

# THE SCHOOLS WE NEED AND WHY WE DON'T HAVE THEM

E. D. Hirsch Jr  
Doubleday 1996

## Chapter 4 : Critique of a Thoughtworld 6. Anti-Intellectualism

As I sit here writing about anti-intellectualism in American education, a debate is raging in my state, Virginia, over a proposal to "raise standards of learning" by mandating knowledge standards for each grade. The factual knowledge that is specified in the Virginia draft is far more explicit than in any currently existing state guidelines. But prospects for approval in any but watered-down form are dim. According to the *Washington Post* (March 29, 1995), the draft guidelines "have provoked scathing criticism from teachers' groups, superintendents, parent organizations, education professors, and legislators, both Republican and Democrat. Some say the goals are unrealistically ambitious for the lower grades, [and] promote rote memorization over critical thinking." (Now, at a later date, as I revise this text, I can report that a watered-down compromise was reached.) That American professors of education are more hostile to the teaching of factual knowledge than education professors elsewhere in the world offers another point of entry into the American educational Thoughtworld. But, as the report from the *Washington Post* indicates, it is not just education professors who express hostility to "rote memorization." That attitude also rallies Republicans and Democrats, parents and legislators, and, as I infer from the tenor of the *Post* article, newspaper reporters as well. There is widespread antiknowledge sentiment in American thought that Richard Hofstadter has labeled "anti-intellectualism."<sup>1</sup>

It is a convenient term, but I wonder whether Hofstadter's definition of it [107] does adequate justice to its attractions for a wide spectrum of Americans. Hofstadter defines anti-intellectualism as contempt for "knowledge for its own sake." This definition perhaps misses something essential, namely, that the knowledge most often scorned by Americans tends to be academic knowledge connected with scientific lore and past traditions—the kind taught in lecture halls and recorded mostly in books. Disinterested curiosity is not in itself scorned by Americans—only disinterested curiosity about the contents of lectures and books.

Of course, Hofstadter is right that interested, as distinct from disinterested, practicality is a persistent American trait. We are fondest of knowledge that has utility for economic and moral improvement, a preference I happen to share. Befitting our early image of ourselves as giving mankind a new, Edenic start in history, Americans have valued knowledge that comes directly from experience more than knowledge that comes from books. "Critical thinking" about one's own direct experience is to be preferred to "rote memorization" of the writings of others. Huck Finn is an archetypal American antibook figure. He is going to get *his* education by critically thinking about what he discovers on the river and in the Territory. Nature and experience will be his teachers. Huck's attitudes are not very different from those of Walt Whitman:

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer;  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;  
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;  
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;  
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.<sup>2</sup>*

Whitman wrote those lines in 1865. American thought has been conflicted about the value of book learning since the mid-nineteenth century. With one part of our minds we have remained loyal to the Jeffersonian and Enlightenment faith in the utility of scholarship, research, and ever-advancing knowledge. So strong was our faith in the economic, political, and social efficacy of universal education that this Enlightenment trait of American thinking was salient enough to be noted by Tocqueville: "They [the Americans] have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man, they judge the diffusion of knowledge [ 108 ] [also Jefferson's phrase] must necessarily be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal."<sup>3</sup>

But since the mid-nineteenth century, American distrust of book learning has been equally strong. Books became associated with a corrupt tradition and sinful Europe. Americans are people who look forward, not back. "The eyes of man are set in his forehead, not his hindhead" (Emerson). "History is bunk" (Henry Ford). A much deeper and better education is to be gained from direct, practical experience than from listening to lectures in lecture rooms. One becomes truly educated not by reading but by interacting with people and things in the vast American landscape. Thus arose a conflict between our Enlightenment tradition, which connected democracy with

<sup>1</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Part I*, Chapter 18.

book learning, and our Romantic tradition, which disparaged culture and books. The two conflicting traditions were personified in nineteenth-century Boston by Horace Mann on the one hand and Ralph Waldo Emerson on the other. After listening to Mann expatiate on the importance of the common school to American democracy, Emerson made the following disdainful comment in his journal:

*Yesterday Mr Mann' s address on Education. It was full of the modern gloomy view of our democratical institutions, and hence the inference to the importance of Schools. . . . Education! . . . We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years & come out at last with a bellyfull of words & do not know a thing. We cannot use our hands or our legs or our eyes or our arms. We do not know an edible root in the woods. We cannot tell our course by the stars nor the hour of the day by the sun. It is well if we can swim & skate. We are afraid of a horse, of a cow, of a dog, of a cat, of a spider. Far better was the Roman rule to teach a boy nothing that he could not learn standing. . . . The farm, the farm is the right school. The reason of my deep respect for the farmer is that he is a realist and not a dictionary. The farm is a piece of the world, the School bouse is not. The farm by training the physical rectifies and invigorates the metaphysical & moral nature."<sup>4</sup>*

