

## CONSERVATISM AND SCHOOLING

In the next section, we will examine Conservatism and schooling in terms of the role of the school, the nature of the curriculum, and the role of the teacher.

### *The School*

The school, in the Conservative ideology, is a repository of cultural values. It is an agency for transmitting the cultural heritage and values from the mature to the culturally immature, thus preserving them for future generations. The school's role is to unite the individual with the heritage and to instill a sense of belonging to the group whose traditions are manifested in the institution.

In addition to its general role as an agency for transmitting and perpetuating the cultural heritage, the school also aids other institutions by identifying the future elite and providing the education appropriate to its destiny as a leadership group. The education of a leadership elite can take place either through special schools established solely for the task, or by **tracking** or **streaming**, which places those who display leadership potential in special classes within a comprehensive setting. Whatever the mode, there is an appropriate preparation for the elite. It should be noted that this leadership elite is to exhibit both character and intellectual acumen.

### *The Curriculum*

For Conservatives, the curriculum transmits the general culture to all and also provides appropriate education to the various strata of the society. It includes the generally accepted basic skills found in most school programs—reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, loyalty to and membership in the community, often the nation-state, is developed by a selective use of the literature to exemplify significant cultural themes. History, too, is a core subject for providing a perspective into the evolution of the culture and its heritage. Fine arts, music, and dance are also used to expose students to the cultural heritage. Defined and prescribed cultural values are used to shape behavior or character to conform to traditional norms or to national character. Wherever possible, Conservatives prefer to integrate character formation or development within a religious context.

Secondary and higher education continues to cultivate intellectual discipline through the study of subjects such as the native language, classical and foreign languages, mathematics, history, literature, and science. Often, Conservative educators identify a core of prescribed studies designed for all students to ensure the uniform transmittal of the cultural heritage.

### *The Conservative Teacher*

The teacher in the Conservative educational setting is an agent of transmitting the cultural heritage to children and youth so that they can incorporate it into

their intellectual outlooks and characters. Such teachers should be people who cherish the cultural heritage, who know it well, and who reflect in their personalities and behavior the culture's traditional values. Like the Idealist teacher, they are character models that students can imitate. While they may use educational technology to transmit the tradition more effectively, Conservative teachers are not agents seeking to change or reconstruct society. Nor do such teachers encourage cultural alternatives and diversity. In a world that has grown increasingly unstable because of social and technological change, incessant mobility, and moral relativism, Conservative teachers use the school as a stabilizing agency. Their task is to maintain the cultural heritage as a repository of the enduring achievements of the human race by introducing it to the young so that they can absorb it and perpetuate it.

## CONTEMPORARY NEO-CONSERVATIVE REVIVAL

Since the 1980s, the contemporary United States has experienced a strong revival of Neo-Conservatism in politics, economics, and education. The U.S. Neo-Conservative movement is complex since it brings together some rather diverse strands that while related are not truly interwoven into one ideological fabric. In the following section, we analyze the following strands: (1) a need to reconnect with a particular version of the cultural heritage; (2) Classical Liberal economic theory; (3) religious fundamentalism; and (4) Essentialist and Perennialist educational themes.

### *A Version of the Cultural Heritage*

In the discussion of general Conservative principles, it was asserted that Conservatives find authority in the past, in the traditions of the cultural heritage. U.S. Neo-Conservatives are no exception. They tend to view the past as the glorious creation of a special and exceptional American identity. For them, the American heritage represents the creating of a special people who conquered a wilderness and established a republic governed by law and civility. It should be noted that the tendency to create a particular version of the past is not unique to Conservatives but is true of other ideologies.

Although Neo-Conservatives are likely to recognize the historical realities of cultural pluralism associated with an immigrant nation such as the United States, they tend to see a distinct U.S. culture formed by a special past. For them, government arose from covenant, represented by the Constitution, which they insist rested on essential Judeo-Christian principles. For them, the common law, based on the Anglo-American juridical heritage, guarantees order, stability, freedom, and the right to hold property.

Neo-Conservatives hold that a profound need exists, especially in a dynamic technological society, to maintain a stable cultural core. They locate

the U.S. cultural core in the tradition of Western civilization, particularly in its Anglo-Saxon, English-language, common-law precedents that were transferred to the new world. The essential educational core is to be transmitted by the schools.

