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5 Cultural Literacy Reconsidered

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Recently a student in an American high school was asked on a test who Socrates was. He answered that Socrates was an Indian chief. Whether this incident is apocryphal is difficult to say. It does have the ring of authenticity: One can imagine the hapless student, in desperate search for an answer, associating Socrates with Seneca, the ancient Roman philosopher, then connecting Seneca to the Indian tribe of the same name. In any case the story is a favorite of former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Chester E. Finn, Jr., and has been used repeatedly to illustrate the cultural illiteracy of American students and to dramatize the urgency of restoring the nation's cultural knowledge. In fact, a formidable educational reform movement has developed, aimed at improving the teaching of American culture within the schools.

These ideas about public education, if carried forward, have strong implications for the school curriculum at both the elementary and secondary levels and for the content of standardized achievement tests at all levels. That is, both the content of what is now taught and tested for would be changed quite substantially if the schools were to focus on cultural literacy. In this chapter we will examine the core ideas of cultural literacy with a view to assessing their merit.

The phrase "cultural literacy" was popularized by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987b), in his best-selling book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.* The book has been lauded by top government officials as critical to the future of American education and lambasted by critics as "educational trivial pursuit." Hirsch published a sequel, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988c), and his organization, the Foundation for Cultural Literacy, also has been developing special tests. Another highly influential book about cultural literacy in higher education, Allan Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students,* sold more than 650,000

hardback copies, a phenomenal number, and *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* by Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, Jr. (1987), has also enjoyed popular success. All of these books have received considerable media attention, but we will concentrate here on Hirsch's ideas.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL LITERACY

Hirsch (1983) contends that there is no doubt that our national cultural literacy has declined. The chief culprit is the pluralism of the school curriculum, which has diluted the content of the traditional English and history courses. Educators, afraid of attacks by minority groups accusing them of cultural imperialism, have promulgated a content-free curriculum focused exclusively upon formal cognitive skills. "Literacy is not just a formal skill; it is also a political decision. . . . Literacy implies specific contents as well as formal skills" (p. 162). This essential "canonical knowledge" Hirsch labels "cultural literacy."

In his view the United States is becoming so fragmented as to lose its coherence as a culture. He proposed a National Board of Education that would define broad lists of suggested literary works for the schools to teach. If such a national board could not be set up, other organizations should provide recommendations, including a lexicon of words and phrases that high school graduates should know and that could serve as a guide to instruction. Currently only the Scholastic Aptitude Test provides such guidance, Hirsch thought. "Is the Educational Testing Service our hidden National Board of Education? Does it sponsor our hidden national curriculum? If so, the ETS is rather to be praised than blamed" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 168). Hirsch later retreated from this position somewhat: "The common background knowledge required for literacy does not depend on specific texts" (Hirsch, 1986, p. 1). Perhaps the point Hirsch is trying to make is that "canonical knowledge" may be arrived at through a number of means, only one of which may be by reading a set of prescribed texts (Hirsch, 1984, 1987b, 1988b).

In 1987 Hirsch presented his full rationale: "The civic importance of cultural literacy lies in the fact that true enfranchisement depends upon knowledge, knowledge upon literacy, and literacy upon cultural literacy" (1987b, p. 12). In his view, reading requires background or "world knowledge"—cultural literacy. And this background knowledge is national in character rather than either local or international. The false doctrines of cultural pluralism and educational formalism were preventing our national culture from being taught, and the schools must teach specific national cultural content in the early grades.

There are four major strands to Hirsch's rationale. First, reading literacy depends upon background knowledge, and, similarly, getting along in society depends upon cultural literacy, that is, knowing the culture one lives in; second, modern industrial nations depend upon the development of homogeneous national cultures; third, traditional American pluralism does not preclude the necessity for conformity to the national culture; and fourth, education has fallen victim to romantic formalism and misguided pluralism, which has led to a diluted school curriculum and consequent cultural fragmentation. The solution is to reestablish the national culture as the core of the curriculum. Hirsch concludes his book by presenting a list of about 6,000 terms that comprise the national culture and that should be taught in the schools.

