The Politics of Official Knowledge: Does a National Curriculum Make Sense?

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Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a *selective tradition*, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people. As I argue in *Ideology and Curriculum* and *Official Knowledge*, the decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society.[1]

Think of social studies texts that continue to speak of "the Dark Ages" rather than the historically more accurate and less racist phrase "the age of African and Asian ascendancy" or books that treat Rosa Parks as merely a naive African-American woman who was simply too tired to go to the back of the bus, rather than discussing her training in organized civil disobedience at the Highlander Folk School. The realization that teaching, especially at the elementary school level, has in large part been defined as women's paid work—with its accompanying struggles over autonomy, pay, respect, and deskilling—documents the connections between curriculum and teaching and the history of gender politics as well.[2] Thus, whether we like it or not, differential power intrudes into the very heart of curriculum, teaching, and evaluation. What *counts* as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and—just as critically—who is allowed to ask and answer all of these questions are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in this society.[3] There is, then, always a *politics* of official knowledge, a politics that embodies conflict over what some regard as simply neutral descriptions of the world and others regard as elite conceptions that empower some groups while disempowering others.

Speaking in general about how elite culture, habits, and "tastes" function, Pierre Bourdieu puts it this way:

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> The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberatively or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social difference.[4]

As he goes on to say, these cultural forms, "through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, . . . are bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of different classes and class fractions."[5] Thus, cultural form and content function as markers of class.[6] The granting of sole legitimacy to such a system of culture through its incorporation within the official centralized curriculum, then, creates a situation in which the markers of taste become the markers of people. The school becomes a class school.

The tradition of scholarship and activism that has formed me has been based on exactly these insights: the complex relationships between economic capital and cultural capital, the role of the school in reproducing and challenging the multitude of unequal relations of power (ones that go well beyond class, of course), and the ways the content and organization of the curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation function in all of this.

It is at exactly this time that these kinds of issues must be taken most seriously. This is a period—what we can call the *conservative restoration*—when the conflicts over the politics of official knowledge are severe. At stake I believe is the very idea of public education and the very idea of a curriculum that responds to the cultures and histories of large and growing segments of the American population. Even the commitments of the "moderate" Democratic administration now in Washington embody the tendencies I shall speak of here. In fact, it is exactly *because* there is now a somewhat more moderate administration at a national level that we must think quite carefully about what can happen in the future as it is pulled—for political reasons—in increasingly conservative directions.

I want to instantiate these arguments through an analysis of the proposals for a national curriculum and national testing. But in order to understand them, we must think *relationally*; we must connect these proposals to the larger program of the conservative restoration. I want to argue that behind the educational justifications for a national curriculum and national testing is an ideological attack that is very dangerous. Its effects will be truly damaging to those who already have the most to lose in this society. I shall first present a few interpretive cautions. Then I shall analyze the general project of the rightist agenda. Third, I shall show the connections between national curricula and national testing and the increasing

focus on privatization and "choice" plans. Finally, I want to discuss the patterns of differential benefits that will probably result from all this.

THE QUESTION OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Where should those of us who count ourselves a part of the long progressive tradition in education stand in relationship to the call for a national curriculum?

At the outset, I want to make something clear. I am not opposed in principle to a national curriculum. Nor am I opposed in principle to the idea or activity of testing. Rather, I want to provide a more conjunctural set of arguments, one based on a claim that at this time—given the balance of social forces—there are very real dangers of which we must be quite conscious. I shall largely confine myself to the negative case here. My task is a simple one: to raise enough serious questions to make us stop and think about the implications of moving in this direction in a time of conservative triumphalism.

We are not the only nation where a largely rightist coalition has put such proposals on the educational agenda. In England, a national curriculum is now, in essence, mostly in place, first introduced by the Thatcher government. It consists of "core and foundation subjects" such as mathematics, science, technology, history, art, music, physical education, and a modern foreign language. Working groups to determine the standard goals, "attainment targets," and content in each have already brought forth their results. This is accompanied by a national system of achievement testing—one that is expensive and takes a considerable amount of time in classrooms to do—for all students in state-run schools at age seven, eleven, fourteen, and sixteen.[7]

The assumption in many quarters here is that we must follow nations with national curricula and testing—Britain and especially Japan—or we shall be left behind. Yet it is crucial that we understand that we *already* have a national curriculum, but one that is determined by the complicated nexus of state textbook adoption policies and the market in text publishing.[8] Thus, we have to ask if a national curriculum—one that will undoubtedly be linked to a system of national goals and nationally standardized instruments of evaluation (quite probably standardized tests, due to time and money)—is *better* than an equally widespread but somewhat more hidden national curriculum established by state textbook adoption states such as California and Texas with their control of 20–30 percent of the market in textbooks.[9] Whether or not such a national curriculum already exists in a hidden way, though, there is a growing feeling that a standardized set of

national curricular goals and guidelines is essential to "raise standards" and to hold schools accountable for their students' achievement or lack of it.

