

## Beyond Jefferson: The Rhetoric of Meritocracy and the Funding of Public Education

By Barbara Nicholson

*Unlike medicine, agriculture, and industrial production, the field of education operates largely on the basis of ideology and professional consensus. As such, it is subject to fads and is incapable of the cumulative progress that follows from the application of the scientific method and from the systematic collection and use of objective information in policymaking. We will change education to make it an evidence-based field. We will accomplish this goal by dramatically improving the quality and relevance of research funded or conducted by the Department, by providing policymakers, educators, parents, and other concerned citizens with ready access to syntheses of research and objective information that allow more informed and effective decisions, and by encouraging the use of this knowledge. (2002)*

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This declaration from the United States Department of Education's *Strategic Plan: 2002-2007* signifies in no uncertain terms that the battle waged by critics of alternative research methods continues, and

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is likely to intensify. As insulting as the language of Strategic Goal Four (“Transforming Education Into an Evidence-Based Field”) is, however, it is the normative assumption on which it is predicated, a classic example of the kind of “begging the question” that often underlies such initiatives, which is most troublesome.

The denigration of research methods which decline to adhere to the trappings of logical positivism may have begun with Rene Descartes, but the origins of the dispute between positivists and post-positivists reach much further into history. This analysis examines the dimensions of one such method of classical inquiry, rhetorical criticism, and, taking as an example the funding of public education, demonstrates the value of attending to the language of persuasion. Judging from the excerpt above, it is a skill conservative policymakers practice all too well and one which the social foundations community may find beneficial in efforts to effect meaningful reform.

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### “Facts Are Precisely What There Are Not”

It would seem a reasonable enough claim to note that scholarship involves the use of persuasion, as researchers must necessarily explain their findings in language which is convincing to those who read their work. Such as assertion, however, always finds opposition from those who argue, as does the Department of Education, that adhering to the “scientific method” ensures a level of objectivity which eludes other approaches to research.

Modern scholars usually deny their rhetoric. Wearing the masks of scientific methodology first donned in the seventeenth century, they have forgotten about the rhetorical faces underneath. Their simple repetition of official rhetoric against rhetoric serves mainly to dampen anxieties about how things really happen in the lab or library. (Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987, 3)

This observation raises two important and interrelated issues pertaining to the status of rhetoric: the history of its marginalization as a practice and its potential value to those seeking to replace the unquestioned neutrality of scientific methods with an insightful scrutiny of the premises which ground them.

The origins of the exclusion of rhetoric as an integral element in the pursuit of knowledge extend to the Classical Period, serving to center many of the metaphysical debates between Plato and his student Aristotle on the varied distinctions between philosophy and rhetorical theory. While Aristotle shared his mentor’s reverence for human knowledge, derived through the syllogistic properties of the dialectical process (in philosophical engagements), it was his sentiment that the full value of knowledge is realized only when it is applied in the broader realm of human affairs (the domain of rhetoric). It was not the philosophical but the rhetorical syllogism that allowed for such realization. The syllogistic equation was the same in both cases, i.e., if  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ . The difference was that Plato’s dialectical syllogism resulted, he believed, in what was *true*. Aristotle’s rhetorical

sylogism, practiced in pragmatic rather than philosophical circumstances, resulted in what was *probably* true. Its result, as Brumbaugh describes it, “was not new knowledge, but action” (1981, 187). The persuasiveness of the argument that human affairs didn’t lend themselves to processes laying claim to absolute truth resulted in the general acceptance of the Aristotelian “canon,” combining thought and action, as the foundation of Western thought and education for several centuries. It wasn’t until the 16th century, nearly 2,000 years later, that the connection was broken in Peter Ramus’ “Whatever Aristotle Has Said is a Fabrication.” A professor of philosophy in the College de France, Ramus was a prolific writer publishing some five dozen works ranging from physics to epistemology. It was his interest in the latter, and his belief that the canon complicated rather than simplified learning, that led to the eventual demise of interdisciplinarity in the academy.

Ramus’ epistemological theory, informed more by utility than perception, was grounded in compartmentalization. His general disdain for Aristotle led him to reduce rhetoric to mere oratorical style and delivery, thus rendering it the sole province of professors of eloquence. This conception of rhetoric as discursive ornamentation as opposed to a means for bringing knowledge to bear on human problems not only robbed it of its stature, but led to the convention of academic specializations that characterizes the educational enterprise to this day. “Fields” were identified, and “disciplines” within those fields. Research was separated from teaching, and research and teaching from public service. Soon entire campuses would take on designations as research or teaching institutions, and both the students and faculty in them would develop a remarkable inability to discern any interrelationships between their work and that of their colleagues in other fields. While the social foundations community has attempted to ameliorate the hardening of disciplinary divisions, we have been inclined to find our fellows in the social sciences. We are, however, much indebted to the humanities as well — and particularly to philosophy. A number of late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, for example, Nietzsche chief among them, rejected the positivist notion that scientific processes lead to “facts”: “[Facts are] precisely what there are not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing” (Montinari & Colli 1968, 323). Heidegger also rejected the notion that facts or data “speak for themselves,” and Wittgenstein’s later work favored the stance that meaning is a shifting and deeply personal phenomenon.