In the first argument Hirsch relies heavily upon research conducted by Anderson and his colleagues at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois. In brief, this research demonstrates that specific background knowledge, called a *schema,* is critical to reading a given text. For example, in a study often cited by Hirsch, Americans reading about an American wedding understand the text much better than East Indians do, and East Indians understand the text about an Indian wedding much better. Hence, reading ability depends upon preexisting knowledge. The work by Anderson and his colleagues is highly regarded within the educational research community and is leading to significant changes in reading instruction in the schools.

There are problems with Hirsch's argument, however. Hirsch draws conclusions beyond the research studies: "What distinguishes good readers from poor ones is simply the possession of a lot of diverse, task-specific information" (p. 61). It is one thing to say that background information plays an important role in reading, consistent with the research, and quite another to say that such specific information is everything, which the research does not. One of Hirsch's own examples calls his extrapolation into question. He argues that master chess players recognize and employ chess schemata to organize and guide their play, which seems reasonable. However, it would seem highly unlikely that teaching a list of chess terms and concepts to chess novices would transform the novices into master chess players. Whatever chess schemata consist of, surely they are not simply lists of chess terms. Rather the novice must learn schemata by playing chess extensively and studying it intensively. The knowledge of the master entails much more than lists of specific knowledge. That is, schemata are different from a list of terms.

Hirsch's argument is by analogy: Reading ability is to reading schemata (as chess playing is to chess schemata) as succeeding in life is to achieving

cultural literacy (cultural schemata). But the analogy does not hold very well when cultural literacy is defined as simple knowledge of a list of specific terms. What one might reasonably conclude is that reading ability is dependent in part on reading schemata, and that chess playing is dependent on chess schemata, and that knowledge of a list of specific cultural terms may help one do well in society but that cultural knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing well. Our opinion is that cultural knowledge is extremely desirable to have but that it is not necessary to or sufficient for "success in life," as that term is normally understood in American society. The fact that the upper social classes have more cultural knowledge in general and the lower classes do not is a relationship of correlation, not of cause and effect. So in our judgment Hirsch pushes his argument too far, although we would agree that cultural knowledge helps one interpret the social world.

It is also the case that Hirsch ignores the implications of his own argument as well as the research on the social context of learning. Eisenhart and Cutts-Dougherty in Chapter 3 survey the substantial research by anthropologists on how and what students learn in a particular context. Learning to read, or learning anything else, is highly dependent on the student's cultural background, as Hirsch asserts, but the anthropologists arrive at the conclusion that the student's own cultural background itself must be taken into account if the student is to learn. To use Hirsch's own example, teaching American students about an East Indian wedding will be much more successful if one recognizes the conceptions about weddings that the students already have. In other words, their own cultural backgrounds must be taken into consideration. Hirsch draws the opposite conclusion, that the students are culturally deficient and one must ignore their culture.

NATIONAL CULTURE

The second strand of Hirsch's rationale is an argument asserting the criticality of a national language and a national culture for the development of the modern industrial nation. He contends that a modern nation must have both a single national language and a homogeneous national culture. Hirsch first develops an argument for the necessity of a national language, essentially a case for standards: "Inside a national border, education helps to keep the national language stable by holding it to standards that are set forth in national dictionaries, spelling books, pronunciation guides, and grammars" (p. 71). Modern industrial societies do indeed require their citizenry to be literate, but that nations also deliberately "fix" their national languages is more contentious. The fact that the British, Australians, and Americans

understand one another's dialects may have more to do with the pervasiveness of the mass media than with national governments' establishing language standards and holding their citizens to them.

Hirsch's account of how modern languages have become standardized is rather idiosyncratic. In his view, there is an international vocabulary, a national vocabulary, and a local vocabulary. The national language must be standardized by central authorities' imposing a particular dialect upon the general population in an arbitrary manner. "The fact of a common standard is much more important than the intrinsic character of the standard chosen" (p. 79). And regardless of the character of the accepted standards, such as the notorious inconsistency of English spelling, "It is much better to stick to them, whatever their intrinsic drawbacks" (p. 81). The idea that we must always accept what we are given runs throughout Hirsch's work.