Granted, many people from an array of educational and political positions are involved in calls for higher standards, more rigorous curricula at a national level, and a system of national testing. Yet we must always ask one question: What group is in leadership in these "reform" efforts? This of course leads to another, broader question. Given our answer to the former, who will benefit and who will lose as a result of all this? I shall contend that unfortunately rightist groups are indeed setting the political agenda in education and that, in general, the same pattern of benefits that has characterized nearly all areas of social policy—in which the top 20 percent of the population reaps 80 percent of the benefits[10]—will be reproduced here.

Of course, we need to be very cautious of the genetic fallacy, the assumption that *because* a policy or a practice originates within a distasteful position it is fundamentally determined, in all its aspects, by its origination within that tradition. Take Thorndike. The fact that his social beliefs were often repugnant—with his participation in the popular eugenics movement and his notions of racial, gender, and class hierarchies—does not necessarily destroy at each and every moment his research on learning. While I am not at all a supporter of this paradigm of research—and its epistemological and social implications still require major criticism[11]—this calls for a kind of argument different from that based on origination. (Indeed, one can find some progressive educators turning to Thorndike for support for some of their claims about what had to be transformed in our curriculum and pedagogy.)

Of course, it is not only those who are identified with the rightist project who argue for a national curriculum. Others who have historically been identified with a more liberal agenda have attempted to make a case.[12]

Smith, O'Day, and Cohen suggest a positive if cautionary vision for a national curriculum. A national curriculum would involve the invention of new examinations, a technically, conceptually, and politically difficult task. It would require the teaching of more rigorous content and thus would ask teachers to engage in more demanding and exciting work. Our teachers and administrators, hence, would have to "deepen their knowledge of academic subjects and change their conceptions of knowledge itself." Teaching and learning would have to be seen as "more active and inventive." Teachers, administrators, and students would need "to become more thoughtful, collaborative, and participatory. . . . Conversion to a national curriculum could only succeed if the work of conversion were conceived and undertaken as a grand, cooperative learning venture. Such an enter-

prise would fail miserably if it were conceived and organized chiefly as a technical process of developing new exams and materials and then 'disseminating' or implementing them."[13]

They go on to say:

> A worthwhile, effective national curriculum would also require the creation of much new social and intellectual connective tissue. For instance, the content and pedagogy of teacher education would have to be closely related to the content of and pedagogy of the schools' curriculum. The content and pedagogy of examinations would have to be tied to those of the curriculum and teacher education. Such connections do not now exist.[14]

The authors conclude that such a revitalized system, one in which such coordination would be built, "will not be easy, quick, or cheap," especially if it is to preserve variety and initiative. "If Americans continue to want educational reform on the cheap, a national curriculum would be a mistake."[15] I could not agree more with this last point.

Yet what they do not sufficiently recognize is that much of what they fear is already going on in the very linkage for which they call. Even more importantly, it is what they do not pay sufficient attention to—the connections between a national curriculum and national testing and the larger rightist agenda—that constitutes an even greater danger. It is this on which I wish to focus.

BETWEEN NEOCONSERVATISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

Conservatism by its very name announces one interpretation of its agenda. It conserves. Other interpretations are possible, of course. One could say, somewhat more wryly, that conservatism believes that nothing should be done for the first time.[16] Yet in many ways, in the current situation this is deceptive. For with the Right now in ascendancy in many nations, we are witnessing a much more activist project. Conservative politics now is very much the politics of alteration—not always, but clearly the idea of "Do nothing for the first time" is not a sufficient explanation of what is going on either in education or elsewhere.[17]

Conservatism has in fact meant different things at different times and places. At times, it will involve defensive actions; at other times, it will involve taking initiative against the status quo.[18] Today, we are witnessing both.

Because of this, it is important that I set out the larger social context in which the current politics of official knowledge operates. There has been a breakdown in the accord that guided a good deal of educational policy since World War II. Powerful groups within government and the economy,

and within "authoritarian populist"[19] social movements, have been able to redefine—often in very retrogressive ways—the terms of debate in education, social welfare, and other areas of the common good. What education is *for* is being transformed. No longer is education seen as part of a social alliance that combined many "minority"[20] groups, women, teachers, community activists, progressive legislators and government officials, and others who acted together to propose (limited) social democratic policies for schools (e.g., expanding educational opportunities, limited attempts at equalizing outcomes, developing special programs in bilingual and multicultural education, and so on). A new alliance has been formed, one that has increasing power in educational and social policy. This power bloc combines business with the New Right and with neoconservative intellectuals. Its interests lie not in increasing the life chances of women, people of color, or labor. Rather, it aims at providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the "ideal" home, family, and school.[21]

The power of this alliance can be seen in a number of educational policies and proposals: (1) programs for "choice," such as voucher plans and tax credits to make schools like the thoroughly idealized free-market economy; (2) the movement at national and state levels throughout the country to "raise standards" and mandate both teacher and student "competencies" and basic curricular goals and knowledge, increasingly now through the implementation of statewide and national testing; (3) the increasingly effective attacks on the school curriculum for its antifamily and anti–free enterprise "bias," its secular humanism, its lack of patriotism, and its supposed neglect of the knowledge and values of the "Western tradition" and of "real knowledge"; and (4) the growing pressure to make the perceived needs of business and industry into the primary goals of the school.[22]