It was Toulmin, however, who explicitly connected Wittgenstein’s study of meaning and intent as they relate to the discursive properties of science. His exploration of how individuals reason their way through moral issues, articulated in *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (1950), led him to question the appropriateness of using formal logic as a means of resolving human problems. Calling into account the practices and language of the scientific community, he criticized the dismissing of interest in “the oral, the particular, the local, and the

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timely” (in Wartofsky, 1997). Rather than accept the presuppositions inherent in the notion of context-free judgment, Toulmin instead advocated a less dogmatic privileging of one form of rationality over all others.

Borrowing Toulmin’s terms, Nelson et al. (1987) encourage researchers to redirect their attention from positivist standards of Truth and Reason, and “toward the ‘warrants’ and ‘backings’ of particular reasonings ... stressing the importance of the audience [with whom] the warrants and backings must be shared ... if an argument is to have power. And it entails focusing on the figurative and even the mythic” (15). Rhetorical criticism, which takes as its focus the “figurative and even the mythic,” has proven a valuable tool for scholars in the humanities for literally decades. To the extent that the process itself has undergone a shift — from the morally neutral stance it attempted prior to the 1960s in order to conform to the trends common to other research disciplines, to one from which it embraces and even relishes its social obligations — rhetorical criticism constitutes a powerful means of confronting the material conditions it seeks to change. Klumpp and Hollihan (1989), in fact, “are convinced that the direction of contemporary rhetorical understanding obligates critics to become morally engaged” (87).

While it is not the intent of this article to develop a complete taxonomy of analytical methods available to the rhetorical critic, those whose interest lies in discerning the persuasive modalities in play in contested policies and engaging them on moral grounds may find this examination of the mythic properties inherent in school funding policies a helpful introduction.

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## Neo-liberalism, Neo-conservatism, and Retro-ideology

In an insightful discussion of whether critical pedagogies can manage to intervene in a meaningful way into Rightist policies, Michael Apple (2000) analyzes the influence of a “new power bloc” which has united seemingly paradoxical sets of advocates. The primary players are neoliberals, advocating market solutions to educational problems, and neoconservatives, who are committed to standardization of curricula and tests as well as a return to an idealized past the conditions of which are largely, if not exclusively, mythologized. Joining these cohorts are “authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular factions of the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and ‘management’” (230).

While there are contested issues between and among these constituencies, their common aim is the conscription of public education into the service of their crusade, a maneuver alleged to enhance American economic competitiveness, restore discipline (both national and individual), and return us to a fictionalized past they see as eminently preferable to the present.

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In essence, the new alliance has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those that guide its economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility to social needs; the reinforcement of intensely competitive structures of mobility, both inside and outside the school; the lowering of people's expectations for economic security; the 'disciplining' of culture and the body; and the popularization of what is clearly a form of Social Darwinist thinking. (231)

While much of Apple's (2000) text is devoted to how this perspective, grounded in the specious assumption that progressivism has become the dominant position in educational policy, can be seen in the development of particular initiatives and the need to resist such efforts, there is an equal measure of concern for how the perspective itself can and should be challenged. Much like Georg Lukacs, who lamented the inclination of members of the Frankfurt School to theorize, speculate and otherwise frequent the "Grand Hotel Abyss" rather than involve themselves in the resolution of real problems, Apple contends that only when critical pedagogy addresses what he calls the "gritty materialities" (229) will there be any real hope of disrupting this profoundly conservative agenda. These "gritty materialities" are the direct results of an immensely successful ideological project the discourse of which has framed the rationale for such changes in what is termed "common sense." Gilborn (1997) explains the process:

This is a powerful technique. First, it assumes that there are no genuine arguments against the chosen position; any opposing views are thereby positioned as false, insincere or self-serving. Second, the technique presents the speaker as someone brave or honest enough to speak the (previously) unspeakable. Hence, the moral high ground is assumed and opponents are further denigrated. (2)

The appeal of such rhetoric is complemented by the widely held view of academics as ivory-towered recluses who are deeply out of touch with reality and whose thinking is thus irrelevant, a perception exploited by skillful conservative advocates. It is thus critical, as Apple urges, that as we frame our challenges to these linguistic conventions, and the material initiatives they attempt to justify, we do so with the understanding that such an endeavor is in large part a discursive enterprise, requiring that we sufficiently connect our theoretical claims to existing material conditions.