Hirsch also seems to equate national language with written language, as opposed to oral dialects, though he discusses written and oral language interchangeably at times. Finally, and most importantly, "But in many other respects national languages are distinct from oral dialects. Among several distinctive features that make them unique linguistic phenomena, . . . one . . . is especially significant for the subject of this book: every national language is a conscious construct that transcends any particular dialect, region, or social class" (p. 82). In his view, national languages are the province of *all* the people of the country and do not disadvantage those from particular nonstandard dialects.

From this view of how national languages develop, Hirsch then takes a key intellectual leap: "What may be less obvious is that every national culture is similarly contrived. It also transcends dialect, region, and social class and is partly a conscious construct" (pp. 82–83). He posits a "national culture" development analogous to national language development. "For nation builders, fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation" (p. 84). In other words, the national culture must be fixed, homogeneous, and arbitrarily imposed for the good of the nation, just as the national language must be.

Hirsch cites an example of the formation of American national culture—Mason Weems's creation of the myth of George Washington and the cherry tree. Hirsch is admiring of this total fabrication, but we confess that we are bothered by authors' manufacturing untrue stories about famous personages and presenting them as the truth, even if in Hirsch's view, "Weems deduced that the public needed a domesticated Everyman whose life would serve as a model for American youth" (p. 89). McGuffey later introduced his own version of Weems's cherry tree myth in his *Reader,* which influenced many generations of young minds. No doubt Hirsch is correct in asserting

that this is how some pieces of national cultures originate, but is it all right to make up facts if the cause is a good one?

Hirsch is steadfast in his belief that not only is the national culture difficult to change but it is wrong to attempt to do so. "Rapid, large-scale change is no more possible in the sphere of national culture than in the sphere of national language. It is no more *desirable* or practicable to drop biblical and legendary allusions from our culture than to drop the letter s from the third person singular" (p. 91, emphasis added). Not only can one not do it, but one should not do it. Hirsch is profoundly conservative on this matter. However, again his own examples give him difficulty. Did not the English introduce large-scale change in both language and national culture in Scotland—and rather successfully? Did not Weems deliberately introduce myths about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln into American culture in such a way as to instill certain values into generations of American school children, and, in Hirsch's own opinion, do so successfully and desirably? Hirsch's stated position on the immutability of culture is contradicted by his own examples. His actual position seems to be that it was possible and desirable to make such cultural changes in the past but that we cannot and should not do so in the present. We must passively accept the culture others have manufactured for us and extend it to everyone.

PLURALISM AND DIVERSITY

Where does this imposition of national culture leave our American tradition of pluralism? Hirsch is clear about this: "The brute fact of history in every modern nation has been the increasing dominance of the national culture over local and ethnic cultures" (p. 97). More prescriptively, "It is for the Amish to decide what Amish traditions are, but it is for all of us to decide collectively what our American traditions are, to decide what 'American' means on the other side of the hyphen in Italo-American or Asian-American" (p. 98). And how shall we decide what American culture consists of?

To resolve this problem, Hirsch divides the public culture into three parts: our "civil religion," which includes value commitments to freedom, patriotism, equality, and other core values, as well as supporting rituals and myths; the "culture proper," which includes the politics, customs, and legends that "define and determine our current attitudes and actions and our institutions" (p. 103); and the "vocabulary of national discourse," which includes the value-neutral language and cultural terms through which we engage in dialogue about the culture proper and which is synonymous with

cultural literacy. The distinction here is similar to that between a language and the ideas expressed in that language, with certain ideas being sacred.

In Hirsch's view only items in the culture proper, the ideas themselves, should be argued about, but not the sacred ideas nor the medium of the national vocabulary. The national vocabulary is merely a convention that enables us to communicate with each other and is not subject to dispute. Why would one argue about vocabulary terms in English? Also, the national vocabulary has an "inherently classless character": "Nor does the national vocabulary reflect a coherent culture of a dominant class or other group in the same way that a local dialect does. It is primarily an instrument of communication among diverse cultures rather than a cultural or class instrument in its own right" (p. 104).

> Neither in origin nor in subsequent history have national languages been inherently class languages. It is true that after national dictionaries were formulated, the standard languages were more likely to be acquired by people who were rich enough to be educated than by poor people. But the distinction is one of schooling, which we have made universal, not of economic or social class. (p. 106)

Throughout his book Hirsch is at great pains to repeat again and again that cultural literacy has nothing to do with social class.

