Dictatorship of Virtue

Multiculturalism in Elementary and Secondary Schools

Richard Bernstein

This selection first appeared in the *American Experiment Quarterly*'s Summer 1998 edition. Journalist Richard Bernstein is a book critic for the *New York Times,* where he has also been United Nations correspondent and national cultural correspondent. Two of his four books are about China; he opened *Time* magazine's first Beijing bureau in 1980.

In his book Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future *(1994), Bernstein wrote, "Scratch the surface of a multiculturalist curriculum, and there is this worm gnawing away at any notion of American goodness. What emerges is the passion play of victims and oppressors, colonizers and colonized." A* Boston Globe *reviewer called the book "tart, sometimes eloquent, always graceful and lucid." Bernstein spoke to a Center of the American Experiment audience on this subject in October 1997.*

One of the frustrations of the topic of multiculturalism and the assault on the concept of an American identity is that it takes such a multitude of forms that it is difficult to keep track of it all. Multiculturalism and its closely allied phenomenon of political correctness (PC) show up mostly in small ways, in a statement here, a program there. It is not a centralized movement with a head office and an official newsletter. It is, in short, difficult to keep track of and difficult to define with precision. And when we do define it, we tend to focus attention on certain outrageous episodes that happen to catch the media's attention—like some excess of gender-neutral language, or the book *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, or an outrageous sexual harassment charge: a six-year-old boy, for example, accused of harassment for kissing a six-year-old girl on the cheek.

But most often the examples are too small to make it into the newspapers, even though it is this nonspectacular, normative sort of PCness that, in my view, is the real PCness. Let me give you an example, an illustration of the way in which the PC sensibility has become so pervasive as to have become normal, almost unnoticed.

I was in Barnes and Noble, where I had occasion to leaf through a large, reference-sized volume called *Masterpieces of World Literature* pub-

lished by HarperCollins. It provided short, readable, quite high quality articles on perhaps a couple hundred acknowledged literary masterpieces. I was doing a review for the *New York Times* on a novel that was based on the Oedipus plays by the immortal Sophocles, and I needed a kind of Cliffs Notes fix to remind me of some of the characters' names and their roles. I was reminded, reading the synopsis and the explanatory articles on *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus,* of how staggeringly great the Sophocles plays are and why they have stood the test of time. For me the essential element of those plays was Oedipus's amazing integrity, his courage in accepting the consequences for what was—true—a flaw in his character, but what was also an unmerited tragic fate. I hadn't read or seen or even thought about the Oedipus plays for many years, and so, reading the articles in *Masterpieces of World Literature,* I found myself once again inspired by Sophocles' great vision. This was a writer who dared to imagine the unimaginable and, in so doing, created two works of staggering strangeness, moral illumination, and poetic grandeur.

The other works in *Masterpieces of World Literature* had much the same ring. I won't list all of the books that are included, but I did note down the first work for each letter of the alphabet, beginning with *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner and ending with *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, with such works as Voltaire's *Candide,* Dickens's *David Copperfield,* Steinbeck's *East of Eden,* and Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in between, along with *Hamlet, The Iliad, Das Kapital,* Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite," *Paradise Lost,* the *Ramayana, The Tale of Genji, The Trial* by Franz Kafka, and *Ulysses* by James Joyce. A good list for lovers of literature.

Then I noticed that there was a whole set of these *Masterpieces* books, and it was the others in the series that bring me to my point. The other volumes were *Masterpieces of Women's Literature, Masterpieces of African-American Literature,* and *Masterpieces of Latino Literature.* I breezed through these other volumes and found what I expected to find. Let me give you a sense of it by going over the list—first work for each letter of the alphabet—for the *Masterpieces of Women's Literature.* There was, first, *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, a book that happens also to be in the *Masterpieces of World Literature* list. The first book under *B* was *Backlash* by Susan Faludi. This book, published in 1991, is a lengthy argument by a journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* to the effect that men were finding ways to rob women of the progress made by the women's movement. You can agree or disagree with Faludi's argument,

but even if you agree, would you place her book, not yet a decade old, into the "masterpiece" category? Would you call it "literature"? I happen to know Susan Faludi, and I like her, even if we don't always see eye to eye. I think she would probably agree that putting *Backlash* on a list of literary masterpieces is a bit of a stretch.

It gets worse—or, at least, it does not get better. Next on the women's list is a work called *Calm Down Mother,* a one-act play by Megan Terry. The women's book in its summary categorizes each work according to what it calls "type of plot," and *Calm Down Mother*'s type of plot is "feminist." I had not realized that the word feminist could be used to describe a type of plot. I wonder: Is there a type of plot that is black? Another that is white? Christian? Jewish? Are there Republican plot types and Democratic ones, conservative and liberal? I suspect that an "antifeminist" plot might have a hard time making it onto the masterpieces of women's literature list.

