

What Are Schools For?

**Holistic Education in
American Culture**

Ron Miller

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Contents

Preface to the Third Edition	iv
Introduction	1

Part One: Cultural Roots of American Education

Chapter 1. Themes of American Education	6
Chapter 2. Education in Early America	20
Chapter 3. Education in the Modern Age	44

Part Two: Holistic Critiques of American Education

Chapter 4. Education for a Postmodern Age	68
Chapter 5. Pioneers of Holistic Education	87
Chapter 6. John Dewey and Progressive Education	121
Chapter 7. Imported Holistic Movements	149
Chapter 8. The Education Crisis: 1967-1972	173
Chapter 9. Education for Human Potential	190
Chapter 10. Goals 2000: Triumph of the Megamachine.	204
Chapter 11. Education for the Twenty-First Century	212
Bibliography	219

Preface to the Third Edition

This new edition addresses the literature on holistic and postmodern education that has appeared since I originally researched *What Are Schools For?* as a doctoral dissertation in the late 1980s. A great deal of fine scholarly work has been done on spirituality, ecology, epistemology and culture in the past ten years that simply was not available before. In addition, my own thinking has matured considerably, and my own perspective has expanded significantly, as I have encountered more varieties of scholarly work, become involved myself in the holistic education movement, and observed the direction that national educational policy has taken in the last several years.

What Are Schools For? was an early attempt to make sense of the emerging transition from modern to postmodern ways of thinking about society and education. As a graduate student in my 20s I was not familiar with “postmodernism” but had experienced this transition in my own young, intellectual development. I was frustrated by the contradiction between the inspiring ideas of the new culture, which I had encountered in my studies of humanistic psychology and my training as a Montessori educator, and the strong resistance to these ideas in the prevailing culture during the Reagan years. My research was unconventional in that it did not focus on any one specific topic or literature, but looked broadly at the social and intellectual history of American education to find answers to my own sense of frustration. I was satisfied to be able to portray a “big picture” of cultural and countercultural themes in education. This had not been done before, and *What Are Schools For?* was, I think, a legitimate contribution to the literature; it has been used as a textbook in several

courses on educational foundations and I am often told that it stimulates thoughtful questions and discussions.

As my thinking matured, though, I came to see that the explanatory ideas I had picked up from the holistic literature of the 1980s (for example, the notion of “paradigm shifts”) were not sufficient to address the complexity of the cultural, political and economic crisis of our age. Above all, I now understand that the modern age is not about to be eclipsed by some “holistic paradigm”; there does seem to be a postmodern age coming, but it is far more problematic than the “new paradigm” thinkers admit. The ecological/ spiritual vision that holistic thinkers promote is one possible component of a new culture; I continue to share this vision and will continue working on its behalf. However, I do not think that, by itself, it is going to solve all the social, political, economic or even educational problems of our time. We have a lot of work to do, in every arena of culture, to gradually create a more compassionate, democratic, life-affirming, ecologically sustainable society. Holistic educators need to work together with activists and scholars from many different communities and perspectives if we are to achieve the transformation of which we dream.

In this revised edition, I have replaced the original Chapter Four (“The Holistic Paradigm in Education”) with an entirely new essay on “Education for a Postmodern Age.” I’ve added two new chapters (Nine and Ten) that reflect on developments in holistic and mainstream education during the past ten years. (Some of the historical material in Chapter Nine was originally part of “The Holistic Paradigm in Education.”) Finally, I have made major and minor revisions in most other parts of the book.

When I first pursued the research for this book, I worked alone. I did not know of anyone else asking similar questions, and I rarely came across authors who addressed them. But now, ten years later, I can gladly acknowledge the inspiration, support and encouragement I’ve received from numerous colleagues, in particular Kathleen Kesson, Jeffrey Kane, Jack Miller, Aostre Johnson, David Purpel, and the late James Moffett. I have also been encouraged by conversations and correspondence with Don Oliver, Douglas Sloan, Patrick Shannon, Lois Bridges, David Orr, Tom Del Prete, Rachael (Shelley) Kessler, Parker Palmer, David Conrad, Alex Gerber, David Marshak, Lynn Stoddard, Sambhava and Josette Luvmour, Dayle Bethel in Japan, and David Dufty in Australia. Several people in the alternative school and homeschooling movements have

been my friends and colleagues for years now, including Jerry Mintz, John Taylor Gatto, Mary Leue, Pat Farenga, and Chris Mercogliano. I also want to acknowledge two contemporary visionaries who are carrying on the work I write about in this book — Phil Gang and Ed Clark — and Charles Jakiela, a dedicated publisher who has kept my books alive. I've worked with numerous other good people and been inspired by many other good books, and am sorry I cannot name them all here.