I would suggest, however, that by adopting a focus on the connection of our claims to existing material conditions, we ignore an important preliminary step. Before we can devote ourselves to the formidable but necessary task of effectively challenging existing material conditions, it is important that we understand *why* so many have found the claims which ground the reforms initiated by the new neoliberal-neoconservative "power bloc" persuasive. Taking the stance of the rhetorical critic, one may examine the discursive strategies of their success in the initiation phase and thus help to illuminate the accomplishment of their implementation of key reforms.

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The key to that success lies in large part in the predispositions of their listeners, and those predispositions are cultivated in the deeply held myths which serve to order and explain our lives. Understanding why a particular myth resonates can provide a means of both exposing and challenging it, allowing us to see the connections between thought and action in a way which can inform feasible alternatives.

An analysis of public school funding can serve to illustrate why this particular form of rhetoric has seemed to strike such a resonant chord. While presently grounded in one version of a longstanding American myth, and hence compelling when evoked in material conditions which seem to reflect its tenets, K-12 funding could as easily be framed within the context of an equally persuasive yet competing myth. Identifying that myth, and the ways in which people relate it to events and conditions in their lives, can help us bring the debate to a different terrain — to one that is defined by progressive rather than conservative ideas.

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### Myth and the Forming of Public Policy

Among the more fruitful of analytical frameworks in political rhetoric has been the application of myth. While definitions of myth in the rhetorical context have been advanced by numerous scholars across a range of disciplines, it remains a term that can be best characterized by its semantic abstraction. Edelman, for example, defines myth as “an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning” (1971, 14). “An all-encompassing activating image; a sort of vision of desirable objectives ... that have become strongly colored, overwhelming, and which displace from the conscious all that is not related to it” is the definition offered by Ellul (1973, 30.) One of the more specific definitions can be found in the work of Braden:

Myth draws upon memory and imagination .... [I]t results from a collective effort over a considerable period of time ... represents an oversimplification of events, persons and relationships .... is more emotional than logical ... [and] combines reality and fiction. (1975, 113)

Fisher (1973), in his seminal article on the use of myth in political rhetoric, uses as an example the 1972 presidential campaign, which he describes as embodying two distinct versions of the “American Dream”: the moralistic account offered by George McGovern, and the materialistic narrative of Richard Nixon. The moralistic version, Fisher writes, focuses on moral/ethical issues; on the value of the individual and the inherent worth and quality of human beings. The materialistic version, on the other hand, embodies the Puritan work ethic in asserting that one’s rewards are directly proportional to the effort put forth. The harder one works, the greater the achievement and the larger the returns.

The materialistic version of the American Dream sanctions competition (whether for higher grades and merit scholarships, or for promotions and salary increases) as the way of determining personal worth. As Fisher explains, “[I]t

promises that if one employs his energies and talents to the fullest, he will reap the rewards of status, wealth and power” (161). Revolving around persistence, initiative and self-reliance, the materialistic myth can provide a powerful ideological boost to initiatives grounded in its tenets.

Asking no more than the simple deployment of the Puritan work ethic, it promises rewards. The same premise underlies recent reform rhetoric in public education, although in the contextual shift the term has shifted as well. Rather than “the materialistic myth,” it can be referred to as the “meritocratic myth.”<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, presently most notable for its current manifestation in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which assumes that all that is required for a child or school to rise to a pre-determined standard of performance is simple willpower.

Moreover, Fisher continues, the materialistic myth conceives of freedom as freedom from controls, regulations or constraints which impede the individual’s ability to climb the ladder of social and economic success. Such an understanding is embedded in the stance of those who are suspicious of government intervention in virtually any enterprise, public or personal.

The materialistic myth, Fisher points out, is susceptible to subversion from several angles. It is not believed, for example, by those who have abided by its principles but still found success elusive. Nor is it trusted by those who are bothered by the greed, resentment, envy and occasional malice that all too often result from its implementation. And, he writes, “it is naturally opposed by those who place highest value on moral rather than material goods” (161).

The moralistic version of the American Dream myth, on the other hand, is embodied in the tenets of the Declaration of Independence — the presumption of equality, the acknowledgment of “certain inalienable rights,” and the understanding that governments are instituted to secure these rights. Fisher observes that these tenets “involve the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” (161). These values then undergird endeavors to ensure public institutions and agencies guarantee equal treatment, and serve as a foundation for efforts to provide assistance to those who are less fortunate.

As is the case with the materialistic myth, the moralistic myth too can be undermined from a number of directions. The first is that in its appeal to our better natures, it is “predicated on the arousal of guilt” (162). In order to be motivated by an moralistic appeal, it is necessary to concede that failing to act will be construed, perhaps accurately, as a manifestation of self-interest. Second, moralistic values are frequently associated with movements designed to effect fundamental social or political change. As such, they can generate not only feelings of guilt, but of fear or threat as well.