To continue, though I promise not for too much longer. The next work, the first book listed under *D: A Diary from Dixie* by Mary Boykin Chesnut. This book is a Civil War diary that "reveals a keen awareness of the oppression to which women—black and white, slave or free—were subjected during that period." Chesnut, the description of her book continues, was "fond of her husband" (I like that expression, "fond of her husband," which stands in stark contrast to the possibility that Chesnut actually loved her husband), but she saw all women, rich and poor, as "slaves to men."

And so we find another illustration of another characteristic of multiculturalism, and we are only up to the letter *D.* It is what I call the equality of suffering syndrome, and the main idea is that all people who are not white and male have been equally victimized by that vale of tears that is patriarchal history. Mary Chesnut may or may not have actually believed in the antebellum American South that slave women and free women were equal sufferers. If she did believe that, then she was a very foolish woman and her works would almost by definition have to be excluded from any list of "masterpieces." In any case, the little blurb about her illustrates another element in the multiculturalist picture, which is its careful, assiduous, reverential cultivation of the cult of victimhood, by which women, gays and lesbians, Hispanics, Asians, disabled people, and various others are assumed to be just as disadvantaged as blacks were in American history.

Just for your information, some of the other works that are listed are *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller,

and *Intercourse* by Andrea Dworkin, this last book described as one in which the author "attributes women's societal subordination to their becoming a colonized people through the act which intimately connects them to their oppressors—sexual intercourse."

Politics and Power Grabs

What does the example of *Masterpieces of Women's Literature* tell us about the multiculturalist world that we inhabit? Or, to put this question a different way: What is the connection between the book in Barnes and Noble and an issue that has arisen lately in Minnesota, the issue of the Department of Education's newly published Rules for Educational Diversity? I think there are two connections, two ways in which the ideology behind the book and the ideology behind the rules manifest the same misconceived tendencies.

First, they both show that material is being chosen not because of its intrinsic merit, but because of the requirements of group politics. Secondary works are elevated to the status of "masterpiece" by political decree, in the same way that educational requirements are altered to try to bring about an arithmetic equality of results among every group in the society. Second, they both show the way in which what is presented as a literary or educational program is really a political program, or even a grab for power. *Masterpieces of Women's Literature*, with its inclusion of every feminist tract ever written and its choice of secondary works showing the supposed oppression of women, poses as a literary endeavor; actually, it is pure politics, a politics that pushes us to redefine literary standards—or, what is more common, to eliminate them altogether on the grounds that they are, as Catharine MacKinnon has said, just the things that white males value about themselves anyway. A similar statement can be made about the Rules for Educational Diversity; it is a political program—an effort to purvey a particular, rather left-wing way of looking at the world—that preempts opposition by portraying itself as a way of making educational advances for disadvantaged students.

I happen to have some background information about the situation in Minnesota that might shed some light on what these rules would actually do to the schools if they were adopted. Some years ago, when I was doing research for my book, I was looking for a school that had adopted multiculturalism as its official philosophy. I wanted to visit it, interview teachers and administrators, see classrooms and curriculum materials, and get

a sense of what the multiculturalist system of education of the future would look like. I chose the Hans Christian Andersen School of Many Voices in Minneapolis. It was here that I first encountered that not-very-euphonious phrase *MCGFDA pedagogy,* which reappeared in the diversity rules proposed for the entire state. MCGFDA stands for multicultural, gender fair, disability aware. What is it?

Let me be clear about one thing. I spent two days at the Hans Christian Andersen School of Many Voices, and I was impressed with the spirit of the enterprise, the liveliness and attractiveness of the place itself, the dedication of the teachers, their obvious energy and commitment. Like Will Rogers, I didn't meet anybody I didn't like. They clearly believed that they were doing what was best for children, especially the black, Hispanic, and Native American children who made up about three-quarters of the school's population.

But when I looked at the curriculum, at the message conveyed to the pupils there, I did not have a favorable impression. The school was a realm for the practice of the victim cult, with white males set up as the victimizers of all of the nonwhite peoples, who represented the good. The underlying message of the place (actually, it wasn't all that underlying: it was pretty overt) was that we are all different rather than all the same and that we have to stress that difference, to identify with it in almost everything we do.