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(Birthplace of John Dewey)
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Introduction

American education is in turmoil. For the past fifteen years, leading politicians, corporate executives, journalists, academics and foundations have loudly and urgently insisted that our schools are failing to train good enough workers and citizens. The critics demand more “excellence,” more “accountability,” and higher test scores. Governors and legislatures have stepped in to mandate more rigorous curricula and more disciplined school policies and practices. The federal government has established national educational goals and called for national educational standards. Meanwhile, public education is under attack from disgruntled taxpayers, free-market conservatives, and religious groups; homeschooling has grown from an insignificant (and generally illegal) practice into a mass movement; and educators are bombarded constantly by new innovations and ideas, such as magnet schools, charter schools, “whole language,” “multiple intelligences,” multicultural and Afrocentric curricula, portfolio assessment, emotional literacy, ecological literacy, the multiage classroom, and an endless stream of others.

Most of the political and ideological interests struggling for control of American education share some basic assumptions about the meaning and purpose of schooling in modern society. They assume that schools exist to transmit a certain body of knowledge, and a certain set of values, to young people. They assume that the community, or the state, has the right, indeed the obligation, to discipline children’s minds and abilities into occupations deemed useful to society. And for the most part, they assume that the economy is the central institution of modern life, and hence that outfitting young people for employment is the dominant purpose of education. The different interest groups disagree strongly over which body of knowledge and values should be transmitted, which activities are most useful, and which skills are most needed for economic success, but they do not quarrel over these basic assumptions.

The purpose of this book is to deconstruct these assumptions, to step back from the ongoing conflicts to ask, from a moral, spiritual and philosophical perspective, what the aims of education really ought to be: *What are schools for?* In the first part of the book, I demonstrate why American culture supports certain assumptions about the purpose of education. In a nation of diverse ethnic, religious, and ideological perspectives, whose values and beliefs does schooling represent, and why? The first three chapters offer a concise but critical summary of the social and intellectual history of American education. Over the last few decades, educational historians have provided a detailed, comprehensive analysis of the many political and social forces that formed our system of schooling. It is now well understood that American education is not simply democracy in action, as we had previously been assured by apologists for the system; we now recognize that Horace Mann and other founders of modern public schooling had an ideological agenda that combined some democratic elements with a host of elitist, nativist, moralist, and technocratic views that do not serve a democratic society well. This agenda continues to haunt education in our society, and we need to examine it critically and decide whether some elements of it ought to be transformed or discarded.

My perspective as an historian is the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. Thus, I am not as interested in the politics or mechanics of public schooling as an institution, so much as in the cultural context of education. I have sought to understand how schools reflect the prevailing worldview of American society — the basic, and largely implicit, epistemological and moral assumptions that guide the formation of social practices and institutions. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) and other scholars have emphasized that culture is essentially a system of meaning; it is the way that a social group defines the scope of reality, nature, and human possibility. Phenomenological and postmodern thought hold that human beings do not perceive an objective world and then make up different cultural stories about it; rather, we perceive the world through cultural lenses, and literally experience different realities according to the culturally conditioned meanings inherent in perception. Psychologist Charles Tart (1986) has spoken of this socially shaped reality as “consensus consciousness” or “consensus trance.” To “deconstruct” cultural assumptions means to step back and deliberately examine the cultural shaping of meaning, making explicit what is usually

taken for granted, and acknowledging that there are other valid versions of reality.

I believe we can understand why schooling serves certain ideologies, and not others, by examining the cultural themes that have defined the meaning of “education” in modern American society. In the first part of this book, I will suggest that five themes seem particularly influential in the evolution of American schools: (1) A particular religious worldview that may be referred to as a “Calvinist” or “Puritan” theology; (2) A fascination with the power of science and technology based on the reductionistic, mechanistic thinking of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon; (3) A restrained democratic ideology that celebrates freedom and individualism but within definite boundaries of social discipline; (4) Capitalism — an economic system that emphasizes competition, meritocracy, and the protection of self-interest; (5) Nationalism — the belief that the state is somehow the sacred guardian of cultural ideals. Historians of modern culture (e.g., Rifkin 1991) have shown how these themes are intertwined and mutually reinforcing; feminist scholars have suggested that the theme of patriarchy runs through all these facets of the modern worldview. Together, they form a coherent, integrated, and very solidly established “consensus consciousness” that has selected particular forms of education over other possible meanings.

