

# TRADITIONAL HUMANISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at outlining the most important orientations of the traditional humanist education with their specific peculiarities, starting with essentialism and perennialism, appeared as a reaction against the progressive education, and continuing with the period of the Cold War when traditional humanist education dominated the entire American curriculum and imposed a teacher centred education.*

**Key words:** *essentialism, perennialism, traditional humanism, Cold War.*

## 1. Introduction

In his book *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893 – 1958*, Herbert M. Kliebard identified four types of curriculum according to the major orientations of American education (Kliebard, 1986):

- a) developmentalism,
- b) humanism,
- c) social-meliorism
- d) social efficiency.

Throughout the 20th century, one of these curriculum types dominated the others in different stages of historical evolution, the humanist curriculum being one of the most outstanding.

## 2. Humanism – Defining the Concept

A concept can be defined starting from the origins and usage of keywords. Words often show the way people understood the concepts, and the changes in the meanings of a word leave traces along the maps of the social and cultural past. The word 'humanism' comes from the Latin 'humanus; humanitas.' 'Humanus' means human nature. The Oxford Latin Dictionary defines the word 'humanitas' as the quality that distinguishes the civilized from the uneducated man. Thus, we can say that the roots of humanism refer both to the specificity of the human-being, different from other species, and also to the distinction between educated and uneducated man.

The Latin origins of the term are obvious in the Italian word 'Humanist.' 'Humanista' in

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the Italian universities, was the professor who taught classical culture. The Renaissance system of values is often called humanist or humanistic. The Italian word 'human' has its origins in the Renaissance when it was used to make a distinction between students in the liberal arts and those studying civil law (*legista*) or canon law (*canonista*).

Nowadays, traditional or classical humanism includes formal philosophies which derive from the main ideas of Plato and Aristotle, from the elites of the academic departments of classical- liberal studies and humanities. Humanists share a theory according to which the mind has the power to discern the essential characteristics of the world and human nature. They believe that artistic and intellectual subjects contain truths that have withstood the test of time, and that these truths must constitute the guidelines for the content and process of human life and education (McNeil, 1996). The human mind, according to the classics, is not just a psychological mechanism explained through the response to different stimuli by fixed laws of association or through a logical exercise of ideas. Imagination is considered a source of creativity. From this point of view, Michael Polanyi's theory on tacit knowledge and scientific research enjoyed the attention of educational philosophy. The tacit dimension provides a possible justification for knowledge which does not always work explicitly (McNeil, 1996; Shapiro, 1987).

The classical humanism has its origins in the Greek tradition which promoted an educational system wanting to develop a harmonious and balanced personality. This education focuses on what it means to be a human being who tries to find the meaning of life and death and to experience happiness, while also trying to achieve excellence through education. Both the Greeks and the Romans, who had adopted Greek civilization, believed that it was not enough to enrich the students' knowledge, but it was also essential to make them happy. The people of Athens emphasized on freedom and development of physical, psychological and artistic skills. In the late Athenian period, a prosperous period, we could observe the appearance of desire for fame and wealth, not just the desire of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Greek philosophers of various orientations established their own schools. Stoicism is one of those philosophies that spark interest because of the importance given to self-education in forming character. Stoicism follows the Socratic philosophical ideas: self-actualization, endurance and virtue, teaching the disciples to be indifferent towards heavy conditions and to accept life as it is. Later, these ideas were promoted by the emperor Marcus Aurelius and the early Christians. Today, the ideas of classical humanism have been resurrected by authors like Peter Gibbon who supports the heroes' reintroduction in the curriculum as an attempt to recognize the greatness of America. In Greece and Rome, the study of heroes meant an attempt to improve the spirit by seeking a model in life through the hero, whose character is as important as his intellectual capacity. [At the time when he was president, Bill Clinton said that he read Marcus Aurelius twice a year] (McNeil, 1996).