The most conspicuous part of the school—aside from the banner with the fabled initials MCGFDA on it—was the veritable cult of difference that existed there, the power of the pressure on pupils to think of themselves as members of small groups whose character and identities stemmed from that association. I attended a poetry-reading class for one of the lower elementary grades (the school went from kindergarten to fifth grade). As each poem was recited, the teacher would ask the students to identify its ethnic origins. And so after the poem, the children would shout out "Langston Hughes—African American." They sang in unison "European American" after the name of another poet, "American Indian-Zuni" after a third, "Asian-Chinese" for yet another. The feeling pervaded the school that recognizing the diversity of American life was not just a goal created in the service of tolerance, but that it was the ultimate objective of the entire educational experience, the single-issue campaign to be waged through the six years that children would spend there. A banner displayed in the school saying "I Learn Through Diversity" summed up this idea. But that seemed to me

an empty slogan, a phrase utterly without real meaning. How does one learn through diversity? Does it help with addition? Can you master a foreign language with it? Does it teach correct English usage? Could there be another banner reading "I Learn Through Homogeneity"?

On a bulletin board, I saw a display of essays in which the children expressed their ideas on making the world a better place. At the bottom of each little essay, the pupils had written their names and their ethnic identity, along the lines of "My name is John Smith and my culture is European American" or "My name is Elisa Jones and my culture is African American." There was, in other words, no American culture, no common culture at the school. There were just separate cultures, which, upon further scrutiny, were actually divided into two cultures: the hegemonic white male culture and all the oppressed cultures.

My impression of a left-wing and highly politicized curriculum was intensified when I asked several social studies teachers what they actually taught. Their answers suggested that the notion of victims and victimizers was an organizing principle of the school's program. Whom do the students admire after they have finished at the school? I asked one teacher. Her reply: "The sentiment in my room is that they don't like Christians and they don't like white people, because they saw what has been done in the name of Christianity and what the white people did to the Indians and the Africans."

What about George Washington? I asked, wondering if there was at least one admirable white person for American children to admire. What do you teach about him? "That he was the first president, that he was a slave owner, that he was rich—not much," she replied. This teacher (who, it must be stressed, was a dedicated person who gave a strong impression of caring deeply about her pupils), told me that her pupils did learn about Eli Whitney, the cotton gin inventor, in her social studies class. The children learn "that he stole his invention from a woman who didn't patent it," she said, spoiling my illusion that at least some whites could be portrayed in a generous and positive way under the strict rules of MCGFDA pedagogy.

Clichéd Diversity

This brings me to my second observation, about the use of that word *diversity* and its actual meaning, as in a phrase like "educational diversity rules." Actually, of course, multiculturalism has almost nothing to do

with culture, and it isn't multi either. *Multiculturalism* is a code word for a left-wing political program that preempts opposition by presenting itself as a call for respect, tolerance, and diversity. The reality is that, as it is practiced, multiculturalism is not respectful or tolerant of difference, and its idea of diversity is an extremely truncated one. Diversity to a multiculturalist means a group of people who look different and who have different sexual practices, but who, when it comes to politics, think pretty much alike.

Put another way, "diversity" in practice is actually a political philosophy lying on a rather narrow band of the political-cultural spectrum that is utterly and exclusively Western in origin and inspiration. As a journalist who has done a fair amount of traveling in the world, I sometimes imagine what a multiculturalist would make of the actual diversity that exists across the globe, as opposed to the comforting, cliché-ridden "diversity" of the American multiculturalist imagination. The truth of the matter is this: If you want real multiculturalism, get on an airplane and go someplace else—out there in that great region of the world called Abroad, where practices like female circumcision abound, along with amputation of the hands of thieves, head-to-foot veils for women, and death sentences for those who write supposedly "blasphemous" books. That place called Abroad, by the way, is not the place where tolerance for homosexuality was invented, or equal rights for women, or where the phrase about all men being born equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights was struck. Try getting on the bus in China and you will see what multiculturalism is all about.

My point is that multiculturalism is at best a misnomer, a well-intended but inaccurate synonym for a set of values that is Western in origin and that makes up a key part of the American culture to which we all actually belong, even as multiculturalism denies that there is such a thing as a common American culture. The funny thing is that in all of my travels among the multiculturalists, I almost never encountered one who had actually bothered to undertake serious study of another culture. It might have something to do with the fact that it's a lot easier and more emotionally gratifying to learn a few honeyed and heartwarming clichés than to acquire in-depth knowledge.

