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REVIEWS and RESPONSES

Bowers, C.A. (1987). *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education*. New York: Teachers College Press. 187 pages. ISBN 0-8077-2849-7

Tom Anderson

His writing style is serpentine and torturous, almost as though he apprenticed at the knee of one of those magnificently opaque translators of German philosophy. And that's too bad, because what he has to say is important, but not many readers will exert the effort it takes to get through this little book. C.A. Bowers, in *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education*, eventually posits a vision of post-liberal bioregionalist general education. But first he defines liberalism through describing and analyzing theoretical positions held by four great thinkers he picks as representing significant aspects of the liberal tradition: John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, and B.F. Skinner. The astute reader will recognize that Bowers includes both a Marxist (Freire) and a traditional conservative (Skinner) within the framework of the liberalism, arguing that they share in the grounding assumptions of the liberal tradition as it evolved out of the Enlightenment. Bowers then discusses

pre-modern/pre-liberal indigenous traditional social constructs as well as the post-liberal constructs of Foucault and others. Finally, he applies this to what he feels is valuable in the liberal tradition to construct his vision of post-liberal education. What he comes up with is education directed toward the restoration of community. One hundred fifty-seven pages are devoted to this. As useful and informative as this is, it seems that the real heart of this book—what Bowers really cares about—is the fifteen page “Afterword”, an argument for bioregionalist education. The whole of this dense little book leading to the establishment community-based education, is simply a foundation for the “Afterword”.

Bowers sets the table, initially, by synthesizing the now well-known theories of Foucault and others, that culture, and particularly language, set the horizons of one’s understanding. They do this by facilitating certain visions, perspectives, and approaches and limiting or eliminating others through providing selective screens or interpretive frame-works that influence what we pay attention to and what we ignore. This exposes, somewhat, the liberal conception of freedom of choice as a reification in stressing that the possible field of action is limited by traditional understandings or assumptions embedded in patterns of culture.

The four primary assumptions Bowers sees as grounding the great liberal tradition are progress, rationality, individualism, and emancipation. In the liberal conception, progress is inevitable and good. History is progressive. In this context the role of education is to recognize and facilitate progress, both social and technological. Second, social and philosophical authority are centered in the individual rather than in the group. The individual’s power to rationalize and to make individual choices based on rationalization replaces an earlier collective wisdom. Thus, finally, it follows that a primary purpose of education in the liberal view is emancipation from

traditional social constrictions through heightened individual consciousness. The “enlightened” individual’s implied task is to continue to facilitate the escalator of progress. Also implied within this liberal vision is the idea of tradition, conservative in its essence, as undesirable, something to be overcome, something standing in the way of progress.

Conversely, Bowers argues that traditional conservatism of the ancient sort pre-existing the current liberal tradition offers valuable understandings for a post-liberal education. He believes that liberalism, in its emphasis on emancipatory progress through individual rationality, denies or ignores the collective wisdom inherent in group norms, social imbeddedness and communal authority. Bowers claims that it is neither possible nor desirable to “emancipate” oneself from one’s culture. Again drawing on Foucault and other post-modern philosophers, Bowers de-centers the individual, and individual choice, in explaining that one’s field of action is limited by culturally agreed upon discourse—language—which is the medium of societal cohesion and reinforcement. Thus he also claims that language must also be the means for individual negotiation within culture. So cultural imbeddedness not only limits the field of action, but facilitates individual manipulations within that context. In short, Bowers argues, we must accept society’s collective legitimacy rather than individual rational decisions as the source of cultural authority. To do otherwise leads to an undesirable absolute relativity of values, and to anarchy and social disorder.

Bowers is not, however, in favor of abandoning liberal ideals *en toto*, but of integrating the most useful liberal conceptions with the most promising traditional conceptions into a post-liberal schema. He suggests that innovation residing in the individual as well as collective wisdom are both critical for a cohesive post-modern society. A collective grounding which allows for individual negotiation, along with the

development of communicative competence is the basis of Bowers' concept of a post-liberal education.

