On Progress & Education


by Gordon M. Pradl

The self-confident voices of the liberal culture would have us all believe in progress. Through their rhetorical excesses and their exclusionary stance they have tried to create the illusion that they alone know what progress is and that they have a monopoly on both the vision of the good life and the values needed to bring it about. This claim is a simple abuse of truth. True conservatives are deeply concerned with the values of life but they follow a more cautious path to bring them about.

Progress presumably relates to the future. But debates over differing notions of progress are really about the past, about those values that one locates in previous generations, as one attempts to imagine and shape a future that will satisfy our needs. A society that includes the idea of progress as part of its dynamics is not damning its previous manifestations, but merely acknowledging that work still remains to be done to improve the conditions of life for its members, thus increasing the odds that it will adequately anticipate tomorrow.

Progress, in other words, need not imply an attack on the existing value structure of a society; rather, it can point to our continuing efforts to realize more widely the values that we have inherited and that have shaped our past and present achievements. Viewed in this way, change need hold no fatal contradiction for a true conservative position as long as the value center holds, as long as the material accomplishments do not destroy the spiritual basis for the original vitality of that culture.

Liberal culture refuses to acknowledge such obvious truths because it thinks it can maintain its hegemony by denying the very foundations of the society that allowed its rise in the first place. In touting progress, liberal culture's real concern is to brainwash us into thinking that because not all of our society's actions in the past have been defensible, its value structure must be at fault, and thus exposed as a sham. Consequently, it relentlessly attacks the values, standards, and institutions that have shaped America's greatness. And in this life-and-death struggle for control of the future, the social institution that, excepting the family, best embodies our regenerative capacity, is education.

If the world that we pass on to our children no longer reflects all that we hold dear, then to a large extent we will feel that our efforts have been in vain. So we construct institutions that help to ensure that future generations will fundamentally perpetuate our present characteristics as a people. One of the key strategies used to ensure such survival is school organization and management. How education is defined and ordered in America, which ideology shapes our knowledge, attitudes, and abilities, once they have been determined, goes a long way toward clarifying the deep structures that bind us together as a civilization.

That conservatives are in danger of losing this battle of definition and order in education should come as no surprise: what should startle us, however, is how our present plight is illuminated by various left-leaning commentators who themselves hold no truck with the liberal culture. By suspending abhorrence for their political-economic agendas we can use their eyes to see more clearly how schooling all too often fosters within students a negative vision of America's values and achievements—how individual autonomy is denigrated, dependency encouraged, and standards leveled.

In *An English Temper: Essays on Education, Culture and Communications*, the British literary critic and educator Richard Hoggart addresses a number of issues relating to standards and distribution in education. How should people behave in educational settings, both teachers and students? How do we monitor the mass media which so powerfully dictate our images and values? How should we both think of and assist the dispossessed amongst us, especially in terms of literacy and legitimacy? Although Hoggart claims identity with the left, his real values grow out of his university training, which was elitist in the best sense of that term. There lie his real loyalties, for there he learned the power of respecting and supporting the quest for individual achievement. Such a position grew inevitably out of his literary training:

For all its looseness and lack of analytical rigor, the English tradition in literary-cultural criticism has always been concerned with making a deeply human critique. It has kept a firm focus on individuals, on what happens to people.

This concern for the individual and his nascent powers aligns Hoggart against liberal culture. He recognizes, for instance, its master strategy for anesthetizing the populace by endlessly assaulting Protestant ethics, especially in "attitudes to competitive work and to the sexual life." Throughout his essays he dramatically captures our sense of alienation and impotence in the face of our increasingly centralized and technologized social institutions. More and more we are on the outside looking in on the crucial decisions that affect our lives. And, frighteningly, we seem on the verge of even

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welcoming such dependency: "consumer societies tend to flaccidity, to leading people into 'letting them do it,' to handing things over increasingly to professionals." Hoggart connects the drift of our culture with education as he exposes the gap between our rhetoric and our deeds by noting: "adult education is about the responsibility of the individual before that of the collective.”

The heart of the educational dilemma in a democratic society is determining how to balance standards with access, how to ensure that a wider distribution of the products of schooling does not lead to a leveling downward of these very products. Discriminations lost, in other words, even in the name of equality, debase the quality of life for us all. The discriminations that matter most concern educational structures that encourage agency, that promote conduct befitting the individual ownership of concepts and ideas, of imagination and creation. Such property is, of course, public, but the citizen/learner’s stance toward it must be as if it were his own. In this desire to excel lies the pride of achievement behind Hoggart’s use of the word responsibility. Individuals educated under such conditions guarantee a cultural self-renewal in which progress shares the stage with anchored values. Indeed, these forms of discrimination, or standards, are the very values that need to be projected into the future, if such a future is not to be subverted by the liberal culture with all its by manipulations.