Except, of course, when our own culture enters the picture and then, suddenly, the same warm feelings about the worth and value of all cultures no longer apply. One of multiculturalism's main features is its denigration of the West. The multiculturalist is a bit like the "idiot" in

The Mikado who sings enthusiastic praises of "all centuries but this and every country but his own." There are more than a few odd things about this, not least of them the fact that nothing could be more Western in origin and in values than multiculturalism itself. Beyond that is the not insignificant fact that our culture happens to have produced a larger number of people living in stable conditions of freedom and prosperity than ever before in human history. We have our problems, true, but we are also better off in the United States of America with our own culture, not with the Chinese culture or the African culture, or what the inventors of those heartwarming clichés like to call the holistic Native American culture. For the members of my subgroup, the Jews, the gradual realization in practice of American values has led to greater prosperity for more people in conditions of the greatest political freedom and the fullest participation than at any time in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple. There is, in other words, something more to this culture than the allegory of unfairness and victimization that the pupils are learning at the Hans Christian Andersen School of Many Voices.

I, for one, prefer to be a member of the culture that we share as Americans. I am glad that, when I went to public school in a little town in southeastern Connecticut in the benighted and nonmulticulturalist 1950s, no well-meaning and virtuous educational bureaucrat had decreed how good it would be for me to have to stand up and say to the others, "My name is Richard Bernstein and my culture is Jewish American." To have done so would have been to reduce the real and ineffable complexity of human life to a few simple concepts that these bureaucrats, in their ignorance, think they understand. I would want my children, in their public institutions, to be treated irrespective of their private identities, not to have those identities hung on their breast like a badge of merit. I am a Jew. I am an American. It is for the public schools to inculcate the knowledge and the awareness that I need in the American part of my identity; the other part of it is my business.

Mastery or Representation?

What multiculturalism does, of course, is make private identities the business of bureaucrats. It also leads citizens to make demands on each other based on their racial or sexual identities, a practice that I believe will prove to be divisive and harmful. And it encourages children to see

themselves as defined by their origins rather than as self-fashioning individuals. Multiculturalism is based on the idea that race and ethnicity determine not only your social position but also a great deal about the way you learn and look at the world. One of the multiculturalist leaders I encountered in my research a few years ago was an educational consultant named Peggy McIntosh of the Wellesley Center for Research on Women, who lectures to school systems around the country on such things as white privilege and the different "way of knowing" of black children and white children. This is a little hard to believe, but Ms. McIntosh gets a respectful hearing for the idea that white children engage in something called "pinnacled learning" while black children engage something that she calls the "lateral" part of the psyche. In "pinnacled" learning the stress is on "mastery," on correctness versus wrongness, while lateral learning has to do with "our connections with the world, as we grow and develop as bodies in the body of the world."

The plain fact is that if children are going to do well in life as adults they are going to have to achieve a degree of "mastery," of learning how to get things right rather than wrong. Certainly every child is entitled to sensitive, individual treatment, to a degree of nurturing and encouragement that is appropriate to that child. But the various theories about multiculturalist education—most important, that children's all-important self-esteem hinges on, as the common phrase has it, "seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum"—are more often than not just a lot of silliness masquerading as sensitivity to the spiritual makeup of each child. The truth is that the children who are doing the best in school today, Jews and Asians, are precisely those children most ignored by the multiculturalist imperative. They are the children whose groups are almost not reflected in the curriculum at all. In Milwaukee a few years ago, half of the valedictorians in the city's high schools were the children of Hmong refugees, a group that, you can be sure, had not yet been incorporated into the multiculturalist curriculum.

And yet, the effort to create a curriculum based not on what children need to know but on some principle of racial and ethnic representativeness continues to gain momentum in school systems across the country. It is the rough equivalent of *Masterpieces of Women's Literature*, with its implicit advocacy of the idea that literature has sex or race, that there is something fundamentally different in the idea of women's literature or men's literature. When it comes to literature, I think that one would be far more challenged by Sophocles than by Erica Jong, and I

would rather that schools taught the former, even if Sophocles is just another dead white European male and a representative of the white male patriarchal culture.

In the educational sphere, diversity sweeps out of the picture the inescapable fact that there is a body of knowledge that all children must master for success in the future and that this knowledge has no race or sex. To encourage children and their parents in the idea that racial and sexual representativeness is the key to a better educational experience is to defraud them. That is the most painful irony of the multiculturalist-diversity program: It is harmful and fraudulent for the very people it is supposedly aimed at saving. *Masterpieces of Women's Literature* is a political program justifying itself as a literary one. Multiculturalism is, similarly, an effort to advance a debatable political proposition, a debatable vision of American life, as an educational panacea. We shouldn't fall into the honeyed multiculturalist trap. We don't need it and shouldn't want it.

