

CHAPTER 3

A CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ILLITERACY

Illiteracy and Conservatism in America

The most potent challenge to liberalism has emerged in the U.S., where neo-laissez-faire economic theory (e.g. monetarism, "supply side" economics) is insurgent as evidenced by the election of Ronald Reagan as President. This shift to the right has brought various conservative social theories into prominence, several of which have direct relevance to the question of illiteracy. It is useful to examine them here because they present certain core themes which appear in the ideas and policies of Canadian political elites as well, albeit in less reactionary forms at the present time.

The Individual

The conservative perspective which is presently being consolidated in the U.S. shares with the liberal perspective the assumption that there is a causal connection between illiteracy and poverty, i.e. that illiteracy leads to low personal productivity, which in turn leads to poor job prospects and low income. However, conservatives hold that illiteracy is a relatively secondary factor in the causation of poverty, and reject the remediation strategy as an anti-poverty approach. Moreover, they explain the failure of the War on Poverty as the result of the misguided attempt to implement it.

As we have seen, liberals explain that adults are poor because of deficiencies in "human capital" resulting from environmental and institutional factors, particularly a self-perpetuating culture of poverty. In contrast, conservatives shift the blame for poverty directly onto the individual. According to political economist David Gordon, conservatives:

argue that individuals have many opportunities to raise their own productivities. They can stay in school, work steadily, and stay on jobs long enough to learn new skills. If some individuals have low productivities, they are primarily to blame for their own disadvantages.¹

Conservatives hold that a capitalist economy bestows success according to the ambition, ability and hard work of the individuals who compete in it. Therefore, if some individuals remain poor, it is because they have not demonstrated these qualities.

Two arguments are advanced here. First, it is believed that some individuals are 'morally' unfit or defective. That is, they are unwilling to work hard and make sacrifices to take advantage of the many training and education opportunities which are available, such as staying in school until they attain literacy skills, going to night school to improve their basic education and job qualifications, or taking jobs which pay low wages but offer training opportunities. If such individuals are poor, conservatives argue, they deserve it.²

Second, many adults are believed to be unable to develop literacy skills or do well in the world of work because they are inherently less capable or less intelligent than normal. "Scientific" arguments alleging the genetic inferiority of the poor, particularly racial minorities, are frequently cited in this regard.³

In either case, whether the defects of the poor are "moral" or genetic, they are not remediable, and the anti-poverty strategies as developed by liberals are seen as doomed to failure. As prominent conservative Barry Goldwater asserted in 1964, "the fact is that most people who have no skills have no education for the same reason--low intelligence or low ambition".⁴ In effect, conservatives deny that greater social equality is possible.

Economy

In the view of conservatives, public investments in education and training for the poor cannot be justified in economic terms. According to Gordon, conservatives believe:

individual opportunities to work in the labour market are seriously distorted by government intervention in that market, and that we should try to minimize government involvement with market institutions.⁵

They contend that educational programs such as those pursued under the U.S. War on Poverty failed to help the poor, and actually were counterproductive, i.e. they contributed to poverty. According to this view, the rapid expansion of the education establishment caused an inflation of educational requirements for jobs beyond any necessity inherent in the work being done. "Credentialism" has given an inordinate importance to education in the job market and has come to constitute a significant barrier to the employment of the poor.⁶

Another factor cited by conservatives is their belief that wages for even menial jobs grew rapidly, as workers with ever-higher levels of education demanded increases out of line with the work being done, and this ultimately led to a shrinkage in the total

number of jobs which employers could offer⁷. Finally, conservatives argue that the heavy expenditures for education on the part of the federal government contributed to inflation, which in turn stunted economic growth and diminished the job-creating capacity of the economy.⁸

Under the leadership of the Reagan administration, manpower retraining programs and adult basic education programs are being dismantled, severely cut back or responsibility for them shifted to the states in order to remove their "distorting" effect from the labour market, allowing it to function "naturally".⁹ It is believed that in the long run, only unimpeded economic growth can help the poor, or, more exactly, those among the poor who are "willing" to work.¹⁰

Illiteracy

As regards illiteracy, conservatives allow that the failure to attain literacy skills is not always solely the fault of the individual. An influential current of conservative educational thought blames liberals and the liberal educational philosophy of "progressivism" for causing public schools to concentrate on what conservatives consider non-essentials like music, extracurricular activities and social studies, to the exclusion of the proper development of basic cognitive skills, like reading and writing, which are demanded in the world of work. They propose that schools shake off this liberal influence and go "back to the basics" in subject matter and methods (e.g. stressing rote learning and formal didactic instruction).¹¹ A favorite theme with regard to methods has to do with the allegedly pernicious effects of the "look and say" or word recognition method of reading instruction (which stresses reading for meaning), and the incomparable benefits of the phonics method (which stresses memorization).