Bowers' goal for post-liberal education is the restoration of a now fragmented community. Community, as he sees it, has the important element of collective memory. It retells stories, both positive and painful, carrying forward a context in which people may see themselves and frame their individual and collective beliefs, goals, and ideals for the common good. Thus education becomes content-based as opposed to being grounded in generic strategies and technologies. It becomes a vehicle for conscious socialization communicating both what is and natural attitudes toward what is. Thus it demands instruction that critically examines cultural/belief paradigms, going beyond the taken-for-granted, and the liberal/positivist tendency of presenting information as fact or truth.

It becomes apparent, in the "Afterword" that the common good Bowers has in mind as the outcome of post-liberal education turns on an axis of radical bioregionalism. It turns out that the traditional values Bowers wants to see returned to the center are the ancients' attunement to place, to the interdependence of species, and to the sacred sense of the earth which liberal belief and modern technology relegated to the past and to superstition. Bowers sees the degradation of the environment as the primary crisis of our times and thus the primary challenge of contemporary education. Attunement to place, which Bowers sees as a primary strategy in addressing this crisis requires a reassertion of oral and practical education equal to the current emphasis on literacy. Literacy, according to Bowers, encourages the attainment of secondary knowledge over engaging in immediate experience. In short, it is Bowers' position that geographic, biological, and cultural rhythms must be actually experienced to be truly understood.

That is a challenging new paradigm, and one worthy of serious attention. My primary regret is that its presentation is not tuned to the cultural rhythms of most members of the academic reading public. After forced reading and forced discussions one of my doctoral students declared that she had finally found what she could call an affiliation, and declared herself a post-liberal bioregionalist. A breakthrough! But this student, and my other masters and doctoral students all wanted to quit reading long before the end, and would have done so without my threats and coercion. In fact I couldn't help drawing a parallel to poor Patricia Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army. That is, I tortured these students enough so that they came around to the torturer's position and thanked him for it. Which, ultimately, is to say that this book could use severe editing. Like the *Communist Manifesto*, if it were short and sweet, it could be a great book.

**Bersson, R. (1991). *Worlds of Art*.
Mountain View, CA: Mayfield
591 pages. ISBN: 0-87484-797-4**

Susan Washam Witten

The title intrigues; the cover art compels (a woman artist!). In the introduction Bersson proposes a "Breadth of thinking and depth of looking" (p. vi) approach developed both chronologically and thematically. This seductive entry into *Worlds of Art* promises to break new ground. Unfortunately, appearances can be deceiving; as an introduction "to the diverse worlds of art that exist across artistic categories, cultures, and historical periods" (p.vi) it greatly disappoints. "Worlds of Western Fine Art" is a more appropriate title for this art appreciation text.

Bersson indeed covers a breadth of artists, art works, and socio/cultural information if the world of art is defined by Western-European fine art. As promised, interspersed throughout the text are in-depth analyses of specific works of art which are written by a wide range of contributors that include critics, art historians, artists, philosophers, art educators, designers, and philosophers. Bersson attempts to modify the Western-European emphasis by selecting women and minority artists and writers for these "appreciation" pieces. However, the inclusion of these frequently ignored artists would be more palatable if they were a main ingredient in the text rather than just a seasoning.

As a traditional art appreciation text, *Worlds of Art* has some merit. The integration of fine and popular arts, the inclusion of socio/cultural context, and the introduction of women and minority artists combine with Bersson's breadth and depth approach to create a text attempting to touch contemporary society and make art accessible.