In the second part of this book, I will introduce some of these rejected possibilities. Since the beginnings of modern schooling, various educators and thinkers have dissented from the consensus view and argued that it represents a tragically limited, one-dimensional conception of human learning and growth. Most of these dissenters have been ignored or dismissed as sentimental romantics because they speak of children’s hidden powers and see education as a discipline of freedom and self-expression rather than as an agent of the state and the economic system. Few historians of education have taken these dissenters seriously or examined the continuity and coherence of their ideas across two centuries. In recent years, the emergence of a postmodern perspective known as holism enables us to reinterpret these romantic, Transcendentalist, anarchist, progressive and other radical educators and see them, not as isolated cranks, but as perceptive critics of modernity who happened to be years ahead of their time. They were not simply “child-centered” educators, but cultural dissidents who saw that the worldview of modern America has, through education, suppressed the most vital, soulful, creative energies of human growth. Starting in Chapter Four, I will explain

how holistic thought provides a critical perspective for recognizing this element of educational dissent.

This book aims to provide a substantial intellectual foundation for holistic education. On the one hand, it is grounded in extensive research in the social and intellectual history of American education and recent writing on educational theory, cultural history, systems theory and ecology, spirituality and epistemology. I want to demonstrate that holistic education is not merely a romantic, New Age fantasy but a coherent and significant theoretical perspective. On the other hand, I do not write as a detached observer of educational dissent but as a passionate advocate. I believe that the modern world is in crisis and that the reductionist worldview of our age is obsolete and inadequate. I believe that modern schooling is a spiritually devastating form of social engineering that is hostile to human values and democratic ideals, especially now that our nation is embarking on a crusade to standardize teaching and learning. I think we have a great deal to learn from the romantics and rebels whom the guardians of culture have silenced for two hundred years. They are voices of the human spirit, calling us back to a profound wisdom that we in the modern age have forgotten.

Part One

Cultural Roots of American Education

Chapter One

Themes of American Culture

Holistic education is a countercultural movement seeking radical, far-reaching changes in American society. The holistic critique is not a class conflict in the Marxist model, nor is it rooted in ethnic, racial, or religious tensions. Holism is, literally, a search for wholeness in a culture that limits, suppresses, and denies wholeness.

At first, this claim appears extreme. Americans do not commonly view their culture in this light: We honor our nation as the world's standard-bearer of freedom, democracy, opportunity and personal fulfillment. The Statue of Liberty, the Declaration of Independence, and other national icons convey the belief that here, as nowhere else, human beings are free to pursue their happiness, their dreams, their own paths of growth. Those who are dissatisfied with "the American way of life" have generally been viewed as unrealistic romantics, unappreciative of the precious freedom we enjoy in this country.

Certainly, let us appreciate this freedom, and the heritage of political vision and battlefield heroism that made it a reality. At the same time, however, let us understand that the full truth of American culture is far more complex and ambiguous than our national mythology will admit. Let us understand, as well, that cultures need to evolve or else they stagnate, because the human mind continues to evolve and expand. Ideologies and social institutions that arose to serve specific purposes in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries need to be reexamined, reapplied to the conditions of an emerging postmodern age. We can celebrate our heritage of freedom and opportunity, but we must not celebrate it blindly.

In specific ways, American culture has failed to live up to its own ideals. Some of these failures are blatant, and are, by now, widely acknowledged. Slavery was accepted in the compromises that formed the Constitution, and racism has remained a stubborn disease of the American spirit. Women — over half the population — were excluded from political and economic power for much of our history. And recent generations of historians have documented how truly unjustly large numbers of human beings — such as indigenous people, Asian and non-Protestant European immigrants, and unskilled workers — have been treated in this country. Clearly, enough opportunity and hope existed (and still exist), in comparison to many other parts of the world, to continue drawing millions of immigrants to this land, but we can no longer ignore the human suffering and cultural consequences of the frequent and flagrant betrayal of democratic values throughout our history.

The educational dissidents whom I call “holistic” educators were concerned about these failures of American democracy, but they are of interest primarily because they also perceived more subtle cultural flaws. As educators, they recognized that American culture rests on an implicit image of the human being and implicit assumptions about the human relationship to nature and the cosmos that prevent the expansion and evolution of human capacities. They recognized that entire dimensions of the personality — aesthetic, expressive, and spiritual dimensions — are chronically undernourished, if not actively suppressed, by schooling and other childrearing practices. In various ways, they pointed out that wholeness is a vitally important value for human happiness and fulfillment, and desperately needs to be reclaimed. Indeed, they have repeatedly argued that the more blatant problems of American democracy are directly related to, if not rooted in, these more subtle, epistemological and spiritual problems.