Humanism calls for a periodical return to the Greek and Latin culture, to what civilization and mankind had best. This is justified primarily by the immutability of the pursued goals: freedom of thought, creativity and self-expression. This kind of elitist education was often restricted to educate only certain selected categories, following the Greek and Roman models. During the Renaissance, the humanists insisted on personal

development, culture and freedom, borrowing the Greek ideas of harmonious development of mind, body and moral education in order to individualize and achieve self-actualization. Focusing on beauty, including sensuous beauty, should be noted.

Traditional humanism promotes rigorous academic standards, a firm code of discipline and refuses to teach anything apart from intellectual contents.

The period during which traditional humanism is strongly felt in American education is during the 1930's, when two types of humanism appeared: essentialism and perennialism, as a reaction against progressive education. During the Cold War, when the humanists considered that it was necessary for the labor force to be prepared to meet the demands of the military and technological race against the Soviet Union, they stressed the importance of academic rigor and intellectual skills training. They refashioned American public schools, considered by the humanists as being anti-intellectual, by asking the help of academic elites to take control of the school curriculum.

### **3. Essentialism**

This pedagogical orientation appeared in the fourth decade, with the following prestigious personalities as main representatives: Isaak L. Kandel, Michael J. Demiashkievich, and William C. Bagle.

The essentialists declared themselves against some of the fundamental theories of progressive education and they denied the role of schools in professional and social integration, objecting to ideas whereby the instructive process consisted in organizing and reorganizing experience, problem-solving, and having the student as central interest. The main purpose of school, according to the essentialists, is to provide good intellectual training for the young generation by transmitting cultural heritage. Training is done through theoretical education. Students are placed in direct contact with the fundamental spiritual values, with what is essential and common for all people (Ravitch, 2001).

Unlike the perennialists, the essentialists don't see the past as an expression of permanence, but a source of knowledge that can be related permanently to contemporary issues (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001). Compared to progressivism, which promoted an education based on the students' direct contact with complex situations, the essentialists return to the training focused on the subjects of education. The teacher is the one who directs the student's activity. School should not become life itself, as in progressivist vision, but must keep its autonomy from society, having a stabilizing role, as an institution that preserves the past and not one which facilitates change (Ravitch, 2001).

This system aims at providing individual access to those spiritual values which 'give students intellectual independence. Although it was applied in practice in schools (Annapolis College), essentialism had less impact than the other anti-progressive trends (Schneider et al., 2001).

#### **4. Perennialism**

The representatives of perennialism - Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Jerome Adler, and Stringfellow Barr - believe that change is not the dominant feature of the world, as the progressivists claim, but continuity. Human nature has remained in its essence the same. It is essential, in their opinion that the formation of the human being is done in accordance with its own nature.

Education in accordance with human nature is a reaction to the progressive school which was aiming for a new generation that was fully adapted to and ready for social realities.

The goal of education cannot be other than to cultivate reason. As for the teaching methods, they should not be diversified because all people are endowed with reason, and education aims at developing human reason.

Truth being unique, schools should promote the stable, unchanged values from the great works of ancient and contemporary authors. The most valuable works in the fields of literature, philosophy and the history of science were studied. Only through a liberal education does the student get to individual thinking and to appreciate the world through the permanent values of humanity.

Progressivism insists on the importance of change, the perennialists insist upon absolute unchanged values. If from the progressivists' point of view school should be linked to the future, the perennialists see it rooted in the past.

Progressivism promotes the adaptation of youth to the social environment, while perennialism eschews social realities. Therefore, those educated under a perennialist system will remain merely critical spirits unaware of the realities of life.

#### **5. Humanistic Trends during the Cold War**

A strong humanist reaction against the anti-intellectualism of American education was launched during the Cold War, against the background of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to win the military race. Humanists claimed that the anti-intellectualism of the American education represented the weakest link in the country's defense and that education was responsible for the loss of the technological war in favor of the Soviet Union (Spring, 1996).

