

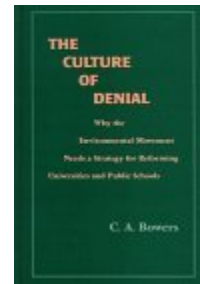
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



C. A. Bowers. *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. x + 277 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3464-2; \$30.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3463-5.

Reviewed by Eric Shibuya (Colorado State University)
Published on H-Teachpol (May, 1998)



Chet Bowers puts forth a powerful argument. His critique extends not only to society's preoccupation with technology, "progress," and economic "growth," but also points to how our educational system has aided in instilling and reinforcing these values, from primary education to university levels. Bowers argues that the educational system needs to be completely restructured to instill values and teach practices that lead to ecologically sustainable forms of living. Along the way, Bowers points to how even thinkers considered "reformists" contribute to ecologically unsustainable ways of thinking. What is being called for here is not simply the addition of environmental studies programs, or the add-on of "green" courses into the curriculum, but rather a fundamental change in the foundations, the very values, that our educational system strives to propagate.

Bowers first discusses what he calls the "culture of denial," the refusal to examine the possibility that how we live our lives now may not be environmentally sustainable. The continuing obsession of consumerism and commercialism, the unquestioning faith in technological "fixes," and escapist practices via television or (more insidiously) the Internet: these practices all insure that the bulk of the population will not stop to question where we are going, what road we are traveling on. Rather than leading to questions of current practices, Bowers argues that our educational system has reinforced this culture of denial. It has done this by its presentation of history as linear, "progress" from traditional (bad) to "modern." Further, the educational system has focused upon the individual as an autonomous unit, and its insistence that knowledge and discovery comes from within the individual misses the point that every individual is in fact culturally, socially grounded. Finally, (and this is

especially true at the higher levels of education), Bowers notes that "higher-level" knowledge is privileged, meaning that type of knowledge based on "rational" principles (e.g., the scientific method). Forms of knowledge that harken back to "tradition" are labeled as backward and not useful to our discussion; they do not "further knowledge." As such, even reform movements such as those advocated by Paulo Friere or the postmodern movement do not give us avenues of action that are environmentally sustainable. Postmodernism, for instance, while claiming to be a break from modernity, actually extends the modernity project in that postmodernism continues to view the individual as the basic unit of analysis, and to view past traditions and ways of life as backward. All of these values are so taken for granted that even these so-called reform movements are based somewhat on these foundations. Bowers' work seeks to undermine these values, to question their authority. Quite literally, a paradigm shift is in order.

All that being said, there are some shortcomings. First, and this is a minor quibble, Bowers notes that the modern mindset is instilled within children and a deeply unconscious level, and yet his focus here is to confront these values later in life, notably at the university level, at which point it may be too late. (Bowers does later discuss primary socialization, but this only briefly, and much later in the work). Also, Bowers notes that the cultural elite come from similar educational backgrounds, yet his focus here is on our public school system, then our universities. It may do well to point to how our elites are trained in our *private* school system, where certainly a different kind of socialization—that of class—is going on as well. There is also some cynicism as to how effective our basic educational system really is. Bowers notes, "most

students graduate from high school with such a limited knowledge base that they are able to do little more than be compliant consumers and work in low-status jobs” (p. 38). This may be the case, but it is exactly at this level that the ecologically unsustainable practices have already been instilled within the individual. Also, while Bowers’ criticism of emancipatory writers such as Paulo Friere does point to Friere’s conceptualization of the individual as atomistic, it should be noted that Friere’s work isn’t focused upon the ecological ties between the individual and society, but rather the break from what Friere argues are constraints that are unnecessary. (And even Bowers notes that some traditional forms of living should be put aside [p. 10].) In contrast, Bowers’ work here focuses upon the ecological limits that need to be placed on any form of human emancipation. To therefore argue that Friere and others that follow him miss the point that emancipation does have its limits may go too far.

Next, Bowers often uses the term “tradition” rather loosely. At times it means those patterns of thinking which lead to environmentally sustainable ways of life, but at others Bowers discusses the modern mindset as being instilled as “traditional,” and also points out that there are some traditions which are not ecologically friendly. (This is an ironic point: Bowers argues, quite rightly, that those traditions which are not ecologically friendly need to be discarded. But, isn’t the discarding of “nonuseful” traditions symbolic of modernity?) Also, part of Bowers’ discussion of tradition seems to place tradition as something that isn’t fluid, when in fact his conceptualization of the modern mindset and its extension into postmodernism shows very well how “traditions” can change and metamorphosize. It is only much later in the work (p. 168 ff.) that Bowers acknowledges the fluidity of tradition, at which point the reader may be somewhat frustrated by the term.

The final shortcoming is that while Bowers touches upon the internationalization of the mindset of modernity, there is very little discussion as to the power and influence of the international system, or the power of the state in maintaining the modern mindset. There is a recognition that those in power, such as university administrators, will feel threatened by a movement that undermines “high status” knowledge, but this recognition

doesn’t go further, notably to government officials (who make the funding decisions for public schools and universities), and multinational capitalists (who donate huge funds to universities). Bowers recognizes and accurately points to the individual as being culturally and socially based, but makes little mention until much later in the book of how the “inertia of history,” to borrow from Foucault, makes social change truly difficult.

Culture of Denial is a powerful, controversial book. It will stimulate discussion in a course not only in environmental politics or environmental education, but would be an effective addition even in a wider course on pedagogy, as it will force both students and instructors to examine what it is that they are teaching (and learning) beyond what is made explicit. Some final words of warning, however. This is not an easily accessible book, which is most unfortunate, as this book deserves a wider audience that it will probably receive. *Culture of Denial* can be a hard read, and there is little doubt that its content will be resisted by most students, if not by some academics. Bowers is quite clear in his presentation, that the ecological crisis has reached a point where it may no longer be viable to consider “academic freedom” as an unqualified good: “The modern understanding of academic freedom must now be reconstituted in ways that foreground human dependency on increasingly stressed ecosystems” (p. 202).

There will also no doubt come the claim that what Bowers is advocating is not education per se, but indoctrination. On this point, the entire argument presented in *Culture of Denial* is that our educational system as it stands indoctrinates students into a mindset that is not ecologically viable in the long term. As such, the accusation that this is an indoctrinating program is only damning if one denies the current indoctrination of taken-for-granted values within our school system. All in all, this is a powerful work, and if both students and instructors are willing to work through it, it will provide a strong learning experience and a challenge to previously taken-for-granted understandings.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol>

Citation: Eric Shibuya. Review of Bowers, C. A., *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2066>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.