Although most of these educators (and their few intellectual allies) spoke out with passion and eloquence, they were most often treated as romantic cranks and either ignored or ridiculed. Few of them presented their critique in a systematic way; today, from the perspective of social and intellectual history and a more explicit awareness of the processes of culture, we can describe the broad cultural themes to which holistic educators have objected. We can see quite clearly why American education routinely handles children in ways that the dissident educators could not accept. The following summary of five cultural themes is not meant to be a definitive study of American culture, which is, of course, a com-

plex and multifaceted social reality, but it does suggest that educational ideas are rooted in certain dominant cultural assumptions.

“PURITAN” THEOLOGY

The colonies had been settled by an overwhelmingly Protestant population. Indeed, many colonists had emigrated from Europe in order to establish a more purely Christian society (according to their Calvinist theology) than they could find at home. These religious impulses have continued to pervade American culture: The “Great Awakening” of the mid-eighteenth century and the “Second Great Awakening” at the turn of the nineteenth were major cultural events that left a lasting impression on the evolution of American society. Historian Warren Susman (1984, 56) claims that

No analysis of American culture makes any sense if it fails to realize that this was from the start and largely remains a Protestant nation in which the role of religious ideology in the shaping of other ideological positions is key.

Other, more secular cultural themes, such as Enlightenment philosophy, commercial expansion, and political agitation also characterized late colonial and early national society. But as Susman argues, each of these themes shared important elements of the Protestant worldview, particularly the emphasis on individual moral and economic responsibility.

The Calvinist theology that the Puritans brought to New England was an essential ingredient of the emerging modern worldview. Medieval Christianity represented an organic form of society, in which individuals’ lives were regulated by ritual, myth, and participation in communal enterprises such as guilds. Each person had a destined position in society, and humanity had a secure position in the Great Chain of Being. The new capitalist, scientific worldview required liberation from such regularity. There were new worlds to explore, new resources and markets to exploit, new nations to build. Calvinist Protestantism accommodated these urges, but provided a rigorous moralism to keep humans’ unsavory impulses in check. The Puritan worldview was a particularly narrow and pessimistic view of nature and human nature; it allowed for personal ambition and enterprises so long as these were tempered by guilt, repentance, and pious recognition that worldly pursuits are ultimately worthless in comparison to the divine reality.

According to theologian Matthew Fox (1983), the Christian tradition has produced two profoundly opposed cosmologies. The “creation” tradition flourished in the organic religious society of the Middle Ages and found expression in the mystical visions of Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and others. This view saw God’s presence in all created things, and maintained that humans may participate directly in the ongoing creation of the cosmos through disciplines of compassion and artistic expression. However, says Fox, the cosmology of St. Augustine, which he calls the “Fall/ Redemption” theology, has proven to be more compatible with the “imperialist” institutions of church and state because it teaches that people cannot participate directly in divine reality, and need to be controlled and molded by those in authority. Calvinist Puritanism, although releasing the entrepreneurial energies of modern capitalism, compensated by insisting on strong theocratic control over human impulses.

This view has emphasized an utter separation between the material and spiritual realms — between natural and supernatural, profane and sacred, human and divine, person and God. The material world is “fallen,” meaning non-sacred; it is the realm of depravity and sin. Consequently, human nature is seen as a never-ending battle between the “fallen” state of our physical being and the elusive ideal of divine grace. In relation to the absolute perfection of the divine, the human being is, in the words of many an orthodox minister, a “poor worm.” To the Puritans, the person was by nature a seedbed of depravity and corruption, and in order to deny the personal, physical self, they practiced intense, guilt-inducing introspection (Bercovitch 1975, 15-23; Karier 1986; Roszak 1973, chap. 4; and Roszak 1978, 89-90).

According to historian Charles Leslie Glenn, this theology teaches that sin is an inborn “corruption of human nature cutting man off from God and from his own happiness” (1988, 48). This extreme Calvinist pessimism was challenged in the eighteenth century by the rising influence of secular rationalism and in the nineteenth century by romantic influences, and Glenn argues that these secular and romantic trends came to be embraced as the religion of American public education. (This is the basis for the fundamentalists’ complaint that the religion of “secular humanism” permeates the schools.) However, despite these liberalizing trends, “Fall/ Redemption” views of nature and human nature have remained embedded in American culture. First of all, secularization and public education did not extinguish the influence of Puritan ideas. Glenn

recognizes, in numerous references, that conservative sects were “greatly in the majority among the population” during the formative years of American culture; that “in fact evangelicalism was evolving and expanding rapidly;” that “powerful revival impulses ... were shaping American Protestantism;” and that religious leaders were confident “that they spoke for the nation.” Calvinist Protestantism continued then and continues now to be an active force in American culture (Glenn 1988, 150, 162, 182, 195).

