

CULTURAL LITERACY AND CULTURAL ANXIETY: E.D. HIRSCH'S DISCOURSE OF CRISIS

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Cultural Literacy belongs to a genre of writing about education I want to call the discourse of crisis. By tradition, the genre is predicated on some version of Matthew Arnold's story of culture and anarchy, of how things fall apart when we no longer hold to a common set of traditions and beliefs, and of how we need to reestablish our cultural bearings through what Arnold called the "force of educated opinion." By convention, the genre combines alarmism about endangered values and declining standards with a naive faith in the power of education to ameliorate social problems and restore a consensus of belief about our national identity and destiny. Along with William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* and Allen Bloom's current runaway bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy* joins earlier works in the genre, such as *Why Johnny Can't Read* and *The Educational Wasteland* from the Fifties, to argue against progressive education and to call on the schools, colleges, and universities to stop pampering students, restore order and intellectual rigor, and return a traditional body of knowledge to the center of the curriculum.

Hirsch's version of the crisis in education is a deceptively sim-

ple one. The problem, he says, is that the schools have abandoned their “acculturative responsibilities” to teach a common body of knowledge Hirsch calls “literate national culture.” The reason students don’t read and write well, Hirsch argues, is that they lack the “specific cultural information” and “background knowledge” (what cognitive psychologists call “schemata”) it takes to understand the written word and to communicate effectively. According to Hirsch, students have been the victims of the romantic ideals of Rousseau and John Dewey. What Hirsch calls “educational formalism” has placed at the center of education the natural development of students’ intellectual abilities instead of the cultural legacy of traditional content. Such an emphasis on the process of learning instead of the content, Hirsch claims, has fragmented the curriculum and turned the schools into academic shopping malls.

Fortunately, we can now correct the romantic reluctance to impose adult culture on young learners and reverse the mistaken emphasis on student-centered education and learning-by-doing. We just throw out progressive education and “developmental, content-neutral” approaches to teaching and learning and plug in cultural literacy—the 63 page list of “What Literate Americans Know” Hirsch has conveniently appended to his book. The advantages, Hirsch says, are sweeping: we will get a better literate culture, more “effective nationwide communication,” and maybe even break “the cycle of poverty and illiteracy” and “achieve a just and prosperous society.” And in case we worry about the students, Hirsch assures us they will relish a return to the pleasures of memorization. “Young children,” Hirsch says, “enjoy absorbing formulaic knowledge.” After all, it is “neither wrong nor unnatural to teach young children adult information before they fully understand it” (xvi-xvii).

Now when a literary critic and composition theorist of Hirsch’s stature decides to go public and address his call for educational reform to a broad audience of parents, educators, policy-makers, and opinion-setters, we can assume ahead of time there is something important at stake. And when Hirsch’s book turns into a bestseller, we’re faced with a success story that requires explanation. Of course, we can explain Hirsch’s success in part by the fact that the list in *Cultural Literacy* offers Yuppies and the parlor game set an academic edition of “Trivial Pursuits.” (Houghton Mifflin reportedly is considering turning the book into a board game.) More telling, though, is the fact that Hirsch has tapped into something troubling the public

consciousness. His book is remarkably responsive to the national mood and the pervasive sense of crisis and cultural anxiety that seems to animate current discussion of the state of American education. In short, the appeal of *Cultural Literacy* resides in the “basics” it urges us to go back to. Hirsch’s case for cultural literacy is perhaps the most accessible and persuasive call for a return to a traditional curriculum to emerge from what Ira Shor has called the “conservative restoration of the Eighties”—the broad disciplinary movement to patrol the borders of mainstream culture, to reassert traditional values, and to incorporate all Americans into a monocultural, monolingual body public.

I.

The discourse of crisis inscribed in the writings of Hirsch, Bloom, Bennett, and other neoconservatives is not a disinterested inquiry into the roots and causes of current problems in American education. Rather it speaks of a transformative project to recenter the curriculum and to ground teaching and learning in the traditions of “our” culture. In the modern period, the discourse of crisis can appear at any time. It is most likely to surface, however, during or just after dramatic outbreaks of social conflict, when deeply rooted contradictions erupt with sufficient force to polarize the population and call into question the logic of the dominant social order and its cultural practices. During such periods, education becomes both a problem and a panacea: its failures reach crisis proportions precisely because of the faith invested in schooling as the best means to deal with social problems and to exercise social control. The discourse of crisis, that is, is always strategic, a holding action—in Arnold’s case against the social turmoil and class antagonisms of Victorian England in the case of Hirsch, Bloom, and Bennett against the anti-authoritarian, culturally pluralistic politics of the Sixties.