In essence, the new alliance in favor of the conservative restoration has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those that serve as a guide to its economic and social-welfare goals. These include the expansion of the free market, the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs (though the Clinton administration may mediate this in symbolic and not very extensive—and not very expensive—ways), the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility, the lowering of people's expectations for economic security, and the popularization of what is clearly a form of Social Darwinist thinking.[23]

As I have argued at length elsewhere, the political Right in the United States has been very successful in mobilizing support *against* the educational system and its employees, often placing responsibility for the crisis in the economy on the schools. Thus, one of its major achievements has been

to shift the blame for unemployment and underemployment, for the loss of economic competitiveness, and for the supposed breakdown of traditional values and standards in the family, education, and paid and unpaid work places *from* the economic, cultural, and social policies and effects of dominant groups *to* the school and other public agencies. "Public" now is the center of all evil; "private" is the center of all that is good.[24]

In essence, then, four trends have characterized the conservative restoration both in the United States and in Britain: privatization, centralization, vocationalization, and differentiation.[25] These are actually largely the results of differences within the most powerful wings of this alliance—neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

Neoliberalism has a vision of the weak state. A society that lets the "invisible hand" of the free market guide *all* aspects of its forms of social interaction is seen as both efficient and democratic. On the other hand, neoconservatism is guided by a vision of the strong state in certain areas, especially over the politics of the body and gender and race relations; over standards, values, and conduct; and over what knowledge should be passed on to future generations.[26] Those two positions do not easily sit side by side in the conservative coalition.

Thus, the rightist movement is contradictory. Is there not something paradoxical about linking all of the feelings of loss and nostalgia to the unpredictability of the market, "in replacing loss by sheer flux"?[27]

The contradictions between neoconservative and neoliberal elements in the rightist coalition are "solved" through a policy of what Roger Dale has called conservative modernization.[28] Such a policy is engaged in

> simultaneously "freeing" individuals for economic purposes while controlling them for social purposes; indeed, in so far as economic "freedom" increases inequalities, it is likely to increase the need for social control. A "small, strong state" limits the range of its activities by transferring to the market, which it defends and legitimizes, as much welfare [and other activities] as possible. In education, the new reliance on competition and choice is not all pervasive; instead, "what is intended is a dual system, polarized between . . . market schools and minimum schools."[29]

That is, there will be a relatively less regulated and increasingly privatized sector for the children of the better off. For the rest—and the economic status and racial composition in, say, our urban areas of the people who attend these minimum schools will be thoroughly predictable—the schools will be tightly controlled and policed and will continue to be underfunded and unlinked to decent paid employment.

One of the major effects of the combination of marketization and a

strong state is "to remove educational policies from public debate." That is, the choice is left up to individual parents and "the hidden hand of unintended consequences does the rest." In the process, the very idea of education's being part of a *public* political sphere in which its means and ends are publicly debated atrophies.[30]

There are major differences between democratic attempts at enhancing people's rights over the policies and practices of schooling and the neoliberal emphasis on marketization and privatization. The goal of the former is to *extend politics*, to "revivify democratic practice by devising ways of enhancing public discussion, debate, and negotiation." It is inherently based on a vision of democracy that sees it as an educative practice. The latter, on the other hand, seeks to *contain politics.* It wants to *reduce all politics to economics*, to an ethic of "choice" and "consumption."[31] The world, in essence, becomes a vast supermarket.

Enlarging the private sector so that buying and selling—in a word competition—is the dominant ethic of society involves a set of closely related propositions. It assumes that more individuals are motivated to work harder under these conditions. After all, we "already know" that public servants are inefficient and slothful while private enterprises are efficient and energetic. It assumes that self-interest and competitiveness are the engines of creativity. More knowledge, more experimentation, is created and used to alter what we have now. In the process, less waste is created. Supply and demand stay in a kind of equilibrium. A more efficient machine is thus created, one that minimizes administrative costs and ultimately distributes resources more widely.[32]

This is of course not meant simply to privilege the few. However, it is the equivalent of saying that everyone has the right to climb the north face of the Eiger or scale Mount Everest without exception, providing of course that you are very good at mountain climbing and have the institutional and financial resources to do it.[33]

Thus, in a conservative society, access to a society's private resources (and, remember, the attempt is to make nearly *all* of society's resources private) is largely dependent on one's ability to pay. And this is dependent on one's being a person of an *entreprenurial or efficiently acquisitive class type.* On the other hand, society's public resources (that rapidly decreasing segment) are dependent on need.[34] In a conservative society, the former is to be maximized, the latter is to be minimized.

However, the conservatism of the conservative alliance does not merely depend in a large portion of its arguments and policies on a particular view of human nature—a view of human nature as primarily self-interested. It has gone further; it has set out to degrade that human nature, to force all people to conform to what at first could only be pretended to be true.

Unfortunately, in no small measure it has succeeded. Perhaps blinded by their own absolutist and reductive vision of what it means to be human, many of our political "leaders" do not seem to be capable of recognizing what they have done. They have set out, aggressively, to drag down the character of a people,[35] while at the same time attacking the poor and the disenfranchised for their supposed lack of values and character.

But I digress here and some of my anger begins to show. You will forgive me I trust; but if we cannot allow ourselves to be angry about the lives of our children, what can we be angry about?