Furthermore, the separation of human from divine, secular from sacred has remained a constant theme in American culture and had a strong influence on all the other major themes. Believing that human beings are cut off from the divine and are, instead, moved by innate evil impulses, American culture has become highly moralistic; it is commonly believed that a rigorous moral code, and vigilant enforcement of social mores, standards of behavior, and civil laws are all that stand in the way of social upheaval and anarchy. As some historians have observed, American politics and reform movements have traditionally defined social problems as problems of personal morality and discipline, and therefore have often failed to address the ideological or economic sources of social conflict. This moralistic approach has chronically prescribed religious authority and education rather than consider fundamental institutional change to remedy serious social problems.

This moralism is further reflected in the traditional Puritan attitude toward work and success. Work is seen as a necessary discipline of the naturally slothful human being. Therefore, those who undertake this discipline most diligently exhibit a superior moral status, and are consequently favored by material prosperity. Private property is, in this sense, sacred. Poverty — the absence of property — is not attributed to social factors (especially given the presumably open opportunities available to all) but is seen as the inevitable result of personal moral failure.

Another factor in Puritan religion is its emphasis on intellectual debate and interpretation (often literal interpretation) of scripture, creeds, and catechisms. It is true that various sects have sanctioned emotional conversion experiences and heartfelt moral sentiment, but American religion is not mystical and has relied more heavily on conceptual, verbal, and doctrinal paths to truth than upon those which are more subjective, aesthetic, or contemplative. This emphasis on authoritative texts and creeds has had a profound effect on the educational practices of our cul-

ture. When religious beliefs encourage a more personal or mystical communion with the divine, ideas of education are vastly different.

Finally, American Protestantism has always been charged with a sense of mission, a deeply held belief that America was the New Jerusalem, the “city upon a hill” which would bring forth God’s Kingdom on Earth. Robert Handy observes that “from the beginning American Protestants entertained a lively hope that someday the civilization of the country would be fully Christian” (Handy 1984, ix-x). Converting others in the national community was an urgent task; there was a sense that if they failed to build a holy commonwealth, God would judge them severely. When the western frontier was opened to massive migration in the nineteenth century, Protestant sects hastened to send ministers, Bibles, inspirational tracts, and circuit riders to the wilderness to ensure the perpetuation of Christian morality.

For this reason, we should be skeptical of the historical thesis that the frontier inspired a self-reliant democracy in the American character. The pioneers did not experience the frontier with innocent awe but through the filter of their Protestant worldview. In this view, the pioneers had to be even more vigilant than the settled kinsmen they left behind. Nature was a howling, Godless wilderness; the Indians were uncivilized pagans; the land existed to be tamed; and the community must be bound by a strict moral code or degenerate into lawlessness. Thus, while the frontier may have dissolved some of the pioneers’ previous class distinctions in an economic or social sense, it did not erase the moralistic Puritanism of their ancestors. American culture — on or off the frontier — has not encouraged true self-reliance in a moral or spiritual sense, because it disdains nature and so mistrusts an unconverted, uncontrolled, undisciplined human nature.

SCIENTIFIC REDUCTIONISM

In the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the “natural philosophy” of Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, and Newton became firmly established in Western thought. According to this view, nature is a system of lawful regularities, best understood through reason — the careful use of induction and deduction (ideally expressed through mathematics) — rather than subjective experience. Truth is not tested by personal revelation but by actual effectiveness in practical use. Knowledge of natural laws would give humankind power to control physical events — the highest aim of science. Applied to human affairs by Hobbes, Locke,

Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and others, the scientific worldview was a major underpinning of the republican vision which moved the American revolutionaries and founding fathers. In an important book, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, Yehoshua Arieli (1964, 110-111) says the Enlightenment taught that “man was capable of reshaping himself and his social life according to the dictates of reason and could reflect in his society the harmony of the laws which maintained the universe.”

In this sense, the scientific worldview offered a more progressive social philosophy and a more optimistic image of human nature than did Calvinist Protestantism. The Baconian-Cartesian movement was in part a response to the religious warfare that had torn Europe, a hope that a universally valid method of gaining truth would supplant endless doctrinal strife. Those who were most enthusiastic about the scientific worldview, such as Jefferson, Franklin, and Paine, argued that “unalienable” natural rights applied to all men, and thus called for a broadly democratic society with limited concentrations of political, social, or religious authority. The view that a rational scientific approach is the most authentic means for achieving a humane, democratic society was echoed over a century later in the thought of John Dewey and secular humanists and progressives.