The Sixties is the name we now give to signify delegitimation of power. The Sixties has become a code word for transgressions of the normal boundaries set in everyday life by the dominant culture. In education, the Sixties means more than open classrooms and a revival of Dewey’s progressive education. The Sixties also generated a cultural critique that sought to dismantle the traditional distinction between high and popular culture and to add to the curriculum formerly devalued genres such as science fiction and fantasy, mysteries and detective stories, films, popular and folk music.

At the same time, the Sixties also reinterpreted the authority of the traditional curriculum, revealing it as a relation of power that excluded and dispossessed women, workers, and non-mainstream cultures and traditions. The result, as Hirsch, Bloom, and Bennett are so acutely aware, has been a decentering of the curriculum, a diffusion of power that makes the structure of knowledge in education more pluralistic.

The Sixties is never mentioned by name in *Cultural Literacy*, but its cultural and political weight presses at the margins of Hirsch's discourse. (Bloom is more forthcoming in this respect; he dates his mission of saving Western thought from itself to the day black students—armed black students—took over an administration building at Cornell.) Hirsch's reticence, however, is important because it allows the Sixties to operate as an unspecified pretext for the need to return to traditional content in education. The Sixties looms just off the page as a floating world of permissiveness, rebellion, disrespect, anti-intellectualism—a set of images filtered through mass culture and the nation's selective memory.

One of the primary aims of the conservative restoration of the Eighties is to treat the infiltration of politics into the domain of culture as an aberration, bad manners from the Sixties, a divisive tactic we ought now to put behind us in order to get on with (or back to) business as usual. The call to restore traditional content to the center of the curriculum is really a thinly veiled call for a return to “normalcy”—to a time when cultural norms possessed an unchallenged legitimacy and all students learned a student monocultural tradition. Whether such a golden age ever actually existed sometime in the American past is questionable but beside the point. The discourse of educational crisis requires such a past to make its narrative coherent. Moreover, the fact that educators such as Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins argued in the Thirties for “Great Books” and a traditional curriculum or that postwar critics blamed America's “educational wasteland” on the “real life” emphasis of progressive education is likewise beside the point. The current discourse of crisis is not so much an attempt to put debates about the curriculum in perspective as an account of the cultural anxieties attached to education in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate period.

The cultural anxieties of the Eighties come in large part out of a deep-seated desire to restore American strength and stability—a desire, both shaken and intensified by defeat in Vietnam, to return

to the celebration in the Fifties of what Henry Booth Luce called “the American century.” Hirsch’s call for a return to “national literate culture” is an attempt to get beyond the guilt and the questioning of American power that followed Vietnam during the Carter years. One of its purposes is to resolve the national identity crisis brought about by the Vietnam war and exacerbated by Watergate and the Iranian hostage crisis. It fits into a wider conservative restoration by reassuring the public it is perfectly legitimate—in fact it is called for—to return “our” tradition to the center of the curriculum.

For Hirsch, to return “our” tradition to the center of the curriculum is also to remove it from the arena of political debate and cultural criticism. According to Hirsch, “there is no point in arguing about . . . the whole system of widely shared information and associations” that make up the “national vocabulary” of cultural literacy. “They are our national givens, our starting points” (103). Hirsch sees his role as a “descriptive lexicographer,” a dictionary-maker assembling a usable list of cultural information. The decision to include or exclude particular items in the national vocabulary is not normative, Hirsch claims, because after all it is not himself but “history [which] has decided what those elements are” (107) that belong on the list in *Cultural Literacy*. Here is Hirsch’s most important conservative achievement: he reinvests authority in a problematized tradition by appealing to the inevitability of the past. For Hirsch, the tradition that constitutes cultural literacy is simply there, a *fait accompli* shaped by the implacable movement of history, legitimized by its very givenness. National literate culture confronts us with the force of nature: all we can do is recognize and name it, turn it into a list and teach it.

The real problem with cultural literacy, then, is not just, as a number of Hirsch’s critics hold, that the list is ethnocentric, class-biased, male-dominated, and chauvinistic. It is indeed all these things, as is the version of history Hirsch codifies. The problem rather concerns Hirsch’s attempt to locate a national culture in a transcendent, self-evident realm beyond politics. Hirsch tries to resolve the current educational crisis through a discourse that renaturalizes “our” tradition and authorizes it by the historical weight of self-evidence. It’s not so much what he has put in or left out that matters. More troublesome is the fact that the authority Hirsch ascribes to cultural literacy is above criticism. What cultural literacy threatens to teach students is more than a list of items of cultural information. It

threatens to teach them that the past possesses a kind of inevitability that makes the present the only way things could have turned out. And the problem is that puts the unequal social order we live in out of the question—a matter simply of what happened.