CURRICULUM, TESTING, AND A COMMON CULTURE

As Whitty reminds us, what is striking about the rightist coalition's policies is its capacity to connect the emphasis on traditional knowledge and values, authority, standards, and national identity of the neoconservatives with the emphasis on the extension of market-driven principles into all areas of our society advocated by neoliberals. Thus, a national curriculum—coupled with rigorous national standards and a system of testing that is performance-driven—is able at one and the same time to be aimed at "modernization" of the curriculum and the efficient "production" of better "human capital" *and* represent a nostalgic yearning for a romanticized past.[36] When tied to a program of market-driven policies such as voucher and choice plans, such a national system of standards, testing, and curricula—while perhaps internally inconsistent—is an ideal compromise within the rightist coalition.

But one could still ask, will not a national curriculum coupled with a system of national achievement testing contradict in practice the concomitant emphasis on privatization and school choice? Can one really do both simultaneously? I want to claim here that this apparent contradiction may not be as substantial as one might expect. One long-term aim of powerful elements within the conservative coalition is not necessarily to transfer power from the local level to the center, though for some neoconservatives who favor a strong state when it comes to morality, values, and standards this may indeed be the case. Rather, these elements would prefer to decenter such power altogether and redistribute it according to market forces and thus tacitly disempower those who already have less power while using a rhetoric of empowering the "consumer." In part, both a national curriculum and national testing can be seen as "necessary concessions in pursuit of this long term aim."[37]

In a time of a loss of government legitimacy and a crisis in educational authority relations, the government must be seen to be doing something about raising educational standards. After all, this is exactly what it

promises to offer to consumers of education. A national curriculum is crucial here. Its major value does not lie in its supposed encouragement of standardized goals and content and of levels of achievement in what are considered the most important subject areas, though this of course should not be totally dismissed. However, its major role is in *providing the framework within which national testing can function.* It enables the establishment of a procedure that can supposedly give consumers "quality tags" on schools so that "free-market forces" can operate to the fullest extent possible. If we are to have a free market in education with the consumer presented with an attractive range of "choice," a national curriculum and especially national testing in essence then act as a "state watchdog committee" to control the "worst excesses" of the market.[38]

However, let us be honest to our own history here. Even with the supposed emphasis on portfolios and other more flexible forms of evaluation, there is no evidence at all to support the hope that what will be ultimately and permanently installed—even if only because of time and expense—will be something other than a system of mass standardized paper-and-pencil tests.

Yet we must also be absolutely clear about the social function of such a proposal. A national curriculum may be seen as a device for accountability, to help us establish benchmarks so that parents can evaluate schools. But it also puts into motion a system in which children themselves will be ranked and ordered as never before. One of its primary roles will be to act as "a mechanism for differentiating children more rigidly against fixed norms, *the social meanings and derivation of which are not available for scrutiny.*"[39]

Thus, while the proponents of a national curriculum may see it as a means to create social cohesion and to give all of us the capacity to improve our schools by measuring them against "objective" criteria, the effects will be the opposite. The criteria may seem objective, but the results will not be, given existing differences in resources and in class and race segregation. Rather than cultural and social cohesion, differences between "us" and the "others" will be socially produced even more strongly and the attendant social antagonisms and cultural and economic destruction will worsen. (This will be the case as well with the current infatuation with outcome-based education, a new term for older versions of educational stratification.)

Richard Johnson helps us understand the social processes at work here.

> This nostalgia for "cohesion" is interesting, but the great delusion is that all pupils—black and white, working class, poor, and middle-class, boys and girls—will receive the curriculum in the same way. Actually, it will be read in different ways, according to how pupils are placed in social relationships and culture. A common curriculum, in a heterogeneous society, is not a recipe for "cohesion," but for resistance and the

> renewal of divisions. Since it always rests on cultural foundations of its own, it will put pupils in their places, not according to "ability," but according to how their cultural communities rank along the criteria taken as the "standard." A curriculum which does not "explain itself," is not ironical or self-critical, will always have this effect.[40]

These are significant points, especially the call for all curricula to *explain themselves.* In complex societies like our own, ones riven with differential power, the only kind of cohesion that is possible is one in which we overtly recognize differences and inequalities. The curriculum then should not be presented as objective. Rather, it must constantly *subjectify* itself. That is, it must "acknowledge its own roots" in the culture, history, and social interests out of which it arose. It will accordingly neither homogenize this culture, history, and social interest, nor homogenize the students. The "same treatment" by sex, race and ethnicity, or class is not the same at all. A democratic curriculum and pedagogy must begin with a recognition of "the different social positionings and cultural repertoires in the classrooms, and the power relations between them." Thus, if we are concerned with "really equal treatment"—as I think we must be—we must base a curriculum on a recognition of those differences that empower and depower our students in identifiable ways.[41]

Foucault reminded us that if you want to understand how power works, look at the margins, look at the knowledge, self-understandings, and struggles of those whom powerful groups in this society have cast off as "the other."[42] The New Right and its allies have created entire groups as these "others"—people of color, women who refuse to accept external control of their lives and bodies, gays and lesbians, the poor, and as I know from my own biography the vibrant culture of working-class life (and the list could continue). It is in the recognition of these differences that curriculum dialogue can go on. Such a national dialogue begins with the concrete and public exploration of "how we are differently positioned in society and culture." What the New Right embargoes—the knowledge of the margins, of how culture and power are indissolubly linked—becomes a set of indispensable resources here.[43]

The proposed national curriculum of course would recognize some of these differences. But, as Linda Christian-Smith and I argue in *The Politics of the Textbook,* the national curriculum serves to partly acknowledge difference and at the same time to reincorporate it within the supposed consensus that exists about what we should teach.[44] It is part of an attempt to recreate hegemonic power that has been partly fractured by social movements.