The materialistic version of the American Dream has long grounded thinking on the appropriate role of government, an issue which lies at the heart of any discussion concerning the appropriateness of federally funding public education. Thomas Jefferson’s position on “limited government,” a phrase which appears only

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infrequently in his writing, is expressed in his eloquently phrased objection to the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. In the *Draft of the Kentucky Resolution*, Jefferson articulated his thinking on the appropriateness of confining the federal government to only those functions expressly assigned to it in the Constitution:

[C]onfidence is everywhere the parent of despotism — free government is founded in jealousy, and not in confidence; it is jealousy and not confidence which prescribes limited constitutions, to bind down those whom we are obliged to trust with power: that our Constitution has accordingly fixed the limits to which, and no further, our confidence may go. (1798)

Going on to urge other states to take a public stand on the question of whether the Acts were constitutional, Jefferson added that he “doubts not that their sense will be so announced as to prove their attachment unaltered to limited government, whether general or particular” (1798). His contemporary, James Madison, shared Jefferson’s reaction to the proposed legislation, characterizing it as “a monster that must forever disgrace its parents” (1798).

There were others, however, who found the fear of intrusive government unwarranted, Alexander Hamilton among them: “[T]he powers contained in a constitution of government, especially those which concern the general administration of the affairs of a country, its finances, trade, defense, etc., ought to be construed liberally in advancement of the public good” (1791). While it’s likely the evolution of American society from one which was largely agrarian to one of complex urbanization, and the attendant changes thereto, may give Jefferson reason to reconsider the role of government, his remains the voice which is summoned in defense of the materialistic myth, of maintaining “a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, [but] shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement ... This is the sum of good government” (1801).

Despite the extraordinary influence of the materialistic myth, however, public policy grounded in the moralistic myth is not without precedent. Concern over the mounting influence of corporate trusts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, served to arouse a number of politicians. In his speech accepting the Progressive Party’s nomination for President, Theodore Roosevelt argued that “[t]here is no surer way to prevent all successful effort to deal with the trusts than to insist that they be dealt with in the States rather than by the Nation ... [T]he only effective way in which to regulate the trusts is through the exercise of the collective power of our people as a whole through the Governmental agencies established by the Constitution for this very purpose” (1912).

Only the national government, Roosevelt believed, could provide the necessary control over the economy, a sentiment shared by Woodrow Wilson. “I feel confident,” Wilson declared, “that if Jefferson were living in our day he would see what we see .... Without the watchful interference, the *resolute* interference of the



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government, there can be no fair play between individuals and such powerful institutions as the trusts” (1912, emphasis added). Wilson continued this theme in his 1913 inaugural address:

[W]e have not studied cost or economy as we should either as organizers of industry, as statesmen, or as individuals. Nor have we studied and perfected the means by which government may be put at the service of humanity, in safeguarding the health of the Nation, the health of its men and its women and its children, as well as their rights in the struggle for existence. This is no sentimental duty. The firm basis of government is justice, not pity. These are matters of justice. There can be no equality or opportunity, the first essential of justice in the body politic, if men and women and children be not shielded in their lives, their very vitality, from the consequences of great industrial and social processes which they can not alter, control, or singly cope with. (1913)

Franklin Roosevelt put it succinctly: “The real truth of the matter is ... that a financial element in the larger centers has owned the Government ever since the days of Andrew Jackson” (in Schlesinger, Jr. 2001, 27). The following decades were to see significant strengthening of the federal government’s protection of people against corporate trusts.

Ronald Reagan’s (1981) resurrecting of the Jeffersonian tradition with his claim that government isn’t the solution but the problem, however, served warning. The battle was to be rejoined.

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### Money, Myth, and Rhetorical Opportunity

After more than two decades of litigation and state equalization attempts, wide disparities in public school revenues and per pupil expenditures remain both within and across states. While a recent national study (National Center for Educational Statistics 2001) determined that disparities within most states and regions decreased slightly between 1980 and 1994, there was an increase in six of seven disparity measures for the United States as a whole. Because local control remains the primary determinant of school funding, there is no reason to believe those trends won’t continue (Ritchey 2000).

In 1997-98, for example, estimated per pupil expenditures varied from \$10,410 in New Jersey to \$4,329 in Utah. For 1998-99, the figures were \$10,748 in New Jersey and \$4,478 in Utah (NCES 2001a). Examining school funding data by averages, however, can conceal more subtle inequities. In my own state, 2001 per pupil expenditures ranged from a high of \$9,193 in Boone county to a low of \$6,688 in Hardy county (WV Department of Education 2002), a pattern which is repeated in every state (Educational Trust 2002a; US Census 2002).

