forgotten. A third attitude arises from boredom with the past and the desire to blot it out altogether. Finally, there is the attraction of the unfamiliar. The ways, the religions of the

Far East seem fresh and delightful, especially when they contradict the Western. And to top it all, the yearning to belong to a small cozy group with special customs and a separate language makes the Western creation of the nation-state look oppressive. This last tendency is one of the recurrent themes of the West that I call in my book *Primitivism*.

TWQ: So much of the book is about the Protestant Reformation and the conflicts about religion. Are you a religious person?

BARZUN: Yes.

TWQ: Do you espouse a particular religion?

BARZUN: I was reared in what might be called a semi-Catholic, French fashion—that is a good Catholic, but not intense, like a convert, or the way that many Catholics are today, because the church is attacked. In my time, the church was just there and people took it in stride. I am not a practicing Catholic now, particularly because of the conditions of the church, both its fragmentation and its extreme conservatism and other considerations. American Catholicism is a very different thing from French Catholicism or, indeed, European, and I would not fit into any parish or organization.

I'm perfectly willing to go to a Protestant church, and I find that some of them, which are called Presbyterian, have very high-church ways of being Presbyterian. So that the whole religious question today is almost incapable of being described by the old labels. When I find a choir, the minister coming down the aisle in a procession with the choir behind him in a Presbyterian church, I'm a little amazed. But that is exactly what I've encountered here in San Antonio, which is so largely Catholic.

TWQ: You've written a lot about edu-

cation. Why are we doing such a bad job of educating people today?

BARZUN: We have forgotten what a school is. A school is a place where teaching and learning occur, or should occur. Instead of that, all sorts of purposes, programs, methods, and fancy gadgetry have taken the place of that simple, but difficult, operation of teaching and having others learn. It would take too long in this interview to tell you what teaching and learning require. In the first place, education requires well-trained teachers, which we haven't got, because irrelevant ideas have invaded the teacher training system, so that we turn out people who are geared to do something other than what teaching and learning require.

TWQ: What could we do to make our schools better? There has been no improvement in the last thirty years.

BARZUN: I know; we keep throwing money into the pit and nothing has improved. There are some difficulties. For example, the natural supply of teachers that we could rely on has been far exceeded by the number of children to teach. A born teacher is a very rare animal, and the number of non-teachers that you can train into the semblance of a good teacher is also limited and further reduced by the fact that we pay teachers so poorly on the whole.

Not only pay them poorly, but also give them very little respect precisely because they don't earn very much. So you see, it's a series of wheels within wheels that fail to rotate properly. Also, the idea grew some hundred years ago that the school should socialize, should teach morals, should help reform society by making the children better creatures than their parents, and so on. At the same time, we put great emphasis on the child. The child becomes an important consumer and much of advertising is directed at children, much en-

tertainment is directed at adolescents, so that the adult world has receded somewhat, and, by natural consequence, does not teach the child at home. The child runs the home much more than the parents do, which also makes the school face a very difficult task.

TWQ: I was fascinated with the idea in your book that during the Renaissance the artist was to be virtuous. It seems to me we've done a complete flip-flop, and today artists are *not* supposed to be virtuous.

BARZUN: Oh, no. They're supposed to be the opposite in order to be interesting. (Chuckle.) It's a complex situation. Round about the middle or the early part of the nineteenth century, the artist became very important and as a result of that he was the object of study and of biography. And, it was found that he was not necessarily a good man or woman. He had foibles, he had vices, he was at odds with society, and it became a kind of myth that the great genius must be cantankerous and never pay his debts, be a womanizer, and all that sort of thing. There was just enough biographical evidence to suggest that this often happened. But what was not seen was that one of the causes of his being at odds with society was the fact that the artist had been thrown to the wolves, namely, the general public. Up to nearly the end of the eighteenth century, the artist had a patron, and the patron looked after him, and since he was looked after, he behaved a good deal better.

TWQ: You write that the sixteenth century was "full of women who exerted their talents like men for all the world to see and judge." This runs contrary to the popular idea that women were oppressed throughout the history of the West by what feminists call patriarchy.