However, even if conservatives think that illiteracy is due in some measure to an institutional factor, they oppose any help to illiterate adults through the expenditure of public funds. Presumably, the more ambitious among the victims, of liberal schooling will not allow this problem to stop them--they will develop these skills through adult evening classes and other available opportunities. Here, the Reagan administration looks favorably on efforts to reduce illiteracy either as a profit-making venture, an approach pioneered by the Boston-based Control Data Corporation,¹² or through a volunteer campaign financed by private charity and philanthropy, such as the new conservative National Assault on Illiteracy organization.¹³

Class Interests

In the view of many social scientists, the U.S. neo-conservative social and economic philosophy as presented above constitutes a forthright defense of the class interests of the rich and favored in that country and a vigorous assault on the interests of the working class, particularly the poor.¹⁴ Its overtones of repression and social control are unmistakable. In spite of the cloak of academic respectability affected by

some of the adherents of the philosophy, many of its assumptions and analyses are considered to be either scientifically suspect or otherwise lacking in intellectual merit.¹⁵

For this reason, one would wish not to have to take it seriously, but this is no longer possible in the wake of the election of Ronald Reagan as President. Under his leadership, this reactionary doctrine is playing a pivotal role in efforts by an influential fraction of the ruling class in the U.S. to shore up what is a deteriorating economic situation by shifting the burden onto the most exploited strata of the working class.

Illiteracy and Conservatism in Canada

In Canada, the laissez-faire economic doctrine on which U.S. neo-conservatism is based was never strongly established.¹⁶ However, there are indications that owing to a parallel economic crisis here, a "politics of austerity" which is similar in some respects is emerging in Canada.¹⁷ While ideologically less well elaborated than its American cousin, it shares some of its principal themes. Drover and Moscovitch characterize this new Canadian conservative viewpoint:

The new ... ideology now in the process of formation stresses that capital accumulation is the basis of society. For the economy to grow, capital must grow. For capital to grow, there must be large profits. For profits to be large, there must be fewer wage demands, higher productivity, and fewer social welfare programs to drain off profits and capital.¹⁸

For example, the remarks of a prominent Canadian capitalist, as reported in a 1978 newspaper account, reflect these ideological themes:

Canadians will have to give up some of the benefits of the modern welfare state "in order to ensure the survival of the wealth-creating and Job-producing institutions," says Peter Gordon, chairman of the Steel Co. of Canada.

In a message in the firm's annual report, Gordon says government policies in recent years "have been notable for their wholesale diversion of funds into social services and away from investment in productive assets that provide employment and create wealth."¹⁹

Such policies are, to a great extent, responsible for the problems currently plaguing us -- inflation, unemployment, lagging economic growth, and chronic balance of payments deficits.¹⁹

This new ideology is often manifested in a "cutback mentality" regarding education and social services on the part of political elites. For example, in a December, 1977 speech, the new Minister of Finance, Jean Chretien, asserted that

"people have put too much faith in government." In his view, "the intervention of the government has to be marginal".²⁰ Paul Gingrich argues that:

The state... is in the process of instituting austerity programs against the working class. This means few attempts to stimulate economic growth through tax cuts for workers, expansionary monetary policy or increased spending for social services Demands for reduced government spending ... are demands for a redirection of government priorities more directly toward the interests of capital.²¹

The implications of this new conservative, business-oriented "politics of austerity" for the question of illiteracy are evident in the recent criticisms of the Canada Manpower Training Program. We will now examine them, and the changes that have been introduced in the program in response to them.

Manpower and Illiteracy

In the more prosperous late 1960's and early 1970's, when a major concern of the Ottawa government was to restore public confidence in liberal economic policies which seemingly were unable to deal with continuing unemployment and poverty in some groups and regions in Canada, political elites were willing to take a chance on what were highly optimistic, but as yet largely untested manpower theories which promised simultaneous social and economic benefits from a coordinated program of Job training and academic upgrading. The influence of the assumptions of this new liberal theory was reflected in the dual emphases of the Canada Manpower Training Program: equity, i.e. the provision of opportunities for the "disadvantaged" to achieve economic self sufficiency, and productivity, i.e. the provision of skilled workers in response to the demands of business and industry.²² The belief that these two seemingly disparate goals could be simultaneously accommodated in a single program is a testament to the strong impact of the liberal perspective in Canada.