The Education Trust (2002b) points out that many of the states which appear to be doing the most to reduce district funding disparities “spend far less on the education of poor and minority children than they do on other children.” While

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there are some differences among the states, the Trust's general findings are these:

- ◆ In most states, districts with high numbers of low-income students receive substantially fewer state and local dollars per pupil than districts with few such students;
- ◆ While the funding gap between high- and low-poverty districts has narrowed somewhat over the past several years in the nation as a whole, it has increased significantly in nine states; and
- ◆ In most states, districts with high numbers of minority students also receive substantially fewer state and local dollars than do their counterparts with few minority students. (2002b)

In light of the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which holds schools accountable for improving the performance of every student despite the president's proposed slashing of \$90 million in funding for the program, recognition of the effects of these disparities is crucial.

Schools and the people who inhabit them will be required to demonstrate their progress toward predetermined standards of achievement, and many will argue that fiscal inequities within and among states matter little as the effects of poverty and family environment are too corrosive for schools to overcome. Hess (1998), for example, points out that even the most effective and best financed schools cannot mitigate social problems which have deep and varied causes, and argues that while schooling can effect enormous gains in children's lives, it may not be as effective as other social remedies targeted toward poverty and disadvantage. Pointing to more than three decades of research which has demonstrated conclusively that socioeconomic background is the primary factor in academic achievement, he argues that increasing funding for schooling rather than "facilitative services such as crime-fighting, job-creation, recreational facilities or local infrastructure" may fail to "enhance either social justice or equal educational opportunity" (36). That, of course, is a legitimate observation. On the other hand, we've no idea whether increased funding to schools can interrupt the deterministic relationship between educational performance and socioeconomic status.

We wouldn't know whether "throwing money" at schools works since we haven't tried it (Rips 2000; Rothstein 1993). While critics are fond of asserting that the amount of spending on public schools has roughly doubled since the 1960s, without, they add, any measurable improvement in student performance, they resolutely ignore the targets of that spending. Rothstein (1993), conceding that the \$5,521 spent per pupil in 1990 more than doubles the \$2,611 spent in 1965, points out that special education, nutrition programs, transportation, and increases in teachers' salaries (which he notes have grown only about one percent a year), account for the bulk of additional expenditures.

We know that among the things which improve student performance, particu-

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larly for disadvantaged students, are smaller schools, low student:teacher ratios, and universal preschool programs. All, however, cost money, and the current economic downturn has only intensified concerns regarding public spending.

Unexpected expenditures for the newly established Department of Homeland Security and increased defense spending to underwrite the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq have stretched the federal treasury. These costs have combined with the second round of the Bush Administration's tax cuts to plunge the nation into the largest budget deficit in its history. Unemployment currently stands at a nine-year high, and more than 56,000 jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector in June alone (CBC 2003).

Any possible benefits from deregulation have been more than outweighed by the savings and loan scandals, corporate fraud resulting in disappearing pensions, and higher prices charged by airline, telecommunications and utilities monopolies. Dwindling access to medical care and morally indefensible price gouging by pharmaceutical interests have alarmed even those who thought their health care coverage was adequate, a concern which is compounded as businesses continue to take advantage of NAFTA provisions allowing them to move manufacturing facilities to more business-friendly locations. Many who considered their jobs secure now fear they're but one offshore corporate tax shelter away from a pink slip. Adding to the trepidation is the Bush Administration's continued devolution of fiscal responsibilities to the states. Virtually every state in the country is running a deficit, collectively the largest in more than 50 years. As of December 2002, states had already wrestled with nearly \$50 billion in shortfalls and were facing an additional \$17.5 billion deficit before the end of the fiscal year. In the current fiscal year, state deficits are estimated at between \$60 billion and \$85 billion, or between 13 and 18 percent of state expenditures (Feldman and Marlantes 2002).

Tax revenues are down and costs are exploding. States are considering everything from cuts in services (e.g., health insurance, education, highway maintenance) to massive layoffs (e.g., social workers, teachers, police officers) to even releasing prisoners from correctional facilities and delaying or deferring prosecutions as judicial systems stagger under the same fiscal pressures as other agencies.

The tension between legal demands for balanced budgets and political demands for public spending is inevitable in a democratic society. It is also indisputably difficult to mediate. There is no dispute, however, that such mediation is, as it has always been, necessary if government is to meet its obligations to the citizens who support it. And mediation is an inherently rhetorical undertaking.

Any optimism people may have felt when they saw the reduction in their federal tax burden has been shattered by the prospect of higher state and local taxes. Governors, however, are loathe to take that route, and argue, legitimately, that the states owe their financial crises to federal policymakers who have saddled them with unfunded mandates in education, health care, homeland security and election reform. They have the additional argument that while 49 of the 50 states are

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prohibited from operating in a deficit situation (Vermont is the exception), the federal government has no such requirement.

There is a promising rhetorical opportunity in the ongoing meltdown of the materialistic myth. Chicago school assumptions on laissez-faire economics, holding that capitalism is self-correcting and that any form of regulation is both inefficient and ripe with potential for political corruption, have been proven wrong. The wide-open, unfettered market theology so dear to neoliberals has shown itself to subvert the very values neoconservatives cherish.