BARZUN: The oppression or man-

ifestation of power and intelligence on the part of women is, like everything else, an up-and-down phenomenon. It has not been the same way in all periods. To say that it has come from not knowing history. There has been a modern illusion that women have been oppressed until the last fifty years. No such thing took place in the Roman Empire or in the Byzantine Empire. In many other times and places, women have been, one might almost say, dominant. Quite often the husband, who might have the title, was a do-nothing character or feeble-minded or the women ruled in the name of their son. One must know a bit of the details before one makes a generalization about oppression or superior opportunities.

TWQ: What do you think of the modern women's movement?

BARZUN: It has so many different aspects and directions that I would hesitate to utter any kind of generality. I think that in many ways it has been fruitful and certainly legitimate, an improvement on the past. But, of course, it has also led to exaggeration and it has enthroned a lot of ignorant ideas. Until it is all in, so to speak, it will be very difficult to generalize and say it has been in the main wrong-headed or in the main fruitful.

TWQ: What are some of the ignorant ideas that the women's movement has enthroned?

BARZUN: Well, one of them, as just mentioned, is that women have been oppressed until very recently. Another, which I've encountered a number of times, is that until that very same liberation, women did not write books or had no access to publishers, which is absurd. A third is that there must be some recasting, fundamental recasting, of the activities and attitudes of men and women. Improving their relations by modifying certain habits is one thing, but to

try to remake the two sexes from the ground up is also quite absurd.

TWQ: There's a wonderful idea in your book—you say, "At the origin of the women's question in modern times is a medieval novelty called courtly love." How does courtly love figure into the women's question?

BARZUN: Courtly love was a system of ideas that glorified women as such. Not for particular qualities in any individuals, but for being a woman. She was credited with beauty, elegance, knowledge, judgment, and the power of bestowing love, so she must be dealt with courteously. The very word "courtesy" comes from the court, and courtly love reversed, to a certain degree, the previous balance of power. Men had perhaps tended to think that women were their subordinates and servants and could be treated in a very careless, indifferent manner. Courtly love created by the poets of southern France set up an ideal, which was just the opposite.

TWQ: I've always been rather fascinated with early feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, who seems a bold spirit, if not much of a prose stylist, and Théroigne de Méricourt, whom you describe leading a corps of women known as the Amazons, who marched with one breast bared in Paris at the time of the Revolution. They always strike me as so much more interesting than today's feminists.

BARZUN: Perhaps distance lends that kind of enchantment. They were less, how shall I say, fanatical. They did not, as it were, use the language of the political platform, because there was no political platform very much, except during the French Revolution. They did not, as it were, imitate the enemy, which is what the modern feminists have done. They've picked up the weapons of their antagonists among the men, and that has not done them much good.

TWQ: What weapons have the modern feminists picked up?

BARZUN: Abuse, total denial, and antagonism instead of a modified and roundabout policy, and therefore, more subtle and in the long run, more effective mode of controversy. In short, a demonstration of tactics clearly superior to men's crude ways.

TWQ: Can you tell me a few periods in history other than the Renaissance that have been high points when women have been powerful and active that refutes the idea that we've been oppressed?