But in a very important sense, the scientific revolution was not so much a repudiation of Protestantism as the other side of the Fall/Redemption coin. Scientism retained the religious dichotomy between matter and spirit. The material world is ruled by impersonal, amoral laws, not by any transcendent, self-creative purpose; the spiritual realm is wholly supernatural, and thus not the concern of science. The scientific emphasis on reason over subjective, mystical experience was an exaggeration, but not a rejection, of mainstream Puritan epistemology. The early scientists could — and did — pursue their rational approach towards nature while remaining devoutly religious in their personal and social beliefs. And except for the most implacable Biblical literalists, a religious American culture could accommodate and even complement the rise of scientism.

During the early, formative years of American culture, in social and political thought the secular view remained subordinate to the Protestant. Few of the founding fathers took the natural rights philosophy to its democratic extremes. In general, the ruling Federalists retained what Arieli calls a “Protestant nationalism” which was jealously

protective of public morality and order. The more radical followers of Enlightenment ideas such as Paine, who attacked Christianity directly, were unpopular, and the violence of the atheistic French Revolution gave conservatives a rallying cry for purging whatever influence the radicals did have. Some historians suggest that conservatives' horrified response to the French Revolution led directly to the wave of revivals that comprised the "Second Great Awakening." So even as the Enlightenment radical Jefferson was elected to the Presidency in 1800, American culture was reembracing Protestantism, delaying a more secular worldview for well over half a century.

But after the middle of the nineteenth century, the scientific worldview became more aggressive and pervasive. Religion began to share its central cultural role with a consuming scientific positivism; it was believed, with ever greater fervor, that the scientific method could solve all the riddles of the universe and all the problems of society. This echoed the hope of the Jeffersonian republicans — except that nineteenth century science, freeing itself from all religious concern, veered toward materialism, the belief that all reality is essentially physical matter (which is measurable and manipulable) without any spiritual, transcending force. It became more *mechanistic*, presuming that natural events are produced by lawful cause-and-effect relationships rather than any overarching purpose. And it became more reductionistic, seeking to explain phenomena by breaking everything into component parts and measuring the pieces. By the early twentieth century, even the human sciences had adopted these biases, and still today behavioral and quantitative approaches remain the preferred methods for studying human and social problems. As scientism has moved alongside religion as a dominant influence on American culture, the result for society, as we will see in Chapter Three, has been the "culture of professionalism," which is actually a serious erosion of the Jeffersonian democratic faith.

RESTRAINED DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY

Still, even before the rise of elitist professionalism, American culture had always harbored a tension between radical Jeffersonian ideals and far more conservative principles. Historians have debated which ideology was the most basic in the formation of American culture. Louis Hartz (1955) and "consensus" historians claimed that an individualistic liberalism, based on John Locke's ideas, pervades American culture; other historians, such as Gordon Wood (1969), have argued that the more

conservative ideals of classical republican virtue were very influential. Charles Beard and Progressive historians earlier in this century argued that the founding fathers were opportunistic businessmen. Clearly, there has been an ongoing conflict between conservative elements — represented by the Federalist, Whig, and Republican parties, which are oriented to commercial expansion, traditional morality, and obedient citizenship — and liberal elements — inspired by Jefferson, Jackson, and various populist movements, which tend to emphasize personal freedom and opportunity.

Although both tendencies are represented among mainstream, patriotic Americans, the differences between the conservative and liberal elements should not be taken lightly. These are different ideals of social order, based on different images of human nature. In conservative/republican thought, human excellence is limited to a select few, who naturally tend to rise to economic and social prominence and who should be entrusted with guiding the affairs of state and society. The masses, especially immigrant masses not schooled in national traditions, are often feared as subversive elements. Excessive liberty granted to individuals is seen as a dangerous threat to the social order. Therefore, freedom must go hand-in-hand with discipline. The welfare of the community — the common good — supersedes the personal freedom of the individual.

Liberal democratic ideology, on the other hand, argues that most (if not all) people have the potential to conduct their own lives and do not need to be controlled from above. If people were free from economic, social, and religious injustice, they would, willingly, be hard-working and moral citizens. While this ideology is arguably the majority, mainstream view of American culture (it is certainly the core of the American myth), there is no question but that it is held in check, and in certain periods seriously compromised, by the more conservative tradition. Throughout American history, large numbers of people, notably women, African-Americans, non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, native Americans, and children, have been denied the “natural rights” promised to them by the liberal ideology. Conservative attitudes toward poverty and other social problems, strongly influenced by Puritan Protestantism, tend to be moralistic rather than sympathetic toward those who fail to attain prosperity or power. As we will see, the ongoing tension between conservative and liberal interpretations of democracy is reflected, and has played a major part, in the development of American education.