This clearly written and easily read text begins by providing the reader with a context for thinking about art, formalism, and contextualism, and offers models throughout for writing about art. Bersson moves into the visual world of the (western) reader through fashion, photography, film, album covers, posters, functional design, architecture, illustration, and advertising. As he describes both the formal and contextual aspects of these objects and images, he introduces fine art and creates connections between the worlds of the "ordinary...and extraordinary" (p.v). As the book progresses, increased emphasis is placed on fine art and less on the art of popular culture. By Chapter 8 Bersson has weaned the reader from the "ordinary" and returns to the Renaissance and immersion into the study of the Western-European tradition of painting and sculpture, "extraordinary" art. He concludes the text with a brief foray into the expanding boundaries of art and the growing influence of art by individuals and groups from outside the Western-European tradition. However the acknowledgment that there are (and always have been) diverse concepts of "art" seems shallow when balanced with the dearth of such examples in preceding chapters. The text reinforces the traditional and familiar concept that Western-European fine art is the standard by which all art objects must be compared.

The accompanying instructor's manual does little to expand this traditional view of art. However, it provides the novice instructor with a clear and easy path through key points, lecture topics, teaching methods, exam questions, and additional resources relevant to the content of the book.

Conceptually, Bersson is on the mark. Enhancing the traditional survey approach by focusing on specific works of art and providing socio/cultural contexts makes the world of art more accessible to the reader. This fresh approach provides a natural structure for acknowledging the diversity of the art world. However, Bersson short-changes the reader; his fresh approach turns stale as he reverts to tradition. *Worlds of Art* is not global, democratic, or multicultural in either content or intent. Bersson has created a world of art as he sees it: narrowly defined.

Bersson Responds

Citing the mandate of *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* "to encourage debate and discussion," Michael Emme, the JSTAE Editor, invited me to respond to the review of my book, *Worlds of Art*, in the current edition. For this opportunity, I thank him and hope that what follows will raise issues of general importance for Social Theory Caucus members.

Let me begin with a response to the reviewer's specific criticisms and then build from those to general issues that concern us all. Put simply *Worlds of Art* made some promising steps in the correct direction but then committed certain inexcusable ideological crimes. Admitting that *Worlds of Art* is a "fresh approach," the reviewer praises the book for its "attempts to modify the Western European emphasis by selecting women and minority artists and writers for [many of the book's] thirty-seven 'appreciation' pieces" that focus on an artist and/or artwork in depth. The writer thereafter lauds the book's "breadth and depth approach," emphasis upon "popular

culture," "integration of fine and popular arts, the inclusion of socio-cultural context, and the introduction of women and minority artists...."

However, all of the aforementioned positive features are largely negated for the reviewer when, "As the book progresses, increased emphasis is placed on fine art and less on popular culture." In spite of the fact that a large number of women artists and artists of color are featured in the fine arts unit, and in spite of the fact that the approach to the western fine arts tradition is critical, contextual, and actively inclusive—what is called the "new art history"—the reviewer judges the final unit of the book to be oppressively "traditional." Sweeping charges are then made in the review's conclusion that "*Worlds of Art* is not global, democratic, or multicultural in either content or intent."

While *Worlds of Art* could go further in the direction of "global" inclusion of fine and popular art from around the world, it has gone quite a distance on the road to cultural democracy and multiculturalism. Previous reviews by Caucus members Robert Saunders and Sally Hagaman in the *USSEA Newsletter* and *Studies in Art Education*, and comments by Graeme Chalmers' in *Art Education* emphasize that the content of *Worlds of Art* is far more "democratic," "multicultural," and "global" than traditional art appreciation/art history texts. The same holds true for its approach. Compared to the single-perspective "authoritarian" voice that rules the great majority of art appreciation and art history texts, *Worlds of Art* is radically democratic and multicultural, with the voices of numerous individuals of diverse background, social scientists, art historians, art educators, students a—bringing multiple perspectives to the art at hand.