If it just so happened that some people acquired the national language, what about its content? Is it an adventitious, eclectic mix from all the various peoples who have inhabited America? Well, no. "By accident of history, American cultural literacy has a bias toward English literate traditions. Short of revolutionary political upheaval, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about this" (p. 106). If the ruling classes or social elites did not impose this national vocabulary, how did it emerge? "History has decided what those elements are" (p. 107).

And the emergence of this national vocabulary has nothing to do with merit:

> It is cultural chauvinism and provincialism to believe that the content of our vocabulary is something either to recommend or deplore by virtue of its inherent merit. . . . The specific contents of the different national vocabularies are far less important than the fact of their being shared. Any true democrat who understands this, whether liberal or conservative, will accept the necessary conservatism that exists at the core of the national vocabulary. (p. 107)

Apparently, then, we are not to decide what "American" means after all; it is already decided for us. In short, the national cultural vocabulary emerges

from an agentless historic process, has nothing to do with intrinsic merit, is unattached to particular social classes or subcultures, is nonpolitical, and cannot be changed deliberately.

Frankly, these assertions are difficult to believe. First, the division of culture into three parts again is based upon an analogy with natural language and has no clear anthropological or sociological basis. Apparently, it is Hirsch's own invention. The national cultural vocabulary in fact differs from natural language vocabulary in important ways. Second, natural language itself is often political and historically closely allied with social class. The development of English itself through the Angles, Saxons, and Normans is proof of the great influence on language by the ruling classes.

In modern times the dialect employed by the BBC is the Cambridge-Oxford dialect of the British upper classes, and the same is true for written English. It is hardly accurate to portray this connection as accidental, because whether one obtains an Oxford or Cambridge education is not an accident but linked to social class. The current feminist attack upon pronoun gender usage is another contemporary example of the politics of language. In fact, examples of the political implications of language usage and their association with particular social classes, ethnic groups, and regions are simply too well known to belabor.

Third, cultural content itself is even more political and allied with social class than is natural language. Hirsch (1983) himself recognized this in his original paper: "Literacy is not just a formal skill; it is also a political decision. . . . Literacy implies specific contents as well as formal skills" (p. 162) . . . although I have argued that a literate society depends upon shared information, I have said little about what that information should be. That is chiefly a political question" (p. 167). By 1987, however, he had decided that cultural literacy is not political and that one should not argue about it because it cannot be changed—nor should it be, because it is inherently conservative (1987b). By declaring it nonpolitical, Hirsch hoped to remove it from debate, while at the same time obviously arguing the issue himself.

Again there is a curious contradiction in Hirsch's argument. In his view, the national cultural content cannot and should not be changed because it evolves in natural ways outside deliberate influence—yet if this is so, why is Hirsch writing a book about it and founding a movement? His own efforts are directed toward establishing a particular cultural content. If there is no intrinsic merit in any cultural content, why not allow the mass media or the schools as they currently operate to determine the cultural content of the nation? Why bother at all if the national vocabulary cannot be changed and the content doesn't matter? Hirsch's stance is inherently contradictory.

Both natural language and especially cultural content are in fact highly

political, as evidenced by the explosive political nature of bilingual education, official English referenda, and controversies over standardized test performances, which determine access to educational institutions and better jobs. The daily headlines are full of reports of political encounters over such issues. And they are political precisely because they are allied with the fortunes of social classes, ethnic groups, and races. In reality, it is not that these issues are nonpolitical, as Hirsch suggests, but rather that Hirsch has a particular political position that he presents as nonpolitical.