The very idea of a common culture on which a national curriculum—as defined by neoconservatives—is to be built is itself a form of cultural politics. In the immense linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity that

makes up the constant creativity and flux in which we live, it is the cultural policy of the Right to "override" such diversity. Thinking it is reinstituting a common culture, it is instead *inventing* one, in much the same way as E. D. Hirsch has tried to do in his self-parody of what it means to be literate.[45] A uniform culture never truly existed in the United States, only a selective version, an invented tradition that is reinstalled (though in different forms) in times of economic crisis and a crisis in authority relations, both of which threaten the hegemony of the culturally and economically dominant.

The expansion of voices in the curriculum and the vehement responses of the Right become crucial here. Multicultural and antiracist curricula present challenges to the program of the New Right, challenges that go to the core of their vision. A largely monocultural national curriculum (which deals with diversity by centering the always ideological "we" and usually then simply mentioning "the contributions" of people of color, women, and others), emphasizes the maintenance of existing hierarchies of what counts as official knowledge, the revivifying of traditional Western standards and values, the return to a "disciplined" (and one could say largely masculinist) pedagogy, and so on, and a threat to any of these is also a threat to the entire world view of the Right.[46]

The idea of a "common culture"—in the guise of the romanticized Western tradition of the neoconservatives (or even as expressed in the longings of some socialists)—does not give enough thought, then, to the immense cultural heterogeneity of a society that draws its cultural traditions from all over the world. The task of defending public education as *public*, as deserving of widespread support "across an extremely diverse and deeply divided people, involves a lot more than restoration."[47]

The debate in England is similar. A national curriculum is seen by the Right as essential to prevent relativism. For most of its proponents, a common curriculum must basically transmit both the "common culture" and the high culture that has grown out of it. Anything else will result in incoherence, no culture, merely a "void." Thus, a national culture is "defined in exclusive, nostalgic, and frequently racist terms."[48]

Richard Johnson's analysis of this documents its social logic.

> In formulations like these, culture is thought of as a homogeneous way of life or tradition, not as a sphere of difference, relationships, or power. No recognition is given to the real diversity of social orientations and cultures within a given nation-state or people. Yet a selective version of a national culture is installed as an absolute condition for any social identity at all. The borrowing, mixing and fusion of elements from different cultural systems, a commonplace everyday practice in societies like [ours], is unthinkable within this framework, or is

> seen as a kind of cultural misrule that will produce nothing more than a void. So the "choices" are between . . . a national culture or no culture at all.[49]

The racial subtext here is perhaps below the surface, but is still present in significant ways.[50]

There are many more things that could be said. However, one thing is perfectly clear. The national curriculum is a mechanism for the political control of knowledge.[51] Once established, there will be little chance of turning back. It may be modified by the conflicts that its content generates, but it is in its very establishment that its politics lies. *Only by recognizing its ultimate logic of false consensus and, especially, its undoubted hardening in the future as it becomes linked to a massive system of national testing can we fully understand this.* When this is connected to the other parts of the rightist agenda—marketization and privatization—there is sufficient reason to give us pause, especially given the increasingly powerful conservative gains at local, regional, and state levels.

WHO BENEFITS?

One final question remains, one that I hinted at previously. Since leadership in such efforts to reform our educational system and its curriculum, teaching, and evaluative policies and practices is largely exercised by the rightist coalition, we need always to ask "Whose reforms are these?" and "Who benefits?"

This is indeed reform on the cheap. A system of national curricula and national testing cannot help but ratify and exacerbate gender, race, and class differences in the absence of sufficient resources, both human and material. Thus, when the fiscal crisis in most of our urban areas is so severe that classes are being held in gymnasiums and hallways, when many schools do not have enough funds to keep open for the full 180 days a year, when buildings are literally disintegrating before our very eyes,[52] when in some cities three classrooms must share one set of textbooks at the elementary level,[53] it is simply a flight of fantasy to assume that more standardized testing and national curriculum guidelines are the answer. With the destruction of the economic infrastructure of these same cities through capital flight, with youth unemployment at nearly 75 percent in many of them, with almost nonexistent health care, with lives that are often devoid of hope for meaningful mobility because of what might simply be best called the pornography of poverty, to assume that establishing curricular benchmarks based on problematic cultural visions and more rigorous testing will do more than affix labels to poor students in a way that is seemingly more neutral is also to totally misunderstand the situation. It will lead to more

blame being affixed to students and poor parents and especially to the schools that they attend. It will also be very expensive to institute. Enter voucher and choice plans with even wider public approval.