Anti-intellectualism and individualism came together in Emerson's fear that books can corrupt the unique spark of divinity in each human soul:

*I had better never see a book than be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world of value is the active soul—the soul, free, sovereign, active. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn."<sup>5</sup>*

[109]

Born in the Enlightenment but bred in Romanticism, our nation has retained a curious ambivalence about education and book learning, nurturing both Enlightenment hope that they can bring us nearer social justice (as in Mann) and Romantic fear that they can hinder individualism, understanding, and independence of mind (as in Emerson). Americans are still fond of encouraging their children to work part-time in the "real" world while in school. We still have the Emersonian image of the bookish nerd as a pale, unhealthy weakling, ignorant of the real world and out of touch with his or her own best nature. Faith in nature, and scornful repudiation of the baggage of the past, corne together in the educationist idea that "hands-on" knowledge is more useful than verbal knowledge. There is a direct line of descent from Emerson's antibookish writings of the 1830s to the insistence on practical skills in the *Cardinal Principles* of 1918. By that date, antiacademic sentiment, while simply an element of general American thought, had become the dominant principle taught in education schools.

The focus in *Cardinal Principles* on such nonacademic goals as health, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and the like has remained stable through various permutations of educational vocabulary from 1918 to the present. The superiority of doing over knowing, the stress on vocationalism and social utility, the hostility to traditional subject matters—all became central to curriculum revision in the 1920s and '30s. The following statements corne from Kilpatrick's *Foundations of Method* (1925):

*We are properly concerned first with children that they shall grow, and only secondarily with subject matter that it be learned. . . . Subject mat-ter is good only and because it furnishes a better way-of-behaving. . . . The separate school subjects. Shall we not have to give them up if the ideas -of-purposeful activity and intrinsic subject-matter be adopted? As hitherto conceived and taught, yes; separate subjects for children would have to go."<sup>6</sup>*

In 1939, Charles Prosser, an influential opponent of bookishness, stated in parallel clauses—which displayed a knowledge of rhetoric he would withhold from most of his students—that

*business arithmetic is superior to plane or solid geometry; learning ways of keeping physically fit, to the study of French; learning the technique of selecting an occupation, to the study of algebra; simple science of everyday to geology; simple business English, to Elizabethan classics."<sup>7</sup>*

[110]

Echoing Prosser, a new version of *Cardinal Principles* called *Education for All American Youth* (1944) stated that "there is no aristocracy of subjects. . . . Mathematics and mechanics, art and agriculture, history and homemaking are all peers."<sup>61</sup> In practice, this levelling of educational hierarchies resulted in the suppression of traditional subject categories in favor of nontraditional, nonacademic ones like home economics, consumer practices, and personal adjustment. Emerson's playful claim that practical know-how should be elevated above school learning was

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, *Journals*, entry for September 14, 1839.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, "The American Scholar."

<sup>6</sup> Kilpatrick, *Foundations of Method*, 253, 277, 357.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 66.

now becoming well established as the primary aim of school itself. By the 1940s, according to Diane Ravitch, these utilitarian ideas and practices had become widespread in public schools:

*Their common features were: centering the curriculum around basic areas of human activity, instead of traditional subject matter; incorporating subject matter only insofar as it was useful in everyday situations; stressing functional values such as behavior, attitudes, skills, and know-how, rather than bookish or abstract knowledge; reorienting studies to the immediate needs and interests of students.*<sup>8</sup>

These anti-intellectual traditions have not proved viable or useful in the contemporary world. Today, it is no longer possible to assert that learning algebra is inferior to learning how to select an occupation. With the nature of jobs shifting every few years, it has become obvious that algebra is in fact the more practical study. A recent popular movie, *Stand and Deliver* (1987), was premised on the idea that learning mathematics is the road out of the barrio. With jobs having become highly changeable, no one knows how to teach for specific occupations. In the present, ever-shifting economic scene, the student needs the ability to learn *new* occupations. Hence, a general ability to learn, based on broad general knowledge and vocabulary, is a more practical tool than direct vocational training.

