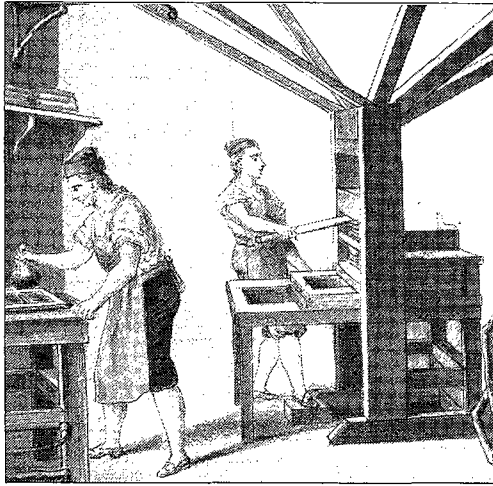


practical," writes Jaffee, "and the practical intent of that knowledge, for heedful and literate young farmers, was economic empowerment in the emerging world of the market."

The new republican popular culture was literally carried to the hinterlands by the likes of Amos Taylor, a former New Hampshire schoolteacher who took to peddling books and pamphlets during the 1780s. Taylor traveled the back roads of the Northeast selling such items as 17th-century English chapbooks, Indian captivity narratives, and even some of his own literary efforts. Taylor thought of his own role in heroic terms. Such "men of an excellent character," he wrote in *The Bookseller's Legacy* (1803), "may do much good in the christian world."



The "business of Enlightenment" was a growth enterprise. In 1760, Massachusetts had only nine print shops; by 1820, it had 120.

Massachusetts shopkeeper Silas Felton was a typical consumer of the new republican culture. In 1802, he formed the Society of Social Enquirers, which met weekly to discuss science, new farm methods, and foreign lands. "Doct. Franklin relates, in his life, that he received a considerable part of his information in this way," Felton

wrote, citing the hero of these men. "Will not every true Republican encourage all sincere social enquirers, who form themselves into societies like this?" From 1790 to 1815, some 500 New England towns created local libraries.

Ultimately, writes Jaffee, cultural entrepreneurs spread the Village Enlightenment throughout New England, and, more peaceably than their counterparts in France, swept away a world of traditions.

Learning by Race

"Multiculturalism" by Diane Ravitch, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1990), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

America's public schools have long been the stage for conflicts over race, ethnicity, and religion. By the late 1960s, writes Ravitch, a historian of education at Columbia, the curriculum's old evasions (elite political history and the melting pot myth) no longer worked and a new "multicultural" perspective was introduced. In new textbooks, the experiences of blacks, immigrants, Indians, women, and other groups were written into American social and political history. Racism was acknowledged; the melting pot was discarded in favor of a new pluralistic view suggesting that variety is the spice of life. Ravitch sees it as a change for the better, providing a much richer portrait of America's com-

mon culture.

But "almost any idea, carried to its extreme, can be made pernicious," she writes, "and this is what is happening now to multiculturalism." In order to combat the so-called Eurocentrism of the schools, activists now advocate an approach to education which rejects any notion of a common culture. At the heart of what Ravitch calls "particularistic multiculturalism" is the unsupported assertion that minority students will have higher self-esteem and learn best when they are immersed in an ethnocentric curriculum that emphasizes the achievements of their own racial or ethnic groups. Thus, black students should be taught Afrocentric history rather than

Western history; Mexican-American students, it has even been suggested, ought to study Mayan math, the Mayan calendar, and Mayan astronomy.

What is being advocated, Ravitch continues, is not merely an extension of such things as Black History Month, which teach that dignity and success can be achieved by all. The idea is to teach children that "their identity is determined by 'cultural genes.'" More pernicious still, the particularist vision implies that "American culture belongs only to those who are white and European," and that all others can belong only to the culture of their ancestors. Aiming to foster self-esteem among minority youth, the particularists wind up telling them instead that their choices and prospects are limited by birth. Aiming to stir racial or ethnic pride, they fan ancient animosities by reducing everyone to a victim or an oppressor.

Ravitch warns that the particularists are no mere fringe group. The school districts of Atlanta, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., are already developing an Afrocentric curriculum. Last February, New York's Board of Regents endorsed a proposal to revise the state history curriculum, based

Debating the Canon

Allan Bloom, the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, from an essay on "Western Civ—and Me" in *Commentary* (Aug. 1990):

The fact that I am doubtful about the non-Western craze suggests automatically, even to sympathetic critics, that I am promoting Western Civ or the like. Yet the very language used reveals how enslaved we have become to the historicist assertion that all thought is decisively culture-bound. When Averroes and Thomas Aquinas read Aristotle they did not think of him as Greek and put him into his historical context. They had no interest in Greek Civ but treated him as a wise man, hence a contemporary at all times.

We smile at this naiveté, but they understood Aristotle better than do our scholars, as one can see simply by perusing their commentaries. Plato and Kant claim that they speak to all men everywhere and forever, and I see no reason to reject those claims a priori. But that is precisely what is done when they are taken to be parts of Western Civ. To the extent they are merely that, the appeals against them are justified, for Western Civ is clearly partial, demanding the supplement of all the other Civs

The serious scholars in non-Western thought should bring us the powerful texts they know of to help us. For the true canon aggregates around the most urgent questions we face. That is the only ground for the study of books Nietzsche reflected on Buddha when he wanted to test the principle of contradiction. That is a model of the way things should be. The last thing we need is a sort of philosophic UN run by bureaucrats for the sake of representation for all peoples.

in part on a report that lambasted the three-year-old pluralist curriculum as a legacy of centuries of "intellectual and educational oppression" of minorities.

Unfortunately, Ravitch concludes, particularism appeals to many in the education establishment precisely because it promises a simple solution—inflating the racial pride of children—to the crisis of American education.

PRESS & TELEVISION

The End of Debate?

"Journalism, Publicity, and the Lost Art of Argument" by Christopher Lasch, in *Gannett Center Journal* (Spring 1990), 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

The ignorance of the American people has reached astonishing proportions. Millions of Americans would be stumped if asked

what the Bill of Rights contains. A majority recently assured pollsters that Israel is an Arab state.