Basil Bernstein's analysis of the complexities of this situation and of its ultimate results is more than a little useful here. As he says, "the pedagogic practices of the new vocationalism [neoliberalism] and those of the old autonomy of knowledge [neoconservatism] represent a conflict between different elitist ideologies, one based on the class hierarchy of the market and the other based on the hierarchy of knowledge and its class supports."[54] Whatever the oppositions between market- and knowledge-oriented pedagogic and curricular practices, present racial, gender, and class-based inequalities are likely to be reproduced.[55]

What he calls an "autonomous visible pedagogy"—one that relies on overt standards and highly structured models of teaching and evaluation—justifies itself by referring to its intrinsic worthiness. The value of the acquisition of say, the Western tradition lies in its foundational status for "all we hold dear" and in the norms and dispositions that it instills in the students. "Its arrogance lies in its claim to moral high ground and to the superiority of its culture, its indifference to its own stratification consequences, its conceit in its lack of relation to anything other than itself, its self-referential abstracted autonomy."[56]

Its supposed opposite—based on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions "required" by business and industry and seeking to transform schooling around market principles—is actually a much more complex ideological construction:

> It incorporates some of the criticism of the autonomous visible pedagogy . . . criticism of the failure of the urban school, of the passivity and inferior status [given to] parents, of the boredom of . . . pupils and their consequent disruptions of and resistance to irrelevant curricula, of assessment procedures which itemize relative failure rather than the positive strength of the acquirer. But it assimilates these criticisms into a new discourse: a new pedagogic Janus. . . . The explicit commitment to greater choice by parents . . . is not a celebration of participatory democracy, but a thin cover for the old stratification of schools and curricula.[57]

Are Bernstein's conclusions correct? Will the combination of national curricula, testing, and privatization actually lead away from democratic processes and outcomes? Here we must look not to Japan (where many people unfortunately have urged us to look) but to Britain, where this combination of proposals is much more advanced.

In Britain, there is now considerable evidence that the overall effects of

the various market-oriented policies introduced by the rightist government are *not* genuine pluralism or the "interrupting [of] traditional modes of social reproduction." Far from this, they may instead largely provide "a legitimating gloss for the perpetuation of long-standing forms of structured inequality."[58] The fact that one of its major effects has been the depowering and deskilling of large numbers of teachers is not inconsequential as well.[59]

Edwards, Gewirtz, and Whitty have come to similar conclusions. In essence, the rightist preoccupation with "escape routes" diverts attention from the effects of such policies on those (probably the majority) who will be left behind.[60]

Thus, it is indeed possible—actually probable—that market-oriented approaches in education (even when coupled with a strong state over a system of national curriculum and testing) will exacerbate already existing and widespread class and race divisions. "Freedom" and "choice" in the new educational market will be for those who can afford them. "Diversity" in schooling will simply be a more polite word for the condition of educational apartheid.[61]

AFTERTHOUGHTS BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

I have been more than a little negative in my appraisal here. I have argued that the politics of official knowledge—in this case surrounding proposals for a national curriculum and for national testing—cannot be fully understood in an isolated way. All of this needs to be situated in larger ideological dynamics in which we are seeing an attempt by a new hegemonic bloc to transform our very ideas of the purpose of education. This transformation involves a major shift—one that Dewey would have shuddered at—in which democracy becomes an economic, not a political, concept and where the idea of the public good withers at its very roots.

But perhaps I have been too negative. Perhaps there are good reasons to support national curricula and national testing, even as currently constituted precisely *because* of the power of the rightist coalition.

It is possible, for example, to argue that *only* by establishing a national curriculum and national testing can we stop the fragmentation that will accompany the neoliberal portion of the rightist project. Only such a system would protect the very idea of a *public* school; would protect teachers' unions, which in a privatized and marketized system would lose much of their power; would protect poor children and children of color from the vicissitudes of the market. After all, it is the free market that created the poverty and destruction of community that they are experiencing in the first place.

It is also possible to argue, as Geoff Whitty has in the British case, that the very fact of a national curriculum encourages both the formation of intense public debate about whose knowledge is declared official and the creation of progressive coalitions across a variety of differences against such state-sponsored definitions of legitimate knowledge.[62] It could be the vehicle for the *return* of the political, which the Right so wishes to evacuate from our public discourse and which the efficiency experts wish to make into merely a technical concern.

Thus, it is quite possible that the establishment of a national curriculum could have the effect of unifying oppositional and oppressed groups. Given the fragmented nature of progressive educational movements today, and given a system of school financing and governance that forces groups to focus largely on the local or state level, one function of a national curriculum could be the coalescence of groups around a common agenda. A *national* movement for a more democratic vision of school reform could be the result.

In many ways—and I am very serious here—we owe principled conservatives (and there are many) a debt of gratitude in an odd way. It is their realization that curriculum issues are not only about techniques, about how-tos, that has helped stimulate the current debate. When many women, people of color, and labor organizations (these groups are obviously not mutually exclusive) fought for decades to have this society recognize the selective tradition in official knowledge, these movements were often (though not always) silenced, ignored, or reincorporated into dominant discourses.[63] The power of the Right—in its contradictory attempt to challenge what is now taught, to establish a national common culture, and to make that culture part of a vast supermarket of choices and thus to purge cultural politics from our sensibilities—has now made it impossible for the politics of official knowledge to be ignored.