### **Classical Liberal Economics**

Although identifying themselves as Conservatives, many U.S. Neo-Conservatives are deeply committed to Classical Liberal economic theories of an open market, free trade, supply and demand, competitiveness, and the privatization of social and educational services. Some subscribe to a revived Social Darwinist ethic which asserts that competition in an unfettered marketplace will encourage the most industrious and able individuals to achieve and produce without having to carry the less productive on their economic shoulders.

U.S. Neo-Conservatism has little of the European sense of paternalism about it. For U.S. Neo-Conservatives, paternalism keeps one group in childlike dependence on another. Let all compete and ensure that competition is not interfered with by well-meaning but misguided Liberal reformers whose social welfare schemes limit the free play of competition.

For Neo-Conservatives, modern welfare state Liberals have interfered with the natural economic processes. Bureaucratic regulations have slowed the engines of U.S. industry, making them unproductive in the face of foreign competition. A sluggish school system that has downgraded basic skills and essential subject matter has replaced hard work and discipline with permissiveness and educational fadism. Rather than preparing an innovative and productive work force, the public school system, often in the hands of misguided Liberals and bureaucratic educationists, has miseducated students. In place of the virtually monopolistic public school system, educational freedom of choice, through a voucher plan, will permit parents and students to choose the kinds of schools that serve their needs. In a competitive educational arena, the most effective and efficient schools could be identified from those that are mediocre. These effective schools would attract academically inclined and motivated students. The voucher system, a form of educational privatization, would make schooling an arena of challenging competition.

### **Religious Fundamentalism**

Following the general tendency historically true of Conservatism, U.S. Neo-Conservatives see supernatural and religious principles undergirding social and educational institutions. For them, many issues, such as the abortion debate over the "right to life" versus "freedom of choice," are essentially religiously grounded moral issues. Family values and women's role in society are also defined in strongly religious terms that define the family as a nuclear unit in which husband and wife have a continuous monogamous relationship. Women tend to be defined as homemakers, child rearers, and caregivers; men as the primary breadwinner,

the chief wage earner. Despite the separation of church and state, Neo-Conservatives see themselves struggling to restore a past vitalized by religious principles and meanings.

### **Neo-Essentialism and Neo-Perennialism**

For many Neo-Conservatives, U.S. public schooling has been moving in the wrong direction. They believe that Dewey's Pragmatism, Progressive education, and secular humanism are philosophies and theories that have contributed to the schools' miseducative problems. These philosophies and theories have brought about a decline of academic standards, an increase of indiscipline and incivility in both schools and society, an erosion of traditional ethical values, and a decline in U.S. economic productivity. To remedy these perceived defects, Neo-Conservatives have called for educational reforms. Although the theories of Perennialism and Essentialism are discussed in Chapters 17 and 18, we will treat them briefly here in relationship to the Neo-Conservative educational agenda.

Many of the reforms of the 1980s that were stimulated by *A Nation at Risk* were designed to correct what Neo-Conservatives regarded as declining academic skills and subjects. Similar to Idealists and Realists, they argue that schools have a primary function: to foster basic skills and competency in traditional academic subjects, namely, mathematics, science, language, and history. To return to fundamental skills and subjects, the curricular residues of Liberalism and Progressivism need to be removed. For example, they challenge the Liberal concept that the school is a multifunctional community service institution. Multifunctionalism, Neo-Conservatives assert, weakens the schools' primary role.

Neo-Conservatives, especially those inclined toward Perennialism, see the schools as transmitting a knowledge and value core derived from the Western cultural experience. They see the classical Greco-Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment eras as presenting a needed cultural frame of reference that orients the young to the cultural heritage. Within this framework are the languages, literatures, history, and arts that were developed in Western civilization. Encased within the larger Western heritage is the American experience in which European settlement is highlighted. Neo-Conservatives resist the more extensive multicultural interpretation which would also include the cultural contributions of Asians and Africans. Also, for many Neo-Conservatives, the issue of the language of instruction in the schools is highly significant. Some would end bilingual and bicultural programs, claiming they erode an English-language-based cultural core.