However, it will be recalled that from the very beginning there were doubts expressed as to the depth of the commitment of the government to the first objective, equity. The most impoverished among the unemployed are those in greatest need of academic upgrading, and yet it has been clear that the federal government has been ill at ease in its role as provider of academic upgrading, which it has had to define as training for pre-occupation purposes in order to circumvent provincial concerns about infringement upon the exclusive Jurisdiction over education granted them under the British North America Act.²³ As well, there have been repeated complaints since the inception of the Manpower program that it was never effectively designed to help the poor, in that strict limits imposed on the length of time individuals could spend in the upgrading program insured that those with the least prior education, who are also the most impoverished, were effectively excluded.²⁴

In spite of these drawbacks, it is a fact that large sums of money were expended on academic upgrading and life skills training within the Manpower programs, and large numbers of illiterate adults enrolled in them in preparation for Job training.²⁵ As well, government representatives continued to assert the dual emphases of the program, including the objective of reducing poverty. For example, in his 1970 Annual Report, the Minister of Manpower and Immigration wrote:

The Manpower Training Program in Canada is one of the main federal programs intended to reduce poverty by helping poor people develop their aptitudes and therefore to improve their revenue and their possibilities of finding work.²⁶

Austerity

However, as the 1970's wore on, severe problems in the capitalist accumulation process, especially 'stagflation', displaced the legitimization problem posed by poverty from the top of the priority list of federal political elites. Reacting to a fiscal crisis in government revenues, and influenced by the new "politics of austerity", Ottawa began to scrutinize social welfare and anti-poverty programs for areas that could be cut back or eliminated.²⁷

At this time there were mounting demands from the business community that government spending in job training and upgrading be made to show better 'pay-off' in immediate economic terms.²⁸ As we have seen, evaluation studies of these programs, conducted both inside and outside the federal government, showed that of the clients who begin with the lowest initial education levels (and are also the most impoverished), a relatively small percentage were actually helped over the poverty line as a result of their participation.²⁹ As well, it was found that the costs involved were high when compared with the amount expended for trainees who began with adequate initial education.³⁰ In a 1976 review of the Manpower policy, officials argued that the attempt to provide literacy and life skills training was not efficient from a cost-benefit standpoint, and not particularly compatible with the occupational emphasis of the manpower program.³¹

Thereafter, the goal of stimulating productivity through responding to shortages of skilled workers would take priority.³² Accordingly, the number of training spaces for the undereducated were reduced to make room for those who could most easily and quickly benefit from training, i.e. those with higher initial education levels.³³ In 1981, academic upgrading at the lowest, i.e. basic literacy, level was abandoned, eliminating from eligibility those with reading abilities corresponding to grades 1 through 4. At the same time, spaces were reduced for those with reading abilities equivalent to grades 5 through 7.³⁴

The actions of the federal government signaled a major retreat from the liberal perspective on illiteracy. That is, until 1976, educational upgrading, including literacy

training, had been treated as both a means of providing 'uplift' for the poor and as a means of stimulating productivity and growth in Canada. This dual emphasis reflected the core theme of the liberal perspective--i.e. that those two objectives are fundamentally congruent. However, after 1976, political elites increasingly rejected the assumption that literacy education is economically efficient, arguing that in fact, such programs are unproductive and have no place in an active manpower policy responding to the needs of the economy. Literacy education was now defined as a problem of social welfare, akin to the provision of subsidized housing, general welfare assistance or other benefits and services for the 'disadvantaged'.