Richard Bernstein's speech was part of American Experiment's Tim Penny–Vin Weber Distinguished Fellows symposium series, which focused in 1997 on the excesses of multiculturalism. Following his speech, Bernstein spoke with members of the audience, including discussion leaders Vin Weber and Tim Penny, former Minnesota representatives to Congress.

Vin Weber: *You've seen the bumper sticker that says "Celebrate Diversity." Doesn't that obscure the fact that, simply put, diversity creates a lot of problems? Not that it is something you necessarily want to resist, not that we haven't overcome those problems in the past, and certainly not that it isn't valuable for people to have broadening experiences, but isn't the hard reality that demographic change in a country does cause friction and tension and problems? Instead of mindlessly saying we should celebrate these things, I would be seriously thinking about how we deal with the problems and the consequences.*

Richard Bernstein: *I agree, but that is a given of American life, and it is not a given that is going away. We do come from different backgrounds: We are a multiracial society, we were multiracial from the very beginning, and we are becoming more multiracial now. Immigration from Asia is very strong.*

Whether you think of immigration as an element of enrichment or as a problem—and I think of it as both—one of the great things about living in America is that we are diverse. But what does that really mean? When the diversity advocates talk about diversity, it is a code word for a political ideology. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the

ways in which a society copes with group identities. American society has coped reasonably well, especially in the past half century. It coped very badly with racial diversity for much of our history, but in the past forty or fifty years, it has allowed people to carve out a sphere in their private lives, and to some extent in their public identities, for their particular group identity. It is OK in American life to present yourself—even publicly—as Jewish, Italian, black, Latino, or whatever, but everyone masters a central, public American culture. What multiculturalism does, it seems to me, is to stand that brilliant solution on its head: It declares that your group identity will be the main feature of your public identity rather than a secondary or private element. The idea that in order for students to do well in school they have to be immersed in their culture is an offshoot of that.

Teachers don't really know what those cultures are, nor do they appreciate the extent to which recent immigrants have come to America—like others who came earlier—in order to take advantage of the freedom and opportunity this country offers. And teachers seem to be abysmally unaware of the fact that in many instances the students who do the best in school are not those who have been immersed in their native cultures.

When I was in Milwaukee in 1992 or 1993 as part of the research for my book, I learned that roughly half of the valedictorians in the Milwaukee high school system—there are something like fourteen or fifteen high schools—were the children of Hmong people, people from the mountains of Laos who fought on the American side during the Vietnam War. They are not immersed in Hmong culture in the schools, and they do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum in the Milwaukee public school system, yet they do very well. The whole idea that in order for students to do well they have to be immersed in their culture is silliness. There is no substantiation for that in actual experience.

Tim Penny: *Someone remarked at a dinner the other evening that the debate about the quality of our schools, which ought to be about education, has been distracted by a debate about race. How do we find our way back?*

Richard Bernstein: *We certainly should not ignore the problems that some groups are having in the schools. Why the achievement of black children and Latino children seems to be below that of many other children is a problem that we can't turn away from and expect that we are going to offer an alternative to the diversity initiative. Let's face it, that's where the diversity initiative comes from—from a genuine concern that some segments of the population, on average, are not doing as well as others, and so a requirement comes along that every segment of the population shall do as well as every other segment in graduation rates, in representation in the curriculum, and so on. This is a genuine concern, and it is not one that we can ignore.*

It comes down to more attention to the schools, better basic education, more parent involvement in the schools—not to offering the panacea that if you see yourself

reflected in the curriculum or if you are segregated into your own little cultural department of the university or the school, somehow your educational achievement is going to improve. It is a fraud perpetrated on the people who most need help that identifying more with their culture will improve their self-esteem and raise their achievement levels. Achievement levels go up because of good schools, good teachers, a curriculum that is based on what children really need to know, the tools that they need to master in order to get ahead in life.

Peggy McIntosh is the head of something called the SEED program—something about equal educational development—and a member of an organization called the Wellesley Center for Research on Women. It doesn't get more politically correct than that. She gives speeches all around the country on two kinds of learning. She starts out by talking about a little black girl she saw in Roxbury, Massachusetts, who was having difficulty adding up columns of figures. You see, this little black girl couldn't learn how to add up columns of figures because she was being culturally excluded from the school. The school was a white cultural school, and white people believe in what McIntosh calls pinnacled learning, which stresses right answers versus wrong answers.

