

EDUCATION, TRADITION, HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Keywords: change, development, historical knowledge, progress, sustainable culture, tradition

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Summary

This article examines the relationship between education, tradition and historical knowledge, with special reference to contemporary American culture and education. Four specific questions are addressed: 1. What is the role of tradition in the creation of a sustainable culture and educational system? 2. What is the role of historical knowledge? 3. What is the relationship between tradition and history? And 4. What should be the role and function of history and tradition in the educational system?

Basic to the argument of this essay is that traditional ways of knowing represent a type of historical knowledge which has come to be increasingly discredited by the dominant metaphors of progress and individuality that dominate many contemporary cultures and their educational systems. The loss and devaluation of these traditional ways of knowing represents a threat to long-term sustainability and social equity. They should be protected and utilized where feasible in the assurance of a more sustainable human future.

1. Introduction

In the 1982 Steven Spielberg wrote and produced the movie *Poltergeist*, in which a greedy real-estate developer bulldozes a cemetery and builds a housing development on its land. Ghosts from the desecrated cemetery come to haunt the people who live in the development's new houses. The implicit message of the film is that those living in the present must respect the history of a place—its traditions and experience.

Spielberg’s movie is a cautionary tale. It takes the image of “development” and says that if humanity does not pay attention to what has come before the present, humans are liable to set loose a chain of unexpected consequences—ones that may be highly destructive.

Like Spielberg’s developer, contemporary education has relatively little interest in what came before it. For example, examining carefully the history of American schooling throughout most of the Twentieth century, there is an assumption of the constant need to reform and *change* the educational system. Further, there is the assumption that *progress* and continued *development* must be achieved in the educational system and that nothing is constant, but is subject to successive revision and change.

As a result, American education, as well as other national educational systems, have seen a steady cycle of educational reform in which new curriculums and management systems—“imperfect panaceas”—are introduced every few years in an attempt to reinvent educational reality, and ultimately, the culture. It is as though a bulldozer sweeps across the educational landscape on a periodic basis clearing away much of the existing landscape.

Some of the drive towards clearing the educational and cultural landscape in American education has come from the desire to achieve greater equity. Traditions of discrimination, elitism and privilege, have been systematically challenged in terms of race, gender and populations with special needs. Beginning in the 1950s, the social landscape of American culture has been reshaped through a process of change—much of it taking place in the public schools. Implicit has been the belief that change is good and that traditions are suspect and potentially *unprogressive*.

In the following essay, the relationship between education, tradition and historical knowledge is examined, with special reference to contemporary American culture and education. The lack of connectedness to tradition and historical knowledge in American education and culture is considered to be a threat to achieving a more just and sustainable society. In this effort, an attempt to address the following questions will be made: What is the role of tradition in the creation of a sustainable culture and educational system? What is the role of historical knowledge? What is the relationship between tradition and history? What should be the role and function of history and tradition in the educational system?

2. What is the role of tradition in the creation of a sustainable culture and educational system?

Tradition has much less credence in American culture than in many other societies. Historically this can be explained, in part, by traditions of the frontier and the nearly constant availability of new land and opportunity, as well as the fact that the United States is an immigrant culture—one that assumes the virtue of change and the opportunity to “make it” as an individual.

Traditions and the past are suspect. There is a presumption that change is good, and that the past needs to be superseded. Unfortunately, the rejection of tradition carries with it

many problems for American culture. To begin with, in a pluralistic culture such as the United States, there are groups of people whose culture and personal lives are deeply rooted in tradition. For example, many Native American groups, as well as traditional religious groups such as Orthodox Jews, construct their lives through long-enduring institutions and traditions. Often these traditions and institutions have been passed down through many generations, and may be highly rule-bound and conservative. They are also often highly successful models for human life and culture. Such models are in marked contrast to more change-oriented systems that emphasize what is inherited from the past as “an irksome burden to be escaped from as soon as possible.” As Edward Shils has so well argued:

In nearly every Western country, an increasing proportion of educated and enlightened persons has for a long time thought that a great many of their beliefs, practices, and institutions prevailing in their societies needed to be changed, replaced, or discarded in favor of new ones, which would inevitably be better ones. The existent, and especially the inherited, suffered under a presumption of untenability; they had to be changed. (Shils, 1981, p. 2)

Implicit in the idea of change is the utopian ideal of progress—the perfectibility of humankind—that goes back to the Eighteenth century Enlightenment and the work of philosophers such as Condorcet. Further developed in the Nineteenth century by figures such as Hegel, Marx and Comte, this ideal promised the total elimination of inequality between nations, and the progress of equality within the same nation. In short, this ideal promised the perfection of human existence and welfare on the earth.

The idea and ideal of “progress” is deeply ingrained in contemporary American culture. Corporations such as General Electric, for example, have in the past indicated that “progress” was their “most important product.” At popular amusement parks such as Disneyworld, exhibits emphasize the idea that science advances humanity through a steady process of discovery and invention.

The idea of progress represents a faith in specific ways of knowing the world. According to students of the subject, such progress presents history as following a linear direction towards social improvement without the cyclical repetitions of less fortunate times. It discards faith in the influence of destiny or providence. The idea of progress undermines religious belief, and strips the “common man—who as yet has not progressed, but has already been cut off from his common land and deprived from his traditional means for autonomous subsistence—of all the cultural footholds that could give him spiritual autonomy and personal confidence as he faces the market, industry and the nation-state” (Sbert, p. 197).

The idea of progress challenges norms by arguing that change is inherently good (i.e. progressive). Tradition is perceived as normative and therefore in opposition to change, and ultimately to the ideal of progress. However, as is seen below, and in article *Indigenous And Neotraditional Knowledge Systems And Their Role In Creating And Maintaining Ecological Sustainability* in this EOLSS Theme, tradition and historical knowledge can be a source of models for more sustainable living.

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Biographical Sketch

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