CAPITALISM

American culture, however, has never accepted extreme doctrines of either the right or the left, because the core values of capitalism are shared by the vast majority. In fact, perhaps more than any other theme, it is capitalism that defines the identity of American culture. It is the almost unanimous acceptance of capitalist ideology — by the worker as well as the entrepreneur, by the followers of Jefferson and Jackson no less than those of Alexander Hamilton — which distinguishes the United States from most other nations. The vast majority of Americans eagerly defend capitalism both for its effectiveness (it has, after all, produced unprecedented material prosperity for the nation) as well as for its moral virtues (to a large extent capitalism does reward ingenuity, initiative, and effort, and the economic freedom it engenders is historically related to the political freedom offered by democratic government).

But in significant ways, capitalism also places limitations on human experience. As a worldview (not simply as an economic system), capitalism involves the belief that nature exists to serve human needs and wants; consequently inventiveness and audacity in taming nature are highly valued, and quality of life is measured in terms of how quickly raw nature is converted to human use — the gross national product. Furthermore, capitalism involves the belief that there are no inherent limits to human progress and comfort; therefore, the most ambitious and wealth-producing entrepreneurs are widely honored, and technological innovations are almost always welcomed. Another core belief is that in an open society there are no unfair barriers to opportunity; it is only one's own talent and initiative that determine one's status (the life of Franklin and the stories of Horatio Alger are thus important myths in American capitalism).

Capitalism as a worldview is based on meritocracy, that is, an almost unchecked competition between individuals for social and economic status. And the standards for measuring success are overwhelmingly materialistic; whole realms of human experience, notably the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual, do not count as qualifications for the job market or as emblems of achievement. Capitalism promotes individualism and self-assertion in social and economic terms, but places far less value on self-understanding, on critical intelligence, or spiritual discovery. Practicality and productivity are more important than contemplation or inner questing; meditative practices are disdained as “contemplating one's

navel." Intellectuals have long complained that American culture is "anti-intellectual" and hostile to the life of the mind; ruled by an unremitting competitiveness, American culture is suspicious of contemplation that does not demonstrate its immediate practicality. Just as the religious tone of the culture encourages practical moral discipline rather than mysticism, capitalism demands tangible results, not inward seeking or self-realization.

Capitalism is closely intertwined with the other themes of the American worldview as well, including the restrained democratic ideology of American culture. On one hand, capitalism does promise, and often provides, opportunities for social and economic advancement. Class distinctions are not imposed by law or custom; the meritocracy invites aspirations and achievement by anyone who is capable. Certainly there is truth in the Franklin/Alger myth. Yet it cannot be denied that the competition for wealth and status results in some highly undemocratic consequences. If clever entrepreneurs represent the heroic ideal of American culture, it is not surprising that we have robber barons and corporate raiders, men (generally white Protestants) with enormous concentrations of wealth and power. Today the richest 1% of the population control something like 30% of the national wealth. It is considered normal for a corporate executive to be paid a hundred or two hundred times what most of his employees make. This is far beyond the personal success to which Franklin or Alger's heroes aspired.

Under corporate capitalism, only a small number of people can reach this pinnacle of success, no matter how many people are talented or motivated to succeed. Capitalism preaches democracy for all, but clearly some people enjoy more actual democracy, in the form of more access to quality education, more influence on economic and political decisions, more freedom to pursue happiness and personal meaning, and more opportunities to acquire still further wealth.

This is not a call for a revolution or legislation to forcibly guarantee equality. But we should reconsider seriously the cultural beliefs that allow us to place such incredibly disproportionate values on the worth of entrepreneurial cleverness versus even the most diligent physical work, and which allow us to accept placidly such concentrations of wealth and leisure when over 20% of our nation's children are growing up in poverty. The point is that capitalism as a worldview does not sufficiently address the extreme effects of its cherished meritocracy. The conservative version of capitalism accepts these effects as perfectly natural; it assumes

that only a select few can actually attain the pinnacle of success because human nature is lazy and untrustworthy; those few who discipline themselves to achieve should be amply rewarded, and the mass of people should simply be content to share in the general prosperity by respecting private property and the rule of law. During the surge of corporate industrial expansion in the late nineteenth century, the doctrine of Social Darwinism was used to justify the extreme polarization of society; to some, natural law dictated the survival of the fittest, and it was considered healthy for society's failures to be weeded out altogether! (Hofstadter, 1955b).