Under these circumstances, the Romantic attack on the "merely" verbal has had fateful consequences for modern American education. Emerson complained that school provides only "a bellyfull of words," and praised the farmer for being "a realist and not a dictionary." But celebrating what is "real" above what is "verbal" has almost no practical relevance to modern education. The prejudice against the verbal is itself a cultural and verbal tradition that has no firm connection to reality. Every decent job available in a modern economy is dependent upon communication and learning—two activities that take place primarily through the medium of words.

Words stand for things. Verbal understanding is not "merely" verbal. Words are the indispensable human tools for understanding realities. One of [111] the fundamental aims of an adequate education is to gain a large vocabulary to become what Emerson disparagingly calls "a dictionary." This is not the only important aim, of course. Understanding the best traditions of one's culture, learning the fundamentals of many fields of knowledge, acquiring habits of private virtue and public-spiritedness, are certainly of equal or greater importance. But, especially today, an educated person is enabled by knowing words to learn a variety of new skills and new jobs. Gaining a broad knowledge of words, and therefore also a knowledge of the things to which words refer, must be among the most practical and significant educational goals in our time.

We don't think of a child's learning of words as "rote memorization." The remarkable learning rate of eight new words a day is far from being a merely receptive activity. As psychologists have shown, learning words requires complex trial-and-error guesses. Young children constantly try to make sense of what they hear on the basis of a bare minimum of relevant background knowledge. Recently in my hearing, an adult said to a five-year-old, "How is Your Highness this morning?" There was a pause of some seconds. The child replied, "I'm a *little* taller; I grow some every night—in my sleep." This child had managed to make some sense out of "Your Highness," even if it wasn't the sense that was meant—by dint of the hypothesis-making that goes on in even the simplest communication. But sometimes when a child does not know enough context, he or she cannot at that moment be an active participant in the class, no matter how resourceful the child or teacher may be. When classes are exceptionally heterogeneous in academic preparation and knowledge of words, as they often are in the United States, universally effective whole-class instruction is impossible. Sometimes, therefore, as Isabel Beck has shown, disadvantaged children can only catch up in their vocabulary by a direct targeting of the words that need to be learned.<sup>9</sup>

But whether a word is learned by targeted practice or by the contextual method of enriched language use, its actual meaning is, for the most part, just a brute fact. In a sense, all words are learned by rote. There is rarely a comprehensible connection between a word and a thing, only a cultural connection that has to be memorized, not "understood." What's to understand when a child learns that the name "bee" identifies a certain kind of flying thing? We Americans understand the words "chair" or "table" by rote, just as the Germans have to learn *Stuhl* and *Tisch*, the French *chaise* and *table*—all by rote. Such an apparently mindless daily performance as making first graders recite the (to them) meaningless sounds of the Pledge of Allegiance encourages trial-and-error inferences that result in many children understanding the meaning of the Pledge by fifth grade.

[ 1 1 2 ]

Pestalozzi, like other Romantics, was an enemy of what he called "verbalism," but he was also a pragmatist who followed a mixture of methods rather than an ideologue who dismissed drill and practice. He conceded the great power of verbal rote memorization as a means of gaining understanding and critical thought:

*[The children] accomplished feats which seemed to me impossible for their years. . . . I taught them to read whole charts of geography printed with the most difficult abbreviations, some of the most unfamiliar words being indicated by only a few letters, at an age when they could hardly read print. You have seen the unwavering accuracy with which they deciphered these charts, and the evident ease with which they learned them by rote. I even attempted at times to make some of the older children master very difficult scientific*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>9</sup> Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, "Effects of Long-Term Vocabulary Instruction on Lexical Access and Reading Comprehension, 506-21.

*propositions which they did not understand. They committed the sentences to memory by reading aloud and by repetition. So also with the questions that explained them. It was at first, like all catechizing, merely a parrot-like reproduction of meaningless words. But the sharp separation of individual ideas, the definite order in this separation, together with the fact that the words themselves impressed light and meaning, in the midst of the darkness, indelibly upon their minds, gradually awakened insight into the subject matter, and transformed the darkness into the clear light of day.*<sup>10</sup>64

One need not go as far as Pestalozzi did in following such practices, of course. But one reason that the early Romantic innovations in education from Pestalozzi to Colonel Parker's school in Quincy, Massachusetts, or Dewey's Lab School in Chicago—were so successful was that these early versions of progressivism retained definite knowledge goals and *mixed* traditional with untraditional practices. Pestalozzi was wiser and more flexible than most of his disciples in advocating what he called a "systematic treatment of vocabulary":