Black people, McIntosh says, engage in a kind of lateral connectedness, in being "bodies in the body of the world." These are phrases that she uses over and over again. How insulting to say that black people are not concerned about getting it right or getting it wrong, that for them adding up a column of figures is somehow a different experience from a white person's adding up a column of figures. That kind of nonsense is very pervasive. We have to combat that kind of nonsense, but we also have to make sure that all children learn how to add up that column of figures.

Ruth Wollenberg: *My children attended school in the Hopkins district [just west of Minneapolis], which is using the SEED project to educate and inform teachers and parents. I asked about funding and found that it is grant money. How can we stop this project from being so pervasive?*

Richard Bernstein: *The cultural wars are real wars.*

When I did the research for Dictatorship of Virtue, *I got some financial support from the Smith Richardson Foundation and the Bradley Foundation, which are generally associated with conservatives—though I don't think of myself as a conservative. Nobody at either of those foundations ever asked to see a word that I wrote. They just thought the project was a good one.*

There is so much money around for multiculturalism; the foundations in general are extremely left-wing. The Ford Foundation especially has practically invented all of this stuff through financing the education and legal defense funds. Take a look when the MacArthur Foundation publishes its "genius awards" list and see how

much more likely you are to be a genius if you study lesbian literature of the nineteenth century than if you study Sophocles.

There's plenty of money available for this kind of thing. Why? Because it presents itself as virtuous, as concern about the effects of racism and sexism, about the plight of the disadvantaged, and so forth. Certainly we must not ignore the reality of that plight. There are people who need help, and it is incumbent on those of us who don't believe in the Peggy McIntosh way to develop an alternative.

Alternatives are being carried out all over the country in all kinds of places. The program that the Bradley Foundation spends most money on is scholarships for children from low-income families who get into a parochial or private school. The Bradley Foundation will guarantee that that student will be able to go to that school, irrespective of financial need. It is a school-choice program, a way of subsidizing parents who want to send their children to better schools. The beneficiaries of that program overwhelmingly come from segments of the population that most need help, and they are getting good basic education for a better future. There needs to be more of that kind of thing.

Edward C. Anderson: *I used to be on the Hopkins school board, and I will tell you that in a big Minnesota school district, the middle-level management is very tough on this stuff. They are true believers.*

I would guess that 50 percent of graduating high school seniors don't know who wrote the Declaration of Independence, who George Washington was, who Babe Ruth was. Aren't we already way behind [in educating students about a common culture]?

Richard Bernstein: *I don't share that concern. I do feel that popular culture is very powerful, and that it draws people in and gives them a common culture, and that common culture transcends individuals' backgrounds.*

What I worry about is that in stressing immersion in your own culture and seeing yourself reflected in the curriculum, we are going to lose sight of what is truly great and challenging. Youth is wasted on the young, and that's already a big obstacle to overcome, but it is an especially big obstacle when adults are helping the young to waste their youth by not introducing them to the great works and the challenging ideas.

The educational curriculum in being politicized is also being watered down. If children in elementary school are not really learning about George Washington and the colonial struggle for independence, they are losing out. Most of us don't study George Washington anymore when we are in our twenties and thirties. We learn about him at a certain time, and not to learn about him is not just a matter of losing the common culture; it is also a matter of not learning something that is important and valuable about the creation of the political values that have made America free and prosperous.

In New York state, for example, students studying the creation of the federal Constitution are required to learn that federalism was modeled in part on the Iroquois Confederation. The central governing body and the five Iroquois tribes are now seen as equivalent to the federal government and the state governments. There is a whole mythology in books and papers and all kinds of curriculum materials that show the contribution of the Iroquois in the creation of the American system of government. If it were true that the system was modeled on the Iroquois, then of course we should learn it, because truth ought to be our most important commodity. It happens not to be true. It is a silly educational compensation that takes away from the difficult issue of how you create a government out of nothing. What kind of system do you create? What were the real problems that Thomas Jefferson and others faced as they wrote the Declaration and then moved on to form a government? If we don't learn about that, then we are not being schooled very well in the principles and challenges of political life. That's where I think we are falling down.

One of the elements in this picture is that multiculturalism does not come with a head office; it has numerous manifestations. To some extent, it's a sensibility that flourished among young adults in the 1960s, when, for the first time in American life, we began to see ourselves not as basically good with some faults, but as basically flawed with some good things. It's a vision of America as essentially a bad place characterized overwhelmingly by its vices rather than its virtues. This idea took hold of an entire generation who are now in their forties and fifties and at the height of their careers. They inhabit the important departments in the universities and the editorial boards of newspapers, including my own. This generational attitude is very important.