Stability, morality, and honest work providing a livable wage sufficient to support a family have all been undermined by the opportunism inherent in American capitalism.

Even some wildly successful capitalists are themselves dismayed by what such a market has wrought. Financier and philanthropist George Soros writes, “Although I have made a fortune in the financial markets, I now fear that the untrammelled intensification of laissez-faire capitalism and the spread of market values into all areas of life is endangering our open and democratic society” (in Schlesinger, Jr. 2001, 29).

The spread of market values into public education surely endangers the futures of our most vulnerable children, a development that some economists and educators alike argue is no accident (Galbraith 2000; Kohn 2000; Rips 2000). As disparities in wages, incomes and wealth increase, they believe, common interests and common social programs are diminished. Rather than the schools our children deserve, “we have the schools our economy dictates” (Rips 2000). Galbraith (2000) even contends that there is little incentive on the part of policymakers to effect meaningful educational reforms because public schools are, in fact, currently producing all the highly educated and skilled workers the economy can absorb while not overeducating those who will be trapped in its fastest growing segment, the service sector.

We have, of course, been here before. When the Great Depression impeached the speculative excesses of laissez-faire economics and financial panics of the earlier Progressive era shocked the nation, demands for reform were widespread. In both instances, a politically energized citizenry elected representatives who enacted fundamental changes in the ground rules of capitalism. Reforms of similar scope may be difficult to achieve in the current environment, particularly as the country’s attention remains occupied by concern for terrorism in light of uncertainties regarding post-war Iraq and the increasing instability in the Middle East that has been the result of that invasion. But as former Texas House Speaker Gib Lewis noted, “All politics is local, and school politics is localer” (in Rips 2000). Whatever the broad, overarching themes of an era, people will look first to how events influence their own families, and the prospect of economic insecurity is looming large for an increasing number of middle-class families who are becoming alarmed about their children’s futures.

James Comer (1997), while regarding such an attitude as irresponsible, none-

theless believes that localized self-interest is the prime motivator in achieving fiscal equity among schools. While he's correct in charging that acting in one's own children's interest neglects the welfare of the least powerful, local control must be challenged despite its revered status. The federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation is the perfect vehicle for mounting that challenge.

Policymakers are only now beginning to understand the wide-ranging implications of the law, as is evidenced in a recent article by Phil Kabler in *The Charleston (WV) Gazette*, 23 October 2002. West Virginia's Senate Education Chairman was dismayed by the realization that "[t]here are about 45 different ways a school can fail." Assessment scores, he learned, "have to show improvement each year, not only schoolwide, but for each of ... 45 subgroups including racial and ethnic groups, the economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities and students with limited proficiency in English."

More recently, school officials in West Virginia have started to plan a public relations blitz to mitigate a "potential loss of confidence [in schools]" resulting from misunderstandings arising from *No Child Left Behind*. Eric Eyre reports in the 15 May 2003 *Charleston (WV) Gazette* that state school board member Paul Morris perceives a "need to pre-condition [the public]."

That the *No Child Left Behind* legislation recognizes the "economically disadvantaged" as a class gives us an opportunity to point out such discrepancies as those recently addressed by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Executive Director, Gene Carter: "Providing fewer funds to schools with the most low-income students contradicts what we know about the learning needs of these students .... [H]igh-poverty districts often require more funding to meet the needs of all students than their more affluent counterparts" (2002). Carter goes on to cite recent reports which found that the academic performance of low-income children suffers when they attend schools with high percentages of poor students, and provides the Association's official position on the issue:

[A]ll children, including those from low-income families, are entitled to safe, healthy, and comfortable school facilities; well-qualified teachers and other staff members; high-quality curriculum and learning materials; and adequate supplies and equipment. School funding must be adequate to give students with different abilities, backgrounds, and preparation equal access to knowledge and skill development. (2002)

Whitney (1999) believes states will find themselves vulnerable to lawsuits if they hold students accountable for meeting high standards yet fail to provide sufficient resources and to allocate them equitably. To date, only five states have not been sued, and even in those in which plaintiffs have prevailed, resource-poor states and districts have failed to meet court-imposed deadlines. Legislators seem to be coming, however belatedly, to the same conclusion.

For the nation's policymakers to take the position, as with the *No Child Left Behind* initiative, that educational policy should be made at the federal level but

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its funding left subject to “localer” politics is derelict at best. If education is a national priority, it cannot be left to the “vagaries of local financing” (Halstead & Lind 2001, 40). We got where we are by relying on property taxes to fund schools, a formula guaranteed to reduce the quality of a child’s education to an accident of geography. As the Vermont Supreme Court notes, however, “The distribution of a resource as precious as educational opportunity may not have as its determining force the mere fortuity of a child’s residence” (in Halstead & Lind 2001, 40).