SCHOOLING

Hirsch (1987b) focuses his reform agenda on the public schools almost exclusively. "But we should direct our attention undeviatingly toward what the schools teach rather than toward family structure, social class, or TV programming. No doubt, reforms outside the schools are important, but they are harder to accomplish" (p. 20). In his view the primary role of the schools is "acculturating our children into our national life" (p. 110), and cultural fragmentation is the fault of the schools:

> The decline of American literacy and the fragmentation of the American school curriculum have been chiefly caused by the ever growing dominance of romantic formalism in educational theory during the past half century. We have too readily blamed shortcomings in American education on social changes (the disorientation of the American family or the impact of television) or incompetent teachers or structural flaws in our school systems. But the chief blame should fall on faulty theories promulgated in our schools of education and accepted by educational policymakers. (p. 110)

According to Hirsch, educators mistakenly believe that reading is based upon formal skills when in reality it is based on cultural knowledge. The real reason low-income students are deficient in reading is because they lack cultural knowledge. Cultural deprivations and family inadequacies can be overcome through such knowledge.

According to Hirsch, these incorrect educational theories began to be implemented when the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education of 1918 replaced the 1893 Committee of Ten recommendation of a traditional humanistic education. Social adjustment replaced subject matter. The origins of these destructive ideas were Rousseau's romanticism and Dewey's pragmatism, both focusing upon the romantic concept of "natural human growth." Unfortunately, in Hirsch's view, these ideas were accepted by educators and

translated into curricula for individual differences and vocational education, thus implicitly accepting the permanent stratification of economic and social positions. Tracking and learning-by-doing, as opposed to book learning, came to dominate American education. According to Hirsch, these educational principles led to replacing history with social studies as a subject of study, and they culminated in the romantic formalism of the 1960s.

What can we make of these ideas? It seems rather farfetched to blame all the ills suffered by lower-class children upon educational theories taught in the schools of education, thus excluding such powerful social influences as poverty, unemployment, family dissolution, crime, and the mass media. Hirsch again reveals his conservative political orientation: These other social institutions cannot be changed; only the schools are at fault. We are also skeptical about the contention that Rousseau's ideas are the source of all the trouble in American education and American society. *Emile* was an influential book, but that is a long reach indeed. Hirsch's intent is to blame the Progressive Education movement for pernicious influences, that movement being a favorite target of conservatives over a number of years.

Actually, schools have been pressing for cultural homogeneity for decades, if not centuries, as Applebee notes in Chapter 16. Matthew Arnold in England saw the teaching of literature as an attempt to stem the evil tides of the industrial revolution, and the standard canon of literary works was established in both British and American schools long before the Progressives emerged. In one way Hirsch is reacting to attempts by various groups to expand the canon to include minorities and women. The switch is that whereas Arnold and others argued that the homogeneous literary canon would mitigate the influences of industrialism, Hirsch argues that cultural homogeneity is absolutely necessary for the development and expansion of the economy.

We leave the historical influences for others to consider and agree that Hirsch does have a valid point about the excesses of "educational formalism," the idea that literacy is a set of techniques that can be developed through coaching and practice. He is correct that literacy involves knowledge of some content that the learner must know, and that the content itself is important. Content matters, and not just skill. We think he is correct that educators and psychologists have sometimes lost their way in developing reading skills by having students practice abstract context-free skills. Having students memorize suffixes is not the way to learn to read. In our judgment Hirsch is also correct in castigating the educational tracking system in which lower-class students are shunted into vocational tracks where they have lessened opportunity to acquire academic knowledge necessary for admission to higher education and the best jobs. American education has had such a sorting mecha-

nism in place for many decades, as Hirsch indicates. The idea of abolishing such a tracking system and allowing all students to acquire the same knowledge is an excellent one, it seems to us, and a surprisingly egalitarian one for Hirsch.

What content should all students learn? Hirsch advocates an "extensive" curriculum that covers the subject matter all Americans need to know, plus an "intensive" curriculum that investigates particular works in detail and that is adjusted to individual interests and abilities. The former (Hirsch's list) will provide what we share as a culture, he believes, and the latter will provide coherence and intellectual depth. However, it is the extensive curriculum that Hirsch's book is all about. Textbooks should convey the national cultural vocabulary, especially for young children. If students do not acquire this national vocabulary by 10th grade, they can rarely make up the loss, according to Hirsch. Schools should abandon romantic formalist ideas like "critical thinking" and "higher order skills" that denigrate facts. Facts and skills are inseparable.