If I weren't worried about it, I wouldn't have spent three years on my book. People are becoming aware of this point of view and beginning to talk about it and forming groups in opposition to it. If there were a headquarters of academic multiculturalism and political correctness, it would be the Modern Language Association. Now there is a counterorganization, the Association of Literary Scholars. The National Association of Scholars, which has branches in practically every major university in the United States, is fighting against a lot of these trends. Another side has risen and the battle is joined; it is now up to us to win that battle. I think we can do it, but it is not going to be easy.

Vin Weber: *We've talked about academia and the nonprofit world, but it seems to me we're letting one big sector of American life—corporations—off the hook. Otherwise hard-headed, sensible businesses are absolute suckers for any cause that describes itself as multicultural or diversity-oriented. Virtually every major company now has a "diversity officer." Hasn't this permeated the corporate culture, as well as academia and the media and everybody else?*

Richard Bernstein: *Education is really at the root of the question—it's the future success or failure of American life—but, yes, I think that the post-1960s liberal culture dominates American life. Michael Lind, in* The Next American Nation, *divides American history up into different periods and argues that we are now in the multiculturalist phase, in which we arrange American life according to arithmetical formulas in which people are represented not on the basis of their individual merit, but on the basis of their membership in small and easily recognizable groups. Corporations have not suddenly been seized by the Peggy McIntosh philosophy, but are protecting themselves against the litigiousness of American life through diversity officers and sensitivity training sessions.*

The first chapter of my book, titled "Elementary Diversity," is an account of what you learn in sensitivity training these days. People of good sense are becoming aware of what is really going on in the guise of this benign and well-intentioned program. In theory, there's nothing wrong with corporations getting together and talking about how we all get along and what people from different groups think about each other. Healthy discussion would be fine, but it is indoctrination into proper thinking about race, sex, and the oppressiveness of American life. It is a kind of mandatory chapel, and that is why I oppose it.

David Pence: *As we try to find a way to get around diversity, what should our common culture be? I don't understand how we are going to get beyond multiculturalism unless we are able to make these very simple statements: That there is a religious sensibility that unites us, that we are created by God, that we all have souls. That's a darn good way to start a society from nothing; that's what we did, and that's what we are trying to do. You seem to shunt religion off to the side as a way to bring us together. Would you comment on that?*

Richard Bernstein: *Of course, religious freedom and religious tolerance are fundamental to American life, and one of the great achievements of American life has been to create a society in which we have synagogues and churches of all different sorts—and now, increasingly, mosques and Buddhist temples—side by side. I cling to the old-fashioned liberal notion that religion should be separate from publicly enforced action. I don't think that it would be appropriate for the state as embodied in the schools to insist on religion or on religious conviction as a basis for the American identity.*

I recognize, by the way, that these are difficult questions: Exactly what are the elements of the American identity? What should be put in and what should be left out? Whatever it is, I know that it should be decided on the basis of truth and real educational value rather than satisfying the requirements of an interest group or a pressure group, including religious pressure groups. I am opposed to the teaching of creationism in the public schools because it is simply not scientifically verifiable.

Religion for me is a preserve of private life, and the ability of Americans to keep religion in the individual's private sphere and not to have it operate in a very active way in the public sphere is one of the elements of the American genius and one of the elements for domestic tranquility, freedom, and prosperity. I really wouldn't want to tamper very much with that system.

Mary Ann Nelson *[superintendent of schools in Fridley, a Minneapolis suburb]: This is the kind of balanced dialogue we need. When you try to move forward with an idea like the SEED project, there are people of varying degrees of passion and thoughtfulness. I've worked in two districts where the SEED project has worked; there are a lot of people of good common sense who have treated it as merely a way to expand on understanding different cultures, not an ideological war.*

It seems to me that we've gotten on the wrong track with this focus on cultural differences to the point where we have failed to talk about personal values that are core democratic values. When you talk about differences among cultures, the thing that I think people fear is people who aren't like them, who don't have common values about appropriate behavior, whether it is in school or in the community. What we've tried to do in our school is talk about core democratic values and how to use them as a base for standards of behavior for parents as well as staff members. Would you comment on our failure to talk more about core democratic values and fight for them because they are what's right and good?

