

***Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future***, by C.A. Bowers. 2003. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 208 pages. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0-7425-3321-2.

Are you a conservative or a liberal? Before you answer, are you confident that you know the difference? This is the central tenet of *Mindful Conservatism*—that we have all become confused with the terms, and the modern rhetorical outpouring from the political left and right have done much to create this confusion. For instance, it is now assumed that liberals work to improve the well-being of others and conservatives perpetuate exploitive and self-serving practices for big business. Bowers, however, argues that the main difference is whether activism is directed toward strengthening and improving the community and hence the commons (conservatism), or in strengthening the industrial culture that places more value on profits and efficiency that degrade the self-renewing capacity of natural systems (liberalism). One of the most basic questions pertaining to conservationism is, “What is it that is to be conserved?” In liberalism, it is, “What is being changed?”

If you can get past your biases and contextually view how the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are presently used compared to their correct historic meanings, you begin to see a fascinating story of how reactionary liberals (such as the Reagan antienvironmental backlash) have created a split in the population on perceived allegiances and beliefs up to the Reagan era. Both main parties considered themselves stewards of a conservation ethic begun by that unique Republican conservationist, Teddy Roosevelt. Nixon/Ford, then Carter and the 1970s Congresses, account for a majority of modern environmental legislation.

In the first two chapters, we are introduced to the terms *conservatism* and *liberalism*, and are clearly shown how they have been misused and corrupted with particular emphasis on how reactionary liberals are now masquerading as conservatives to co-opt moderate conservatives and even moderate liberals. Chapter 3 continues with the argument that well-meaning scientists are helping to promote the problem with a belief system that emphasizes reductionism and purely technological solutions while emphasizing ideas that promote only linear change as progress. This is continued in chapter 4 when science and society promote the loss of different languages, cultures, and biodiversity that are not considered mainstream to modern progress. A true conservative wants to “save” all these things and maintain sociocultural integrity as a means to determine which changes benefit the community. Chapters 1 through 4 clearly show us how liberalism based on unrestricted free trade and linear progress is quite the opposite of beliefs rooted in conservatism.

In chapter 5 the practice of mindful conservatism is discussed. Indigenous cultures have an understanding of their environment built into their language that fits true conservative ideals well. Good mindful conservatism means reflective thinking that fits well with Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic.” Many examples of positive mindfulness, including business and resource usage, are outlined to show that environmentalism is really allied with conservatism (intergenerational knowledge and systems of mutual aid). Bowers wraps up with chapter 6, on educating for a sustainable future. It is here that he discusses various educational reformers and philosophers as a means to understanding those that promote ecologically sustainable thinking from those that support an ecologically destructive form of culture.

Although this is a good book we should all read, I do have some criticisms. In a book that argues about the misuse of terms, it would have been extremely useful to open with the correct definitions of the terms and then build the argument from there. Burke's classic definition for conservatism is not obvious until pages 37 and 65, a good classical definition of liberalism does not occur until page 115, and the book is only 173 pages long. The target audience would therefore seem to be people already conversant in political theory. Unlike most philosophical books, this one is more readable and easier to understand (although it can be difficult in places); hence, a larger, more general audience was probably intended. High school or college classes in social, environmental or political studies, or government, where the teachers/instructors themselves understand the basics of political/educational philosophy, would benefit greatly from discussion of the terms *liberal* and *conservative* and the arguments that Bowers promotes in this book. It behooves all of us to understand the misuse of the terms and to educate others in an attempt to unveil this misuse and how it affects long-term protection of the environment.

*Mindful Conservatism* is a thoroughly thought-provoking and incredibly illuminating book that is iconoclastic about how we label ourselves and continue to promote cultural myths that perpetuate environmental problems. Does Bowers advocate we all go out and vote Republican? Not in the least. He advocates that we start looking closely at the terms and start educating people in their correct meaning so that we all act on our beliefs, not just identify with some party affiliation that we perceive to fit our beliefs. Mindful conservatism emphasizes that we preserve the best of the past and change what contributes to the well-being of the future. Could George W. Bush gain more votes correctly labeled as a free-market liberal in which "the economic base and

mutual support systems within communities and families” are eroded in favor of “anti-environmental efforts with corporate interests” (p. 27)? Would this help environmental protection? In the political climate of the early twenty-first century, this is indeed a critical question.

*Richard R. Jurin*  
Assistant Professor  
Biological Sciences/Environmental Education  
And Director of Environmental Studies Program