The attacks of the academic world against public schools were led by historian Arthur Bestor. In 1952, at the annual meeting of the Association of American Historians, he launched a manifesto entitled *The Anti-intellectualism in Schools - A Challenge to Scholars*, which is meant to raise the alarm about the serious threat to American intellectual life represented by anti-intellectual concepts about education promoted by school administrators and education theorists. He concluded, insisting that the control over the educational system is not in public hands, but in the educational theorists' hands, which he called educationists. Because educational theorists were trying to adjust the curriculum to current life problems, Bestor believed they were responsible for the anti-intellectualism in American schools (Spring, 1996). He claimed that a considerable proportion of the school curriculum was dealing with things without value.

From a list of 55 issues young people learned in high school, he exemplified a series of unimportant issues such as:

- the issue of improving personal appearance
- the issue of choosing a family dentist
- the issue of developing and maintaining relationships between boys and girls

Bestor (cit. in Spring, 1996) wanted schools to stop focusing on socializing and on social selection. From his perspective, the curriculum must be organized around the traditional subjects of study. This was necessary in conditions in which the scientific contents and subjects were presented as systematic ways of thinking and each subject had its own structure and methodology. The subjects to be studied were to include Mathematics, Science, History, English and foreign languages. Bestor dismissed the notion of differentiated courses, based on the individual future social position. Removing the focus of education on socialization and the selection of human resources, in Bestor's opinion, the anti-intellectualist trend of American education would be finished, prompting the student's increased interest in the achievements of culture and knowledge. In 1956, Bestor supported the foundation of the Council for Basic Education and became its first chairman, Mortimer Smith being its Executive Director and the main force of the organization. Bestor condemned the anti-intellectualism in schools and the educators' dominance, considering public schools undemocratic. He claimed that a differentiated curriculum was undemocratic, since it didn't allow the schools to prepare students equally. For Smith, a differentiated curriculum works against a democratic society, because it contributes to the unequal development of individuals in educational terms. Very soon, Albert Lynd joined those who condemned the anti-intellectualism in schools and the control exercised over them by educators. In *Quackery in the Public Schools*, published in 1953, he criticized the anti-intellectual level of the university courses in the programs for teachers' education. He blamed this on the educators' dominant power in higher education (cit. in Spring, 1996).

The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union resulted in more academic courses and much greater importance being given to Science and Mathematics, as a way of winning the weapon race. The emphasis on Science and Mathematics was considered essential in order to provide the labor market with enough engineers and scientists, and to place the United States, technologically speaking, before the Soviet Union. The academic society and federal officials criticized the control exerted by professional educators on schools, arguing that such control had turned the American school into an anti-intellectual one and, therefore, had constituted the weakest link in the system of the United States defense. Scientists began to exert a growing influence on national policies regarding human resources development and education

Scientific research was essential to maintain supremacy in the world, the national security and public health. The key of scientific capital growth consists, primarily, in providing a scientific education, of which a large proportion of population would benefit and then in supporting scientific research in colleges, universities and research institutes.

Young people could choose between continuing their studies and entering the army. Clearly, the system was favoring those who were able to attend university studies

channeling more and younger people to the fields of science and engineering, but there was a permanent fear that public schools were not sufficiently advanced, in academic terms, to meet the challenges of the Cold War.

## 6. Conclusion

The main purpose of school, according to the traditional humanists, is to provide good intellectual instruction for the young generation by transmitting cultural heritage through theoretical education. School should not become life itself, as in progressive vision, but must keep its autonomy from society, having a stabilizing role, as an institution that preserves the past and not one which facilitates change.

From this perspective, the curriculum must be organized around the traditional subjects of study. This was necessary in conditions in which the scientific contents and subjects were presented as systematic ways of thinking and each subject had its own structure and methodology. The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union resulted in more academic courses and much greater importance being given to Science and Mathematics, as a way of winning the weapon race.

Therefore, traditional humanism wanted to ensure a good intellectual background by transmitting the cultural heritage via separated channels (subjects), provided through a mostly theoretical education being entirely a teacher centered education.

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