THE LIST

What then are the essential cultural facts? Hirsch and two colleagues compiled a list of the contents literate Americans should know. The list was submitted to 100 consultants outside academia and published as the appendix of the 1987b book, with a revised list of 6,000 terms published in the 1988b paperback edition. The list itself is supposed to represent a high school level of cultural literacy, to be descriptive of what cultural literate Americans actually do know rather than prescriptive about what they should know, "to represent but not to alter current literate American culture" (1987b, p. 136). The exception is science because Hirsch and his colleagues thought that current scientific knowledge needed enhancement.

The list was deemed to be nonpolitical because schools "have a duty not to take political stands on matters that are subjects of continuing debate" (1987b, p. 137). Although a national core curriculum based upon such a list is neither desirable nor feasible, "an agreed-upon, explicit national vocabulary should in time come to be regarded as the basis of a literate education" (p. 139). Publishers and educators should reach an accord about both the contents of the national vocabulary and a sequence for presenting it, in Hirsch's view. Method of presentation would be left to teachers. A group of educators and public leaders might even develop a model grade-by-grade sequence of core information based on the list.

General knowledge tests should also be developed, perhaps at grades 5, 8, and 12. Such tests based on the list would be less arbitrary than the SAT because the SAT verbal test is essentially a vocabulary test whose makers have never defined the specific vocabulary on which it is based. Only a few hundred pages of information stand between the literate and nonliterate, between dependence and autonomy. In response to those who might object to such a list, Hirsch would say that they are objecting to literacy itself.

Hirsch's list then specifies the national cultural vocabulary, the knowledge that all Americans should know by 10th grade and preferably sooner. According to Hirsch, one does not have to know much about the terms on the list but only just a smattering of information about each item. For example, one does not have to know much about Socrates but should have a vague idea who he was. This is extensive knowledge. If one studies Platonic dialogues in detail, that is intensive knowledge, and not the type of knowledge required by the list.

What is on the original list? A great many proper names of Anglo-American origin, many English literary terms, a surprising number of foreign phrases, many cliches, and only a few historical dates. The original list is short on athletics, health, entertainment, social science, and military terms. It systematically omits terms associated with the 60s, such as the Age of Aquarius, the Beats, the Chicago Seven, counterculture, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. It omits writers such as Jack London, Henry Miller, Ezra Pound, Sam Shepard, and John Steinbeck. It omits ethnic terms such as Black Elk Speaks, the blues, Harlem Renaissance, soul (music, food) and musical references such as Billie Holiday, punk, reggae, rock and roll, but includes Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and the Beatles. It omits references germane to social science, such as Margaret Mead, Thorstein Veblen, and weltanschauung. It omits health terms such as AIDS, carcinogenic, Lamaze, and stress.

Of course, any list will leave out some terms that should be included: It is the systematic exclusion and inclusion of certain ones that biases the list. One cannot help but think that unacknowledged criteria of propriety, acceptability, and politics were operating when the list was constructed. After all, this is supposed to be a list of what educated Americans do know, not what they should know (or should forget). But, of course, the list is transformed into a prescription of what should be taught. Hirsch's subtitle, after all, is "What Every American Needs to Know," not what they do know.

In 1988 the paperback edition of the book was published, and Hirsch deleted and added terms to the list, for what he claims was a net increase of 343. He says, "The deletions are few, totaling only about twenty-five, e.g. 'Edict of Nantes' and 'Occam's razor,' and other items that were questioned by several readers independently" (Hirsch, 1988b, p. xi). Hirsch seems a bit

confused about the deletions. In fact, more than 300 items were deleted from the original list.[1] Apparently Hirsch has forgotten that a number of controversial political figures and terms were removed, as well as terms referring to human reproduction. Is there a politically conservative discrimination at work here?

Some of the omissions appear to be simple oversights, such as Cinderella, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mediterranean Sea, Poland, and Rome. A great number of terms were also added.[2] Hirsch expanded the list to include more terms referring to minorities, women, African-Americans, and Native Americans. On the other hand, both the Wounded Knee and Sand Creek massacres are missing, even though the Armenian massacres are included, which, horrible though they were, presumably would be much less relevant to Americans.