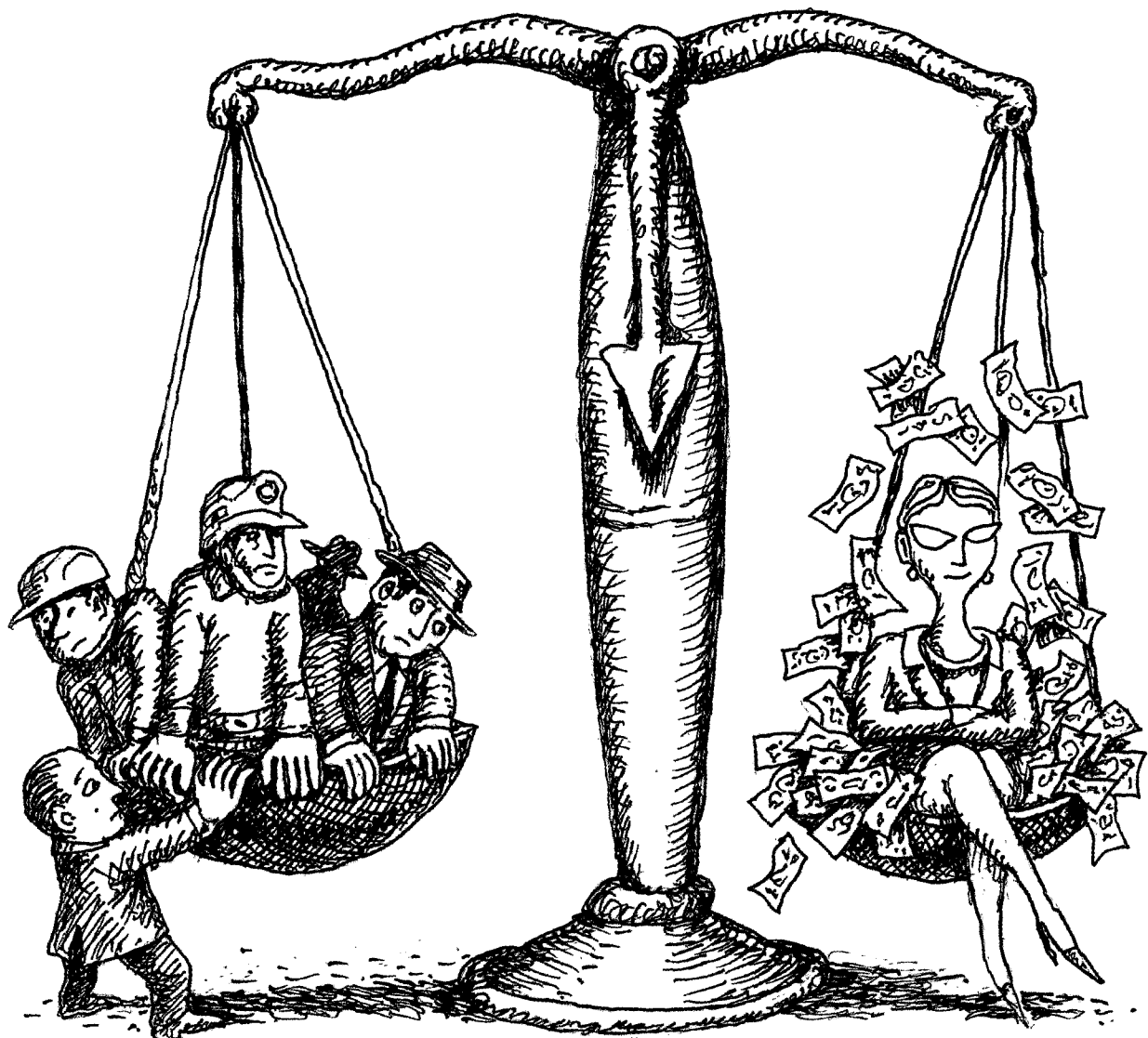
BARZUN: Well, the whole eighteenth century is a century of great women, both in France and in England, and to a much lesser extent in Germany, but again very much in Italy, less so in Spain. One of the best known of the day was Madame de Pompadour. Another was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and there were the other so-called Bluestockings in England and elsewhere. Women were involved in creating the literature and in taking part in government, indirectly to be sure. But their judgment, their favorites, their dealings with their enemies, show them just as if they had been elected to do the job.

TWQ: Some people say we should not use the term "mankind" to refer to both men and women. You do. Why do you use the word mankind?

BARZUN: Because *man* means *human being* both etymologically and by usage ever since the words started at the start of all our languages, which is Sanskrit. Man does not mean male, except in a special exception which is understood by the context. So it is again ignorance and prejudice that thinks *man* always means *male*. The Bible makes that perfectly clear. I mean, the standard King James Version: "God created man, male and female." ♦

The Labor Department Speaks Softly but Carries a Big Lawsuit

Evan Gahr shows how it has made law-abiding corporations fork over millions for trumped-up charges of pay discrimination



ON MAY 8, 1995, the United States Labor Department launched an investigation into possible pay discrimination against women working for the Texaco corporation, which does contract work for the federal government.

In what the Labor Department has described as a routine audit, investigators combed through three years of employment records. They found no hard evidence that the oil giant deliberately paid women less than men. Still, the investigation dragged on. Finally, in January 1999, the Labor