Should we then support a national curriculum and national testing to keep total privatization and marketization at bay? Under current conditions, I do not think it is worth the risk—not only because of its extensive destructive potential in the long and short run, but also because I think it misconstrues and reifies the issues of a common curriculum and a common culture.

Here I must repeat the arguments I made in the second edition of *Ideology and Curriculum*.[64] The current call to "return" to a "common culture" in which all students are to be given the values of a specific group—usually the dominant group—does not in my mind concern a common culture at all. Such an approach hardly scratches the surface of the political and educational issues involved. A common culture can never be the general extension to everyone of what a minority mean and believe. Rather, and

crucially, it requires not the stipulation of the facts, concepts, skills, and values that make us all "culturally literate," *but the creation of the conditions necessary for all people to participate in the creation and recreation of meanings and values.* It requires a democratic process in which all people—not simply those who are the intellectual guardians of the Western tradition—can be involved in the deliberation over what is important. It should go without saying that this necessitates the removal of the very real material obstacles—unequal power, wealth, time for reflection—that stand in the way of such participation.[65] As Raymond Williams so perceptively put it:

> The idea of a common culture is in no sense the idea of a simply consenting, and certainly not of a merely conforming society. [It involves] a common determination of meanings by all the people, acting sometimes as individuals, sometimes as groups, in a process which has no particular end, and which can never be supposed at any time to have finally realized itself, to have become complete. In this common process, the only absolute will be the keeping of the channels and institutions of communication clear so that all may contribute, and be helped to contribute.[66]

In speaking of a common culture, then, we should *not* be talking of something uniform, something to which we all conform. Instead, what we should be asking is "precisely, for that free, contributive and common *process* of participation in the creation of meanings and values."[67] It is the very blockage of that process in our institutions that must concern all of us.

Our current language speaks to how this process is being defined during the conservative restoration. Instead of people who participate in the struggle to build and rebuild our educational, cultural, political, and economic relations, we are defined as consumers (of that "particularly acquisitive class type"). This is truly an extraordinary concept, for it sees people as either stomachs or furnaces. We use and use up. We do not create. Someone else does that. This is disturbing enough in general, but in education it is truly disabling. When we leave the creation of culture to the guardians of tradition, the efficiency and accountability experts, the holders of "real knowledge," or to the Whittles of this world (who will build us franchised "schools of choice" for the generation of profit),[68] we place at great risk especially those students who are already economically and culturally disenfranchised by our dominant institutions.

As I noted at the very outset, we live in a society with identifiable winners and losers. In the future, we may say that the losers made poor "consumer choices" and, well, that is the way markets operate, after all. But is this society really only one vast market?

As Whitty reminds us, in a time when so many people have found out from their daily experiences that the supposed "grand narratives" of progress are deeply flawed, is it appropriate to return to yet another grand

narrative, the market?[69] The results of this narrative are visible every day in the destruction of our communities and environment, in the increasing racism of the society, in the faces and bodies of our children, who see the future and turn away.

Many people are able to disassociate themselves from these realities. There is an almost pathological distancing among the affluent.[70] Yet how can one not be morally outraged at the growing gap between rich and poor, the persistence of hunger and homelessness, the deadly absence of medical care, the degradations of poverty? If *this* were the (always self-critical and constantly subjectifying) centerpiece of a national curriculum (but then how could it be tested cheaply and efficiently and how could the Right control its ends and means?), perhaps such a curriculum would be worthwhile after all. Until such a time, however, we can take a rightist slogan made popular in another context and apply it to their educational agenda: "Just say no."

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Notes

1 Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990); and idem, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

2 See Michael W. Apple, *Teachers & Texts: A Political Economy of Class & Gender Relations in Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

3 See Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control Volume 3* (New York: Routledge, 1977); and Michael W. Apple, "Social Crisis and Curriculum Accords," *Educational Theory* 38 (Spring 1988): 191–201.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 7.

5 Ibid., pp. 5–6.

6 Ibid., p. 2.

7 Geoff Whitty, "Education, Economy and National Culture," in *Social and Forms of Modernity*, ed. Robert Bolock and Kenneth Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 292.

8 See Apple, *Teachers & Texts*; and idem and Linda Christian-Smith, eds., *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9 Ibid.

10 See Michael W. Apple, "American Realities: Poverty, Economy and Education," in *Dropouts from School*, ed. Lois Weis, Eleanor Farrar, and Hugh Petrie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 205–23; Sheldon Danzinger and Daniel Weinberg, eds., *Fighting Poverty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Gary Burtless, ed., *A Future of Lousy Jobs?* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).

11 See, e.g., Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981). Feminist criticisms of science are essential to this task. See, for example, Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Sandra Harding and Jean F. Barr, eds., *Sex and Scientific Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Nancy Tuana, ed., *Feminism and Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Sandra Harding, *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

12 See Marshall S. Smith, Jennifer O'Day, and David K. Cohen, "National Curriculum, American Style: What Might It Look Like?" *American Educator* 14 (Winter 1990): 10–17, 40–47.