*An extensive vocabulary is an inestimable advantage to children. Familiarity with the name enables them to fix the object whenever it enters their consciousness, and a logical and correct series of names develops and maintains in them a consciousness of the vital relation of things to each other. Nor is this all. We should never imagine, because a child does not understand everything about an object, that what he knows is useless to him. When a child has systematically mastered a scientific vocabulary, at any rate, he enjoys the same advantage as the child of a merchant who in [1 13] his earliest years, and in his own home, learns the names of innumerable objects of commerce.*<sup>11</sup>

Like many educational reformers, Pestalozzi was interested in social justice, and thought that children of peasants could gain the same knowledge as children of merchants if that knowledge was taught intensively and systematically. In the comment quoted above, Pestalozzi implies one of the fundamental arguments being made in this book, that in order to enhance the knowledge of those who come from underprivileged homes, it is necessary to teach all students in a focused and direct way the knowledge which the children of privilege gain indirectly by constant exposure and repetition at home. The unfairness of an antibookish or developmentalist approach to schooling lies in its assumption that knowledge can be equally withheld from the children of merchants and the children of peasants to achieve the same results. Much to the distress of some of his fellow Romantics, who occasionally criticized his methods, Pestalozzi was flexible enough to use common sense in the service of social justice.

Dare it be said? In the tradition of Emerson, for all his greatness, there is a lot of foolishness. How could he be blind to the fact that if children did not gain "a bellyfull of words" in school, they would never be able to understand the words he was writing down? Emerson was the elitist, Horace Mann the true democrat. Romantic anti-intellectualism and developmentalism, as Gramsci understood, are luxuries of the merchant class that the poor cannot afford. For that matter, neither can the contemporary middle class in the United States. Today, the Enlightenment view of the value of knowledge is the only view we can afford. When the eighteenth-century Encyclopedists attempted to systematize human knowledge in a set of books, they were placing their hope for progress in the ever-growing experience of humankind, as made available by the invention of writing. They thought it foolish for each person to attempt to reinvent the wheel. Instead of finding a conflict between book learning and utility, they insisted upon the superior practicality of books over unlettered experience, and the greater utility of knowledge over ignorance.

There were implicit ironies in the anti-intellectualism of the American educational community as it moved from "home economics" and "shop" in the 1920s to "critical thinking" and "problem-solving skills" in the 1990s. Earlier, the proponents of traditional, subject-matter education had claimed that the study of Latin, classical literature, and mathematics had not only direct benefits but also indirect ones in inculcating general "mental discipline." Hard subjects, it was said, "trained the mind." Traditional study supposedly taught the student both Latin and critical thinking. But in the early years of this [1 14] century, educationist opponents of Latin and other traditional subjects, using the research of Edward Lee Thorndike as a battering ram, rejected mental discipline as scientifically disproved. Thorndike had shown that skills are *not* transferred from one domain to another. Learning Latin did *not* "teach you to think," it just taught you Latin.

Today, anti-subject-matter educationists profess faith in general, "critical thinking" skills much as traditionalists did, but with just as little scientific justification. Although "critical thinking" has replaced the vocationalism of earlier decades as an aim that is superior to mere book learning, the same antiintellectual, anti-subject-matter, and supposedly anti-elitist bias lies at its root. It was assumed that teaching all children "practical know-how" would have a socially leveling effect; that children from all sorts of families and with all sorts of abilities would meet on the common ground of citizenship; that unacademic, practical schooling would be highly democratic in its teachings and effects. But what in fact occurred and still occurs is a widening of the academic and economic gap between haves and have-nots. Teaching "practical," antibookish skills such as critical thinking has turned out to be highly impractical and inequitable.

---

<sup>10</sup> Pestalozzi, *Pestalozzi Educational Writings*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

The absurd notion that inner-city children lack critical-thinking skills whereas suburban children, who happen to have big vocabularies, possess them is an assumption that cannot stand up to scrutiny. Street-smart children can think very critically in situations that would stump their suburban peers. If their critical-thinking skills *could* be massively transferred from the street to the classroom, special training in this area would be quite unnecessary. The incapacity of the critical-thinking movement to make a dent in the academic gap between haves and have-nots is strong evidence that this version of anti-intellectualism lacks a basis in reality. Edward Thorndike, whose work repudiated the idea that skills can be massively transferred from one domain to another, was, sixty years ago, the chief scientific authority for anti-intellectualism. Now the heirs of his early disciples have forgotten his basic premise. An emphasis on general mind-training skills at the expense of book learning has resulted, as developmentalism has, in depriving disadvantaged children of needed knowledge. As Gramsci prophesied, all versions of anti-intellectualism in education have highly inequitable and undemocratic practical consequences.