Neo-Conservatives, similar to Essentialists, also argue that schools are tied to the country's economic growth and productivity. Using studies that compare the academic achievements of U.S. students in mathematics and science with those of other countries, Neo-Conservatives claim that U.S. productivity has been declining in the face of foreign competition. Japan is usually identified as the chief competitor; it is claimed that Japanese students are superior to U.S. students in the key subjects of mathematics and science. Neo-Conservatives have engi-

neered reforms in the state legislatures to mandate increased requirements in mathematics and science.

It is interesting to note that the Neo-Conservative agenda in education has included both Perennialist and Essentialist arguments. From Perennialism it takes the position that schools must identify and transmit a stable cultural core that links generations in an inherited tradition. From the Essentialist position, it argues that the efficient and effective teaching of key skills and subjects has a positive impact on economic productivity.

Neo-Conservatives decry what they perceive to be declining standards of morality and civility in society. The failure of schools to impart a stable cultural core and universal ethical standards to the young has resulted in violence, immorality, and mediocrity which are all symptomatic of cultural rootlessness. Further, the failure of schools to hold up worthy personal models that young people can emulate further compounds the moral malaise besetting a relativist society. Some Neo-Conservatives, especially those who identify with religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism, look to a revival of traditional religious values to remedy what they see as moral slippage. They advocate prayer in the schools, religious observances, and religious education. Other Neo-Conservatives see moral and ethical decline to be the result of cultural relativism and situational ethics in education. For them, the remedy is to turn to the Western heritage, especially those aspects of it which assert universal, eternal truths and values.

## CONCLUSION

Arising as a reaction to revolutionary social change, Conservatism moved from an attitude or outlook to a fully articulated ideology. Stressing continuity rather than change, it emphasizes the power of the cultural tradition to shape knowledge, character, and values. Seeing human beings as unequal in abilities and capacity, Conservatism views the good society as one that is organized hierarchically. Education, based on the Conservative ideology, is primarily a process of cultural transmission and preservation. Indeed, it is part of the cultural continuum that exists between the generations. Neo-Conservatives in the United States endorse these cultural principles in their educational agenda.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify the Conservative principles endorsed by Edmund Burke and examine the kind of society and school that would result from their implementation.
2. Are Burke's principles relevant to modern U.S. society?
3. Identify and analyze examples of elitism that you have observed in your educational experience.
4. What are the educational implications of the Conservative view of the past?

5. How does tradition function as a means of controlling individual egotism and selfishness?
6. Describe the functions of a hierarchy. Can you identify contemporary institutions that function hierarchically? What education is appropriate for their members?
7. What is the Conservative view of change? According to this perspective, what is the proper relationship between technological innovation and society?
8. Describe the sense of alienation that is often ascribed to modern mass society. Is Conservatism a practical alternative?
9. Using the Conservative ideological perspective, analyze the role of the school, the curriculum, and the teacher.
10. Analyze the revival of contemporary Neo-Conservatism in the United States. What groups are likely to embrace the Neo-Conservative educational agenda?
11. What are the key elements used by Neo-Conservatives to critique U.S. public schools?

## INQUIRY PROJECTS

- Write a review of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Include a section that discusses the work's educational implications.
- Begin and maintain a clippings file of newspaper and magazine articles that uses the Neo-Conservative critique of education and schooling. Analyze the general arguments used in these articles.
- Prepare a research paper that examines the education of an elite such as the graduates of the British "public school" or prestigious preparatory schools in the United States.
- Write a short story or play that describes the roles of people living in a fictional organic society.
- Organize a debate in which members of the class argue for either the Liberal or Conservative ideology.
- Develop a character sketch of a person who would be inclined to Conservatism.
- Prepare a sketch of the Conservative teacher as a role model. Also, include a section on the method of instruction that this teacher would use.
- Prepare a paper that analyzes the ideas of U.S. Conservatives such as Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Jr., or T. S. Eliot, with special emphasis on education.

## FURTHER READINGS

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| Barry, Norman. <i>The New Right</i> . London and New York: Croom Helm in association with Methuen, 1987.             | Burke, Edmund. <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i> . New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955. |