II.

“What we have to see,” Raymond Williams argues, “is not just ‘a tradition’ but a *selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present” (115). Tradition, according to Williams, is not just the inert stuff carried along by the glacial movement of history. Instead, it is an “aspect of *contemporary* social and cultural organization” (116). The tradition of a national culture, from Williams’ perspective, cannot be determined, as it is in Hirsch’s account, by the invisible hand of history. Tradition results rather from a concrete relationship of social forces, from the political struggles and cultural critiques of actual men and women. Traditions are made, not inherited. They are ideological formations, constructed in the present to produce the past we desire. The fact that Hirsch has to reestablish groundwork and give reasons for his version of a national culture shows how political his enterprise really is. Writing the cultural literacy list is not a neutral descriptive act, as Hirsch would like us to believe. It is a rhetorical one, to convince a broad audience that his version of the past is credible and legitimate. If anything, Hirsch’s argument for cultural literacy politicizes the issue of the curriculum by raising the question of what version of the past we should teach.

Hirsch’s version of a “shaping past” retells a classless tale of progress, democracy, and equal opportunity that is central to the ideology of the modern liberal state. According to Hirsch, all the great nations in Europe and North America required a standardized written language, wide-spread literacy, and a national vocabulary of cultural knowledge to insure communication within wider economic and social order and to consolidate centralized political authority. The spread of literacy and a national language through mass education was an especially important strategy the nation-builders of the eighteenth and nineteenth century deployed to uproot local dialects and traditions and to form a monolingual, monocultural citizenry. All of this takes place, at least in the liberal account of state formation, in the interest of the nation at large. Human freedom, individual rights, and a break from arbitrary tradi-

tional authority—and not class interests—are the universal goals that motivated the founding fathers. Likewise, the national cultures that took root during state formation, Hirsch says, are “socially progressive” because they “have helped to overcome class distinctions and barriers to opportunity. Historically, they have had a liberalizing and democratic effect” (91).

Now there can be no question that the rise of the modern democratic state marks a qualitative departure from older forms of political power—the domination of the court and the church, hereditary privilege, and an aristocratic ethos. But this does not mean that an impartial regime of dedicated public servants took over to administer the state for a sovereign people or that the national cultures and mass education systems in Europe and North America embody universal reason and innate longings for freedom. It means that the exercise of political power depends no longer strictly on force but on the consent of the governed as well. National culture and a national educational system have become key socializing agencies to elicit the allegiance of the governed by constituting individuals as citizens of the state. It is in part through a national language and a national culture that the modern state establishes its legitimacy and its right to rule. And by the same token, it is through a national language and a national culture that the governed learn to identify their own interests with those of the state.

As Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer argue, the rise of the modern state entails a “double making: of rules and ruled, of the rights of the former and the wrongs of the latter” (3). The national languages and cultural vocabularies that accompany state formation are not, as Hirsch depicts them, “value-neutral” tools “to support all the conflict values that arise in public discourse” (102). Rather national culture organizes the relationship between ruler and ruled and attempts to defuse the conflicts between them by establishing the routines and rituals, legends and lore that explain the hegemony of the state. The stories of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree and of Abraham Lincoln’s humble birth in a log cabin “owe their longevity,” not as Hirsch holds because of their “human universality” but because they are part of a larger ideology of national virtue and the rise of the common man. They underwrite a particular form of state power.

The view I am counterposing to Hirsch’s sees national culture not as a neutral vocabulary that makes communication possible but

as a collective misrepresentation of the workings of state formation and the hegemony of a ruling class. The “secret” of national language and culture, as Noelle Bissret suggests, is that the ascendant middle class becomes in effect “the social referent for the gradual reorganization of signifiers” (67). As language and culture came to be seen not as aspects of a cosmic hierarchy but as expressions of the human mind, the rising middle class became the point of reference and ideological norm around which linguistic codes and social categories were organized. Accordingly, when the secularizing forces of the eighteenth and nineteenth century said the word “man,” they meant white bourgeois males. “Man,” in fact, was a misrepresentation, a generalization of one class’s self-definition—as freely constituted and discoursing subjects, propertied citizens, the patriarch and his sons. To be anything else—to a woman, a worker, a black slave, an American Indian—was to be different, disenfranchised, excluded, and marked linguistically. National culture is simply the culture which the white propertied classes—the hidden referent of cultural and linguistic practice—experiences as its own. For women and the subordinate classes and races, national culture and the whole symbolic scheme of what it means to be human and a citizen were, and to a large extent remain, alien, an external imposition and a means of social and political discipline. In short, they explain what counts—not just, as Hirsch says, what one needs to know but how one needs to be.