13 Ibid., p. 46.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ted Honderich, *Conservatism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 1.

17 Ibid., p. 4.

18 Ibid., p. 15.

19 See Apple, *Official Knowledge.*

20 I put the word "minority" in quotation marks here to remind us that the vast majority of the world's population is composed of persons of color. It would be wholly salutary for our ideas about culture and education to remember this fact.

21 Apple, *Official Knowledge.*

22 Apple, *Teachers & Texts;* and idem, *Official Knowledge.*

23 See Ann Bastian et al., *Choosing Equality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

24 See Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power* (New York: Routledge, ARK Edition, 1985).

25 Andy Green, "The Peculiarities of English Education," in *Education Limited,* ed. Education Group II (London: Unwin Hyman 1991), p. 27.

26 Allen Hunter, *Children in the Service of Conservatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, Institute for Legal Studies, 1988). Neoliberalism actually does not ignore the idea of a strong state, but it wants to limit it to specific areas (e.g., defense of markets).

27 Richard Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," in *Education Limited,* ed., Education Group II, p. 40.

28 Quoted in Tony Edwards, Sharon Gewirtz, and Geoff Whitty, "Whose Choice of Schools?," in *Voicing Concerns: Sociological Perspectives on Contemporary Educational Reform,* ed. Madeleine Arnot and Len Barton (London: Triangle Books, 1992), p. 156.

29 Ibid. The authors are quoting from Roger Dale, "The Thatcherite Project in Education," *Critical Social Policy* 9 (1989): 4–19.

30 "Introduction to Part Three-Alternatives: Public Education and a New Professionalism," in *Education Limited,* ed. Education Group II, p. 268.

31 Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," p. 68.

32 Honderich, *Conservatism,* p. 104.

33 Ibid., pp. 99–100.

34 Ibid., p. 89.

35 Ibid., p. 81.

36 Whitty, "Education, Economy and National Culture," p. 294.

37 Green, "The Peculiarities of English Education," p. 29.

38 Ibid., I am making a "functional" not necessarily an "intentional" explanation here. See Daniel Liston, *Capitalist Schools* (New York: Routledge, 1988). For an interesting discussion of how such testing programs may actually work against more democratic efforts at school reform, see Linda Darling-Hammond, "Bush's Testing Plan Undercuts School Reforms," *Rethinking Schools* 6 (March/April 1992): 18.

39 Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," p. 79; emphasis in original.

40 Ibid., p. 79–80.

41 Ibid., p. 80. See also Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (August 1989): 297–324.

42 See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 34–75.

43 Richard Johnson, "Ten Theses on a Monday Morning," in *Education Limited*, ed. Education Group II, p. 320.

44 See Apple and Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*; Apple, *Official Knowledge*; and Whitty "Education, Economy and National Culture," p. 28.

45 Johnson, "Ten Theses on a Monday Morning," p. 319; and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

46 Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," p. 51. See also Susan Rose, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

47 "Preface," in *Education Limited*, ed. Education Group II, p. x.

48 Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," p. 71.

49 Ibid.

50 For a more complete analysis of racial subtexts in our policies and practices, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

51 Johnson, "A New Road to Serfdom?," p. 82.

52 See Apple, *Official Knowledge*.

53 See the compelling accounts in Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

54 Basil Bernstein, *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse: Class, Codes and Control, Volume 4* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 63.

55 Ibid., p. 64.

56 Ibid., p. 87.

57 Ibid.

58 Geoff Whitty, "Recent Education Reform: Is It a Post-Modern Phenomenon?" (Unpublished paper presented at the Conference on Reproduction, Social Inequality, and Resistance, University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany, October 1–4, 1991), pp. 20–21.

59 Compare this to the U.S. experience in Michael W. Apple and Susan Jungck, "You Don't Have to Be a Teacher to Teach This Unit," *American Educational Research Journal* 27 (Summer 1990): 227–51.

60 Edwards, Gewirtz, and Whitty, "Whose Choice of Schools?," p. 151.

61 Green, "The Peculiarities of English Education," p. 30. For further discussion of the ideological, social, and economic effects of such choice plans see Stan Karp, "Massachusetts 'Choice' Plan Undercuts Poor Districts," *Rethinking Schools* 6 (March/April 1992): 4; and Robert Lowe, "The Illusion of " 'Choice'," *Rethinking Schools* 6 (March/April 1992): 1, 21–23.

62 Geoff Whitty, personal correspondence. Andy Green, in the English context, argues as well that there are merits in having a *broadly defined* national curriculum, but goes on to say that this makes it even more essential that individual schools have a serious degree of control over its implementation, "not least so that it provides a check against the use of education by the state as a means of promoting a particular ideology" (Green, "The Peculiarities of English Education," p. 22). The fact that a large portion of the teachers in England have, in essence, gone on strike—*refused* to give the national test—provides some support for Whitty's arguments.

63 See Apple and Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*.

64 Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, pp. xiii–xiv.

65 Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* (New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 35–36.

66 Ibid., pp. 37–38.

67 Ibid., p. 68.

68 See Apple, *Official Knowledge*.

69 Whitty, "Education, Economy and National Culture," p. 290.

70 See the discussion in Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*.