Moreover, as social welfare expenditures, they would have a low priority. That is, the Liberal government began to cut back on the "social affairs envelope", i.e. the budget for social welfare expenditures, in order to help finance initiatives in envelopes dealing with economic development (e.g. tax write-offs for business and industry, subsidies for research and development, investments in energy projects, etc.).³⁵

In summary, in the face of economic crisis, political elites in Canada have increasingly rejected the assumptions underlying the liberal perspective and have embraced a new "politics of austerity" which is pessimistic about the feasibility and desirability of attempts to redistribute economic and social opportunity through government action. The growing influence of this perspective in Canada foreshadows the possible eclipse of the problem of illiteracy as an issue of government concern for an indefinite time to come.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. David M. Gordon, "Editor's Introduction," in David M. Gordon (ed.) Problems in Political Economy: An Urban Perspective (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath Company, 1971), p. 60.
2. George Gilder, Wealth and Poverty (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 180.
3. Henry M. Levin, "A Decade of Policy Developments in Improving Education and Training for Low-Income Populations" in Robert H. Haveman (ed.) A Decade of Federal Antipoverty Programs (New York: Academic Press, 1977), p. 180-181.
4. Quoted in Hyman Lumer, Poverty: Its Roots and Its Future (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 14.
5. Gordon, op.cit., p.60.
6. Gilder, op.cit., p. 175.
7. Ibid., p. 178.
8. Ibid., p. 62.
9. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. The New Class War. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), chap. 1.
10. Gilder, op.cit., p. 62-63.
11. J. Berland and D. McGee, "Literacy: The Atrophy of Competence—Part One," Working Teacher 1:1 (Summer 1977), p. 18; J. Berland and D. McGee, "Literacy: The Atrophy of Competence— Part II," Working Teacher 1:2 (Fall 1977), p. 31-33.
12. "How Control Data Turns a Profit on Good Works," The New York Times (January 7, 1979), p. F3.
13. Nathan Wright, "The New Black Leaders," N.Y. Times Magazine (October 4, 1981), p. 20.
14. Piven and Cloward, op.cit., chap 1.

15. Ibid., p. 38-39.
16. Paul Gingrich, "Unemployment and Capitalist Crisis" in Fred Caloren et.al., Is the Canadian Economy Closing Down? (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1978), p. 97.
17. Ibid., p. 96-97.
18. Glenn Drover and Allan Moscovitch, "The Canadian Economy and Inequality" in Allan Moscovitch and Glenn Drover (eds.) Inequality: Essays on the Political Economy of Social Welfare (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 19.
19. "Stelco Chief Hits Welfare Policies," Toronto Star (March 11, 1978).
20. Cy Gonick, "The Economy: The New Supply Side Economics," Canadian Dimension 15-4 (February 1981), p. 18.
21. Gingrich, op.cit., p. 97-101.
22. Various commentators point to three objectives: growth, stabilization and equity. However, as Dupré notes, the goal of stabilization—the absorption of the unemployed into training when unemployment rates are high—can be pursued either with relation to growth or equity. He points out that it is between growth and equity that the more fundamental choice exists, and so the Manpower Program can be said to have dual objectives. See J. Stefen Dupré et.al., Federalism and Policy Development, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 116-117.
23. Ibid., p. 90.
24. Government of Canada, Poverty in Canada: Report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1971), chap. 7.
25. For example, see Canada Manpower and Immigration, Adult Training 1:3 (Winter 1976), p. 41. Nearly 44,000 adults with 8 or fewer years of schooling received training in the 1974-1975 academic year or 24.5% of all enrollees.
26. Pierre Dandurand, "The State and Labor Force Qualification: Manpower Training Programs for Adults in Canada" in Antonia Kloslowska and Guido Martinotti (eds.) Education in a Changing Society (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 1977), p. 210.
27. Gonick, "The New Supply Side...", op.cit., p. 19.
28. Wayne Cheveldayoff, "Job Training," Toronto Globe and Mail (December 7,

1979), p. B3; see also Adult Training, "The Senate Committee's Views on Manpower Training," 2:3 (1976), p. 27.

29. Morley Gunderson, "Evaluation of Government Supported Training in Canada," in a conference report Manpower Training at the Crossroads (Toronto: Canadian Association for Adult Education, 1976), p. 16-17.
30. Ibid., p. 16-17.
31. Audrey Thomas, Adult Literacy in the Seventies: Conference Report (Toronto: The Movement for Canadian Literacy, 1978), p. 7-10.
32. Ibid., p. 7-10.
33. R.J. Adams, Education and Working Canadians: Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Educational Leave and Productivity (Ottawa: Labour Canada, 1979), p. 121-122.
34. Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy, "Librarians Urged on to More Literacy Work," Starting Out 1:2 (Nov.-Dec. 1980); Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy, "Manpower Plans to Cut to Basic Ed. Purchase," Starting Out 1:1 (Sept.-Oct. 1980).
35. Gonick, "The 'New Supply Side' ...," op.cit., p. 19.