Given the growing anxiety of Americans concerning their economic security, we have before us an opportunity to extend that argument. Jefferson’s intent to confine the federal government to only those functions expressly assigned to it in the Constitution was arguable even at the time he proposed it, and is even less compelling in the current environment.

Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy were correct that affirmative government is necessary in order to counteract the natural interests of the powerful. That need is as urgent today as it was in the past. The federal government has protected public lands, improved working conditions, provided a decent living for retirees, ensured access to health care, and pressed for racial equality. From highway construction to social programs, we have a history of “cooperative federalism” combining federal funding with local discretion. A proposal for federal funding of public schools simply “applies the logic of cooperative federalism to the area of education” (Halstead & Lind 2001, 42).

The growing disparities among our children are not so much addressed through the opportunities offered by public schools ... as they are mirrored by the growing disparities among our schools. Until we set higher standards for school funding, for living wages, and for social services designed to redistribute income; until we create decent housing and provide for adequate health care and day care; and until we create vast job opportunity for those with none, standards for learning for large numbers of children will be unreachable and irrelevant. And our schools, as the last large mediating institutions in our society, will continue to mediate inequality. (Rips 2000)

The time to make that case is now.

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### The “Zone of Mediation”

The United States has led the way in reform for more than 200 years. Among other things, we abolished slavery; established child labor laws; enacted suffrage for women, blacks and 18-year-olds; called for the eight-hour workday and the 40-hour week; implemented a graduated income tax; created social security, Medicaid and Medicare; and desegregated schools and other public facilities (although the extent to which America’s public schools are suffering a return of *de facto* segregation is reported to be more pronounced now than at any time in the past 30 years; see Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield 2003; Clotfelter 1999) .

For the most part, these were reforms mounted not by the oppressed themselves, but by advocates who spoke for them. And our preference has been for evolution over revolution, for persuasion rather than coercion — circumstances made possible because this is a society which tolerates dissent.

Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1994) identify three means available to those who seek social reforms: persuasion, a symbolic process which relies on communication to achieve objectives; bargaining, which involves having control of something an important resource and offering or withholding it in return for compliance with demands; and coercion, which responds to anything other than compliance with demands with punishment of some sort (e.g., physical violence, economic warfare via boycotts, etc.).

As the authors point out, however, bargaining and coercion are rarely invoked because most social movements have little with which to bargain, and even less with which to threaten or coerce. Even assuming the possession of tools with which to bargain or coerce, reformers find it difficult to engage powerful interests via such means as those interests generally view any such interaction as legitimation of radicalism. Hence, persuasion is the weapon of choice.

Welner (2001) recognizes this in his explanation of the “zone of mediation,” which he defines as “the boundaries of debate for a given issue” established from “the larger cultural norms, rules, incentives, power relations and values” of a given context (95). His work can be seen as a reintroduction of the Aristotelian observation that the receptiveness of a given audience is intricately connected to the assumptions and other presuppositions they share. Such a process permits the advocate to “discern, in every case, the available means of persuasion,” an aim Aristotle characterized as the exclusive function of rhetoric (Jebb 1969, 56).

Welner believes that the success of equity-minded reform should be measured from the initiation rather than the implementation stage and, like Apple (2000), notes that reforms which challenge normative beliefs about what constitutes an equitable society galvanize the interests of entrenched power. Hence even the mere establishment of a receptive zone of mediation is immensely difficult.

Reforms which have just educational opportunity as their intent must concentrate first on the establishment of a discursive space wherein normative beliefs can be challenged. Impeachment of the materialistic myth, grounded in the Puritan work ethic and underlying both the notion of meritocracy and the appropriate role of government, constitutes just such a rhetorical challenge.

As Fisher (1973) explains, the materialistic myth can be subverted from a number of angles, among them a recognition that its effects are often undesirable and even immoral. The suasory appeal of the moralistic myth, however, lies in its potential to eradicate or at least mitigate those effects.

Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1994) believe that what is necessary to create a receptive discursive zone is the existence of a “triggering event,” e.g., a legal decision, military action, a natural disaster, an environmental catastrophe viewed

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as preventable, a recession or economic distress, insensitivity by an institution, etc. Current economic conditions, and the feelings of insecurity they've catalyzed, combined with the meritocratic assumptions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the unrealistic accountability expectations it establishes, have helped to "trigger" the level of social consciousness required to effect substantive change. It remains up to those who are committed to social justice to press for that change.

While it is crucial that we be mindful of the daily struggles of real people (Fine & Weis 1998; Carlson and Apple 1998), and committed to mitigating them, our first goal must be the rhetorical one of enlarging of the "zone of mediation." A fundamental comprehension of the collective myths to which we're inclined to subscribe can expedite that effort, giving us a real opportunity to improve the lives of children and their teachers.