Terms from the 60s have also been added. The inclusion of some writers and artists and the exclusion of others must simply reflect the tastes of Hirsch and his colleagues. The deletion of terms with sexual references is compensated for by the inclusion of terms for sexually transmitted diseases. In spite of claims to the contrary, there do seem to be definite political biases creeping into the revision. Such a list of cultural terms can never be value neutral, as Hirsch claims. The best one can hope for is that the list reflect different sides, that it be impartial. Hirsch has not managed such balance.

CONCLUSIONS

After this analysis of Hirsch's arguments, several conclusions seem reasonable regarding the nature of cultural literacy, the politics of Hirsch's position, the appeal of cultural literacy to the general public, and what cultural literacy has to offer education in general. Cultural literacy, as advanced by its major proponents, is a particular view of the construction and generation of knowledge, the role of culture in that process, and the role of education in modern industrial society. In spite of references to research on reading, cultural literacy is not an intellectual ability akin to reading literacy. It is one thing to say that people need more cultural knowledge and something different to assert that there is a skill like the ability to read that enables one to succeed in society. Knowledge is necessary in both cases, and probably schemata as well, but these entail rather different abilities. Hirsch extends the analogy of cultural literacy and reading literacy too far. We suspect that there are quite a number of knowledge schemata in history, literature, and writing that enable one to do any number of things but not a coherent set of schema for cultural literacy per se. Cultural literacy is highly successful as a slogan, but its referent is obscure.

Formal education, culture, and literacy do play critical roles in modern industrial society but not necessarily in the way formulated by Hirsch. Hirsch is correct about the centrality of state-supported education to modern society, but we are skeptical about the role assigned education and culture by the particular theory of nationalism and economic development that Hirsch embraces. He interprets this theory in such a way as to make culture and education a driving force of the industrial state and to insist that everyone must assimilate to one dominant culture by means of the educational system.

In spite of protestations otherwise, Hirsch's position is politically conservative in several ways. In his view, nothing can be done about inequalities, social-class differences, social institutions other than the schools, or the dominant Anglo culture to which everyone must conform. The national culture itself is mandated by history and tradition, and we cannot challenge or change it. Social harmony and economic development depend on a homogeneous culture, he asserts. This conservatism does not make his arguments wrong, but his positions are often self-contradictory; for example, if none of us can change the national culture, why is he leading a movement to do so?

Furthermore, the list of what every American must know is politically conservative in what it includes and excludes. Such a list must withstand scrutiny as to its impartiality among the various races, ethnic, and interest groups in America, just as standardized achievement tests must. Minority groups strongly suspect that such a list would function to their further disadvantage, and in spite of Hirsch's assurances that their interests would be served, an examination of the list reveals that it is indeed biased in this regard.

The view of culture presented is one in which individuals passively receive culture rather than actively create it. No doubt one must learn cultural

[1] Including such terms as Spiro Agnew, art deco, civil liberties, Ralph Ellison, El Salvador, Jerry Falwell, Milton Friedman, ghetto, Barry Goldwater, Guatemala, Gulf of Tonkin, Lee Iacocca, Jeffersonian democracy, Edward Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, George McGovern, Ferdinand Marcos, Linus Pauling, Nelson Rockefeller, penis, phallus, Shylock, scrotum, sperm, Gloria Steinem, testes, vagina, Thornton Wilder, William Butler Yeats, and Wounded Knee massacre.

[2] Hank Aaron, AIDS, Aberdeen, Addis Ababa, Alas poor Yorick, Alzheimer's disease, Amazing Grace, Maya Angelou, Armenian massacres, bile, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Bunche, Archie Bunker, Al Capone, Cato, CD (both), Chernobyl, concentration camps, Hernan Cortes, Crazy Horse, Bing Crosby, Demosthenes, Bob Dylan, Donald Duck, Dostoevsky, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Amelia Earhart, Essay on Liberty, Federal Republic of Germany, Ella Fitzgerald, Freedman's Bureau, Anne Frank, William Lloyd Garrison, Marcus Garvey, herpes, Bob Hope, Langston Hughes, I am the very model of a modern Major-General, Kenya, La Fontaine, John Lennon, John L. Lewis, large intestine, La Scala, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Metamorphosis (Ovid and Kafka titles), Carrie Nation, New Right, Nisei, Queen Elizabeths I and II, Queen Victoria, Chief Sequoyah, Junipero Serra, Frank Sinatra, B. F. Skinner, Jimmy Stewart, Shirley Temple, Trail of Tears, Uganda, Woodstock, Andy Warhol, John Wayne, Zambia.