The liberal version of capitalism has been more generous, asserting that there is room for everyone to succeed — if not a particular individual, then surely one's children. Society's major obligation, then, is to provide education in order to equalize economic and social opportunities. Significantly, the liberal capitalist view shares with the conservative the belief that social problems and cultural discontent are best solved by stimulating personal ambition and increasing individual opportunity, rather than by radically questioning the cultural values that may be their root cause. Consequently, the use of education as a panacea for social and cultural problems is a consistent pattern in American history.

One of the root cultural causes of modern social problems is that capitalism, in its materialist urge to control nature, is aligned with scientific reductionism and technocracy. This materialism is a major source of personal spiritual alienation and the disintegration of family and community life. All industrial age cultures share this faith in scientism and hence share its social problems, but in American culture, Protestant teachings give materialism (ironically enough) a distinctly religious fervor; the moral and vocational responsibility of the individual, the discipline of work and saving, and the sanctity of private property clearly distinguish capitalism from socialism, and they are especially pronounced in American culture. Historian Bernard Wisby (1968, 20) has observed that "the will for righteousness and will for success ... [a] complex play of moralism and materialism" have been strongly ingrained into the American character. I believe that a genuine concern for human potentials and their attainment must include a penetrating analysis of such a religiously sanctioned materialism.

NATIONALISM

Finally, an unusual urgency is given to all these cultural themes because they are so completely tied to national identity. Unlike European countries, in which national loyalty is inherited through deep-seated historical, mythical, religious and artistic traditions, to be “American” is to overcome such given distinctions in order to identify oneself deliberately with a certain body of ideals: the American worldview, or as it has frequently been called, the “American way of life.” In the writings and speeches of early American leaders, a deeply felt conviction was expressed again and again:

This society was unique, absolutely different from all the historic societies. Only here had the universal rights of man been translated into a living reality. (Arieli 1964, 78-79)

This self-righteous nationalism has had positive as well as negative connotations. Since European societies were considered to be corrupted by tyranny of church and state, by poverty, ignorance, and superstition, emerging American nationalism was a secular restatement of the Protestant urge to create a holy commonwealth, a model society to inspire the rest of the world. Early Americans, religious and rationalist both, were exhilarated by the sense of being on the verge of a monumental human experiment. Paine captured this feeling in *Common Sense*:

We have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. (in Arieli 1964, 72)

American nationalism has, ever since, had an aggressive, missionary tone. According to the American worldview, no other nation offers humanity a better example to follow.

The negative meaning of nationalism, however, is a nagging insecurity. Other nations have ancient traditions and to be a citizen is to have a lifelong motherland and a secure national identity. Americans, however, are people who have surrendered their ancestral ties to come to the new world. They need to prove their loyalty to a set of abstract ideals. Seen in this light, assertive nationalism is a defensive gesture to reassure Americans that they do, indeed, belong to the national community. Furthermore, especially in the early years, the ideals themselves needed to be

proven; not since antiquity had citizens forged a successful republic. The American experiment was not an assured success. As a result of this insecurity, American culture has generally mistrusted foreign cultures and periodically resorted to xenophobic crusades against immigrants and dissidents. This has taken the form of federal laws, political parties, outright violence, and the notorious Congressional “unAmerican activities” investigations. And, of course, education has been a major weapon in these crusades.

I would argue that these five themes — Puritan theology, scientific reductionism, restrained democratic ideology, capitalism, and nationalism — are defining characteristics of the common, middle class American worldview, the “consensus consciousness” through which most Americans interpret their experience of the world. If there is a common thread which ties these themes together, it is the need for social discipline. Despite the emphasis on “liberty,” “freedom,” “independence,” and “individualism” in the American myth, the dominant worldview actually does not trust the spontaneity and self-expressive creativity of the individual. The proper beliefs and proper ways of acting which lead to social and economic success are predominantly moral, rational, entrepreneurial, and “professional”; in short, they impose rational discipline on the deeper, more impulsive, intuitive, mystical, and emotional aspects of human nature.

Certainly all cultures impose discipline and a degree of conformity; in many ways American culture is individualistic — even atomistic — in comparison to more traditional cultures. But this individualism is almost exclusively economic, competitive, and superficial. The issue here is American culture’s pervasive mistrust of the deeper subjective facets of human experience. Specifically, American culture does not value the truly spiritual element of human life. By “spiritual” I mean a receptivity to the more subtle, interior aspects of existence: a search for deeper meaning to existence than is offered by the intellect or by social convention alone. The American worldview imposes a moralistic, materialistic, rational discipline on this inward receptivity; in this culture, the truly spiritual is dismissed as “mystical” and “romantic.” Holistic thinking is an effort to regain this essential element of our being.

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