Hoggart sees such connections clearly; through his years of service at the university and at UNESCO he has seen firsthand the abuses of schemes catering to the “relevance” demands and whims of undisciplined students or helping the so-called disadvantaged. Concerning this latter group, Hoggart is far from sentimental:

some of those who have reacted against the purer forms of cultural deprivation theory and have insisted on the possible richness of working-

class culture are in danger of themselves falling into a new myth . . . our duty [is] not to romanticize the situations such people are in, but to help them, whilst not doing wrong to whatever may be good in their present worlds, to help them in the right ways, to—and I choose the verb deliberately—surmount that world.

Such talk would scandalize generations of “researchers” and bureaucrats who benefit by keeping such people in their place while dutifully proclaiming respect for their “culture.” In this regard, Hoggart spends considerable time exposing those involved in community arts programs that merely confirm existing prejudices and debased standards. The funding of such projects, he maintains, inexorably reflects an attempt to homogenize us to the lowest level of response. Thwarted from striving upward, we eventually become impervious to those voices within us that urge us to refine and transform our present conditions.

Hoggart demonstrates that a properly conceived notion of literacy is probably the only means of inoculating citizens against mass leveling. It is in the best interests of liberal culture, as they have obvously divined, to pollute the world of literature and thus break down our resistance once and for all. Hoggart’s sensibilities on such central issues will never be muddled and his strongly worded value assertions should be a charge to us all.

In Education and Power, by Michael Apple of the University of Wisconsin, the discourse differs dramatically from An English Temper—and therein lies a tale of the importance of primary educational socialization. Although both men acknowledge their working-class roots, Hoggart has been transformed by the living traditions of a humane university education, while Apple has bought into the abstract doctrine of Marxist social analysis. In his critique of institutional education, Apple attempts to describe
not only how schools reproduce existing socioeconomic arrangements, but also how their impact on students and teachers always threatens to unsettle these traditional arrangements. Typically, Apple assumes the following posture toward his subject:

one fundamental latent social role of the school is 'deviance amplification.' That is, the school naturally generates certain kinds of deviance. This process of natural generation is intimately related to the complex place schools have in the economic and cultural re-production of class relations—on the one hand to the school's function as an ideological state apparatus and through this in producing agents (with the appropriate dispositions and values) to fill the needs of the social division of labor in society, and on the other hand to the place of educational institutions in producing the particular kinds of knowledge forms required in an unequal society.

In such a world evil is easily located: class division, profits, inequality, exploitation. Apple's rhetoric is tiresome and misdirected. He will remain unconvinced that there is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that technological knowledge benefits corporate concerns or that the rationalization of production has meant a better life for all. He will forever be shocked that "In offices, word-processing technology is employed to reduce labor costs and deskkill woman workers. Thus, management attempts to control both the pace of the work and the skills required, to increase more effectively their profit margins or productivity." Productivity and profit margins presumably have nothing to do with the good life, and word-processing will supposedly further enslave us.

Yet part of his educational analysis can be used to expose the dynamics of liberal culture's authoritarian invasion of the schools. "Deviance amplification" provides appropriate jargon with which to start. Schools are supposed to equip students with the skills, the initiative, and the discipline to compete successfully in the marketplace. What gets lost in the process, however, is human agency. Perhaps some mistaken notion is operating which equates submission and obedience with the control of production-line workers, or perhaps it has been forgotten that the goal of any system is self-discipline. Not allowed to buy into the system because their powers of agency are not legitimized, vast numbers of citizens descend into a limbo world which increasingly strikes out against the dominant culture in a variety of forms—from labor featherbedding to scrawling graffiti on public monuments.

Apple claims that "the norms that guide school life" are being rejected by many students. Why aren't these norms working? Certainly at fault is the educational system's neglect of the student's ability to exercise her own intentions. Such self-control has nothing to do with the whining self-indulgence encouraged by liberal culture. Quite simply you don't indoctrinate the values of freedom; you have people live them. Further, you don't separate individual autonomy from the social fabric.

Yet, a number of current curriculum "innovations" are attempting to do just that:

With the increasing employment of prepackaged curricular systems as the basic curricular form, virtually no interaction between teachers is required. If nearly everything is rationalized and specified before execution, then contact among teachers about actual curricular matters is minimized.

Rows of children in front of their individual learning consoles is hardly a reassuring vision of the future. Again the figure agency is lost without the ground of a social network of standards which can be constantly tested. Beating the machine is finally just a sterile achievement. Indeed, the very values of the free market are undercut once all the "prepackaged curricular material" is placed on automatic pilot. For if this comes to pass (as is already happening), it will be equivalent to placing ourselves under the domination of a system which pretends to know in advance what will be the outcome of our experiments and our risks. On the day that initiative is surrendered, America will be no longer.

Apple may be using the wrong lens, but both he and Hoggart prod us to think seriously about how far we have bought into the liberal culture's program for progress. For as long as we fail to support agency and standards, schools will remain perfectly content to turn out the full line of deviance liberal culture demands.