Richard Bernstein: *I appreciate what you're saying. It's easy for me to talk: I'm not a teacher or a school superintendent. I'm a newspaper reporter, and maybe that's why I don't feel qualified to come up with an alternative. I do think that there is something wrong with the way the multicultural movement approaches these issues, but I'm sure it is extremely difficult in the real world when you have to deal with all these constituencies and all of these passions to iron out a curriculum and a program and an educational philosophy that has support from the public and that also works. I admire people who can do it.*

Norms of behavior are *very important, and they cannot be treated as attributes of one culture or another. Like the Peggy McIntosh theory about black children learning through some sort of lateral connections and white children learning through a pinnacle model, there is this notion that black children are somehow more active and a little more unruly than white children and therefore a different standard should apply to them. Treating children differently according to their race is the wrong way to go. We have to have the same expectations of all children, and we have to teach the same core values and the same core curriculum to all children—not as an aesthetic matter, and not to make America unified. I'm not worried about America being disunified; I don't think we're going to fracture like Yugoslavia. What I'm worried about is that certain*

groups in the population are not going to do well, and the way to help them do well is to teach them the same things we teach the groups that do *do well and to make sure that they acquire the culture and the values and the knowledge that will enable them to go to medical school instead of working at Taco Bell. A lot of the educational philosophy that is current today is more likely to send them to Taco Bell.*

Vin Weber: *I'm troubled by your answer to the question about religion because this whole topic and religion are all one in my mind. In the book* Modern Times, *Paul Johnson lays out his thesis that moral relativism is the dominant intellectual trend of this century and is responsible for most of its atrocities. It seems to me that what we are talking about is an outgrowth of our society's increasing inability to make definitive statements about virtually anything. The culture we have developed in this country is superior in measurable, quantifiable terms—life expectancy, infant mortality, and so on—to what has been achieved elsewhere. Religious traditions inculcated the values of both the citizenry and the elites in the society that produced that superior culture. The dominant culture is now hostile to those religious traditions. It seems to me that we are declaring war on the religious traditions that gave us this successful culture and trying to replace them with a secular religion.*

Tim Penny: *This reminds me of Richard's earlier comment about multiculturalism being like a religion in the way that it brings a sensibility factor rather than academic discipline into the educational setting. It's easy to get funding for multiculturalism, but you would have a lot of difficulty if you tried to bring into the school setting any sort of discussion about different religions in society and our communities. We can't seem to give true depth to this multiculturalism debate.*

Richard Bernstein: *There are some things we can agree on; maybe it will help to define the area in which we don't seem to agree, although it may be narrower than is apparent.*

I certainly agree that the political left and the identity politics the left has been promoting—the educational philosophy and the vision of American life that we find somehow off the tracks—is antireligious. American life is portrayed in the schools as an unrelieved history of oppression by a privileged white male majority, and religion is portrayed as complicit in that history of oppression. In that sense, bad history and bad values are being taught. There would have been no civil rights movement in America had we not come from a Judeo-Christian tradition, and of course the black civil rights leaders came out of the churches. The black churches were the centers of resistance to segregation and Jim Crow; they created a sense of dignity and worth among black people.

The genius of the civil rights movement was to insist not that "we blacks" are different and demand that our difference be respected, but that "we blacks" are the

same and expect our sameness to be acknowledged in behavior and in law—and one of the things that makes us the same is our immersion in Christian society and Christian values and in the way those Christian values have been given secular expression in the Declaration of Independence and in the other principles of American life. Those are important, essential notions in the American experience, and they should be taught. Religious values should be given their proper place in the history of American life. There we agree.

The question that I heard was different, though. I thought I heard that we ought to be having prayer in school, Bible classes in school, that there ought to be instruction in the tenets and beliefs of Christianity, or perhaps Judeo-Christianity.

David Pence: *You assume that when people talk about religious sensibility they mean Bible reading and specific sectarian-type education in the schools, but I didn't say that. I do say this: There is a religious sensibility about what a human person is that lies at the core of the American experiment and at the core of the idea of limited government. You have limited government because you believe man is meant for something other than the state, other than political unity, which is an important idea but not the most important idea.*

The only solution to multiculturalism is to ask what we agree on. How do we teach these kids? Why do we tell them they've got to respect each other? It has to do with the fact that we are created by God in his image. If we don't say that, we can't put together all the people who make up America.

Richard Bernstein: *You are right to correct me: You didn't say anything about prayer in schools and Bible study and that sort of thing. But to make it a part of the curriculum that you must believe we were created in God's image is to me an importation of specific religious belief into a governmental institution; it is the kind of thing that is prohibited by the Constitution and the kind of thing that I would* want *to be prohibited by the Constitution.*

There is an important distinction to be made between studying the role of religion and religious values in American life—most often a role that we would see as progressive and successful—and making religious conviction central to the educational experience in the public schools. I don't know exactly how you would do that, what language you would use, what text you would use, but I don't agree that that is what we should do. Religion is for communities, families, individuals to decide for themselves in their private lives. For government to get involved is to go beyond its legally permissible scope.