content before one is able to create products that contribute to that culture. However, Hirsch's denigration of creativity and critical thinking in favor of rote learning leans too far in the direction of educating passive consumers rather than producers of culture. Surely a liberal arts education should enable one to write well and think critically and not just recognize the names of classic authors. There is nothing in Hirsch's approach that emphasizes such an active, critical role for learners. Rote learning is not the education that Socrates would endorse.

Why is cultural literacy so attractive to so many people, in spite of the complex and often incorrect arguments? The deteriorating economic condition of the United States, the development of a seemingly permanent underclass, and the entry of vast numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants, legal and illegal, have created a situation in which many Americans feel threatened. Rising crime rates, welfare recipients, consumption of drugs, chronic poverty, and inadequate ghetto education highlight the problems of the so-called underclass. In addition, there is a pervasive sense of unease about the United States' slipping economically, as reflected in rising trade deficits and a stagnant standard of living. All this concern begs for an answer, and cultural literacy provides an explanation, a focus of blame, and a solution.

Why don't some ethnic groups do better in society? Because they are culturally deficient in the knowledge they possess, according to Hirsch, and they will no longer be disadvantaged when they acquire that cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge alone allows one to succeed. This theme of cultural deprivation is repeated over and over in the United States in recent times and is a favorite of the neoconservatives in explaining why some ethnic groups succeed and some fail.

Cultural literacy promises a solution of traditionalism to an uneasy public by reasserting traditional American values and by promising that this reestablishment of tradition will recapture America's economic preeminence, eliminate the underclass, and transform millions of non-English-speaking immigrants into Americans. Anything that could do all these things has enormous appeal. Of course, the question is whether cultural literacy can do the things promised. We think not. On the other hand, although teaching humanities content will not solve the social ills that beset us, there are other reasons to introduce more cultural content.

Teaching more cultural content in the schools is an attractive idea. One can endorse teaching the poor more humanities content without believing that they are poor because they don't possess such content or that such knowledge will substitute for jobs and influence. The assertion that current texts and materials are deficient in humanities content seems reasonable. More myths,

literature, history, and other changes proposed by the cultural literacy advocates make sense. However, we do not think that this material should be learned by rote or consist of exactly the content specified by Hirsch.

We would like to see a more active view of both culture and learning. Culture is constructed and produced by people and is transformed by both deliberate and nondeliberate modification and revision. American culture certainly has deep roots in Britain, but it is hardly a facsimile. The infusion of many different groups has produced a distinct culture that is reflected only partially by a Shakespearean play. We hold to the view that culture is actively produced and reproduced and is not an antique willed to us by ancestors. Portraying culture and education as passive is not a healthy perspective for a dynamic democracy.

The distinction between extensive and intensive knowledge, and Hirsch's endorsement of the extensive, suggests that tests of subject matter would cover many topics at a superficial level rather than a few terms in depth. This implies multiple-choice rather than essay tests, not a good choice in our opinion. Testing should be on intensive as well as extensive learning. As Langer points out in Chapter 2, the type of instruction best suited to learning is far removed from memorizing lists of terms.

Even though in our view cultural literacy cannot possibly accomplish the things claimed for it, whether, how, and to what extent we should test for more cultural content remains an important question. Though we doubt that such a thing as cultural literacy exists, we do agree that more and better humanities content should be taught and tested for in the public schools. However, this content should be more carefully defined and assessed than heretofore. Students should know when the Civil War took place, but we doubt that they need to know *annus mirabilis*. A list that serves as the basis for curriculum and testing with expectations of complete mastery should be more carefully worked out.

SUMMARY

Underlying the disputes between the cultural literacy advocates and their critics are differing visions of how culture is produced in society and what role the schools should play in transmitting that culture. Ultimately these are choices about what type of society we should have. The cultural literacy advocates have brought these important issues into focus by enunciating their own visions of society, culture, and the schools. Those who disagree must create their own persuasive alternative visions.

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