If, as Hirsch says, cultural literacy is the “common currency for social and economic exchange,” it is nonetheless not a transparent medium. It takes its meaning from a common standard of value that names ruler and ruled, and it sustains the deeply rooted inequalities in the relations of power and exchange. National culture is not, as Hirsch argues, a melting pot of contributions from various classes and ethnic groups. It is a form of cultural practice that shapes subjects and makes Americans—or at least some Americans—in its own image. The failure of schooling to acculturate all Americans reveals the gap between the stated and latent functions of American education. This, of course, is precisely the gap Hirsch wants to bridge by cultural literacy. But what he misses altogether is the critical point that the acculturative failure of American schooling shows ironically that the system works, that it incorporates some and excludes others, constitutes rulers and ruled, and organizes all in relationships around one hegemonic social referent. When Hirsch said recently that “I’m

certainly willing to put in Crazy Horse and Harriet Tubman if people want that" ("Author Sets Up Foundation to Create 'Cultural Literacy' Tests." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 5 August 1987: 2), he makes it clear where they would go: marginalized, on the fringes of the cultural literacy list. Put briefly, we can rename cultural literacy for what it is: a play of power that marks difference in the social and cultural order.

III.

Once we rename cultural literacy as the problem of power, we can understand more clearly exactly what its attraction is to the reading public and segments of the educational community. As I've suggested, Hirsch reasserts the authority of "our" tradition to determine the content of what many now consider to be a hopelessly fragmented curriculum. This is reassuring to many, especially to parents, because the fragmentation of the curriculum not only de-centered traditional structures of knowledge, it also unleashed powerful social forces that turned the curriculum into a kind of ongoing negotiation between students and teachers about what was to be taught and learned. If the schools are often caricatured as places where permissive teachers try to entertain self-indulgent students with science fiction and courses on rock 'n' roll, curricular fragmentation also means that the authority of the curriculum and the cultural tradition it rests upon can no longer be taken for granted. In effect, power has started to leak out of the system and come into common view for all to see.

"Power," as Michel Foucault says, "is neither good nor bad in itself. It's something perilous" (cited in Gandel 129). Cultural literacy is notable for registering the dangers and power leaks inherent in the breakdown of the traditional curriculum. True to the genre of educational crisis, Hirsch foresees anarchy and cultural disintegration as the result when power flows out of its traditional locus. Cultural literacy, in this regard, is a strategic move to contain the flow of power by reconcentrating it in traditional forms of knowledge. What I think many find compelling about cultural literacy is that it promises to stop the leaks before things get out of hand and teachers and students decide to exercise power in their own names for their own purposes. One could, for example, see the breakdown of the traditional curriculum not just as a source of cultural anxiety but as an opportunity to empower teachers and students to look

critically at the whole enterprise of schooling, to turn Hirsch's call for cultural literacy into a call for critical literacy that would ask how "our" tradition took on its current shape, what authority underwrites it, and whose interests it serves.

So the problem finally is not in Hirsch's list. As distracting as the list has been to Hirsch's critics, more is at stake. By portraying John Dewey as an opponent of book learning and an advocate of education through direct personal experience, Hirsch sets up a straw man and throws us off the track. It is useful, for instance, to know that the experimental Dewey School in Chicago around the turn of the century was not restricted to a "content-neutral curriculum." In fact, students started at the age of seven to study the historical development of humanity and continued throughout their education at the Dewey School. If examined closely, the content of Dewey's curriculum resembles Hirsch's program for cultural literacy and would, I think, satisfy any of the neoconservative critics of the lack of historical studies in present-day schooling. Hirsch's real differences reside elsewhere, in the goals he and Dewey emphasize in the study of history and cultural literacy. For Hirsch, cultural literacy is a means of socialization—to re-center power, resolve cultural anxieties, and make the system function more smoothly by acculturating all Americans into a common language and heritage. For Dewey, on the other hand, the goal is the development of social imagination through collective group activity—not just of learning the past but of consulting historical experience as a way to act in the present. From this perspective, the point is not to resolve the cultural anxieties that result from a problematized tradition but to use the gaps in tradition and the leaks of power to reflect critically on the historical moment we find ourselves living in—to learn how to make our own history. Such a program of educational reform can hardly be called "content-neutral" or "formalistic." But it is, I think, a subversive, emancipatory, and deeply sensible response to the current neoconservative discourse of crisis.

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