Many have offered ideas about how federal funding for public education might be accomplished, among them a new federal sales tax, a national property tax, or allocating funds from the federal income tax. Recognizing that such recommendations are largely regressive, however, Halstead and Lind (2001) suggest instead a progressive national consumption tax, which would use as a formula income minus savings and investment with possible exemptions for basic necessities. William Raspberry, in an editorial commentary in *The Charleston (WV) Gazette* on 8 April 2001, reports the perspective of Representative Chaka Fattah (Democrat, Pennsylvania), who took a different approach in introducing the *Equal Protection School Finance Act*.

The act, an amendment to the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, would have required states which presently fail to provide equal funding to districts to do so or lose their federal funding. Noting that his own state has one of the widest disparities in the country, a gap of \$10,000 between the wealthiest and poorest counties, Fattah calculates that if the average classroom size is 30 children, that gap translates into an average per classroom disparity of \$300,000 per year, or an average annual per school gap of \$5 million.

"Not even those who believe that more money for education is not the answer can seriously argue that these additional resources have no impact," Fattah argues. Rather than prescribing federal funding as the resolution, however, Fattah says he's "counting on the self-interest of the economically and politically powerful to keep the funding that their own children enjoy and make the state raise additional resources" (3C). Such a posture, however, ignores the fact that states have shown themselves, time and again, to be either unable or unwilling to provide those resources. If the problem is how to get adequate funding to low-income school districts, the remedy cannot be left up to the states. Local government all too often has turned out to be nothing more than government by the locally powerful.



### **Conclusion: Resurrecting Aristotle**

While I have devoted quite a lot of space to explicating the competing myths which underlie policymaking in the United States, it is not my intent to suggest that the dimensions of the problem are purely rhetorical. It is far too important an issue to be reduced to which set of advocates has the more persuasive claims, and to treat it as such would seriously devalue its human dimensions. “What rhetoric did, and does, promise,” however, writes Thomas Farrell, “is that interested advocates and agents may deal with radical contingencies in the human condition better through the shared disputation of practical reason than through other available options” (1993, 229). Like Aristotle, Farrell recognizes the improbability of “shared practical reason” in the public discursive arena, and is thus careful to say the “shared *disputation* of practical reason.” Rhetoric flourishes in areas of dispute, in matters wherein reasonable people may disagree, which accounts for why public policy constitutes such a rich vein for rhetorical criticism.

Several researchers in the field of social justice have noted that while analyses of the politics and practices of conservative thinking have permitted exposure of the negative results of Rightist reforms, the latent effect has been the ceding of the rhetorical terrain mentioned here in the introduction. The terminological boundaries, Welner’s (2001) “zone of mediation,” have been established by neoliberals and neoconservatives, resulting in debates about “what is” as opposed to debates about “what could be” (Apple 2000; Seddon 1997).

The conservative obsession with standards, curricula, tests, accountability, choice, deregulating the education profession, etc. is, purely and simply, a diversion designed to maintain a focus on what Welner (2000, 239) identifies as first- or second-order change (i.e., changes in the technical aspects of teaching practice or the fundamental ways in which schools function as organizations). It is designed to ensure that the broader issue of increasing income disparities, the net effect of which is to preserve the privilege of the advantaged by perpetuating and even strengthening the mechanisms of exclusion, remains comfortably embedded in the materialistic version of the American Dream. Unless our own claims illuminate that connection, we’ve little hope of calling it into question.

In his examination of the difficulties of establishing traction for equity-minded reforms, Welner (2001) explains that the potential success of any proposed reform must begin with a determination of the extent to which it would occur voluntarily. In those circumstances in which proposed reforms are likely to meet with resistance, it is necessary to first successfully create a context for change. If we can see beyond Jefferson, if we can thoughtfully and collectively initiate a challenge to the materialistic dimensions of both meritocracy and limited government by recommissioning our common moral commitments, and if we can do so in such a way that important theoretical and political claims are not “sacrificed on the altar of common sense” (Apple 2000, 255), perhaps we can ensure that our schools mediate not

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inequality, but opportunity. It is long past the time to do so. Nineteenth-century philosopher Orestes Brownson can guide our efforts:

The men of wealth, the businessmen, manufacturers and merchants, bankers and brokers, are the men who exert the worst influence on government in every country ... They act on the beautiful maxim, 'Let the government take care of the rich, and the rich will take care of the poor,' instead of the far safer maxim, 'Let the government take care of the weak, the strong can take care of themselves. (in Schlesinger, Jr. 2001, 29)

### Note

<sup>1</sup>The term "meritocracy" was coined by Michael Young, former secretary of the policy committee of Great Britain's Labour Party in 1945. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Young deplores Prime Minister Tony Blair's use of the word. "I have been sadly disappointed by my 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. I coined a word which has gone into general circulation, especially in the United States, and most recently found a prominent place in the speeches of Mr Blair .... The book was a satire meant to be a warning .... It is highly unlikely the Prime Minister has read the book, but he has caught on to the word without realising the dangers of what he is advocating." Entire article online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,514207,00.html>

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