Why is the current reviewer's judgement so at odds with those of the previous reviews? The answer is clear: a violent dislike of the western fine art tradition, a distaste so great that it completely reversed the writer's appreciation of the first two-thirds of *Worlds of Art*. Quite simply, the final third of the book, dealing with the evolution of "fine art" from the Renaissance to the present, soured what had been a "fresh" and potentially "palatable" approach. The experience, writes the reviewer, "turns stale as he [Bersson] reverts to tradition."

Herein lie the major questions for Caucus members, many of whom, like myself, have some ambivalent, contradictory feelings about the western fine arts tradition. What place should the western fine arts—art created for ruling classes and cultural elites—take in a socially progressive, culturally democratic art/education? Is the answer, as the reviewer implies, to deemphasize such art in our classrooms and our texts? By extension, should nonwestern elite (i.e., fine) art created for Persian princes, Turkish sultans, Chinese emperors, or Japanese shoguns be likewise deemphasized? Or are Persian miniatures and Sung Dynasty landscapes somehow ideologically acceptable whereas Raphael portraits and Nevelson abstract sculptures are not? Moving a step further, should all fine art, western and nonwestern, be deemphasized in favor of the popular or oppositional arts of the respective cultures? The answer, I would argue, is not to censor the fine arts, but to treat them critically and contextually, all the while striving for inclusiveness of all the arts, fine, popular, folk, and applied.

By broad Caucus standards, an ideal art appreciation/art history introductory text might include proportionally equal amounts of fine and popular art, art by women and men, and art by people of every race, culture and class. The book might be organized chronologically, thematically, and/or by media. In approach it would be contextually and critically-oriented, and would be governed by non-doctrinaire, socially progressive

values. I think both the reviewer and myself would like to see more attempts made in this general direction. Neither of us, I would insist, want to see the "world of art...narrowly defined."

Robert Baron, R. & Spitzer, N.R.
(Eds.). (1992). *Public Folklore*
Washington: Smithsonian Institution
Press. ISBN 1-56098-117-2

Kristin G. Congdon

I have always wondered why public folklorists and art educators seem to have so little interaction with each other. Individuals from both disciplines study traditional art (folklorists more than art educators) and both groups of professionals present artists and art works to the general public. Yet it is all too rare that they share information and teaching methodologies. Consequently, when I was asked to review the anthology, *Public Folklore*, for the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, I was pleased.

Most of the sixteen chapters came about as a result of a series of sessions presented at the 1987 American Folklore

Society meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The editors correctly claim that the essayists reflect on the following questions: "Why and how should folk cultures be represented? Who has the authority to represent them? What are the ideologies that inform such representations" (p.3)? These are excellent questions which are often asked art educators, perhaps utilizing a slightly different language.

One of the most controversial chapters is the second one, written by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Published previously in a 1988 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, the author challenges academic folklorists to effectively train public sector folklorists. She, and several other authors (notably Archie Green and Roger Abrahams), explore the reasons why there is such a split between the academic folklore world and that of the public sector folklorist. An art educator can hardly read this book without thinking about our own tired and continuing dialogue on the gap between theory (the academic domain) and practice (the day to day world of the art teacher). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett admonishes public sector folklorists for not being more active in the intellectual development of their discipline while excusing them somewhat because of their overextended positions. Again, we can hear academic art educators talking to art teachers.

Much of this anthology is for the insider. Those who know the field of folklore will like reading the historical reflections on the leaders, and the better known characters in the field. Archie Green writes about how public folklore got its name. Bess Lomax Hawes cheers the folklorist on while she describes the public sector folklorist's mission. Roger Abrahams, Robert Cantwell, Robert Baron, and Steve Siporin admirably begin the work of writing history. Siporin highlights major publications and programs with an accompanying bibliographic survey of the field. These chapters all acknowledge the well-established marginalization of the public folklorist within the academic

field of folklore, often seen as a marginalized field of study in higher education. While the art educators may not find themselves too interested in these chapters, unfortunately they will probably see some correlations regarding their status.

With the exception of the Kirshenblatt-Gimblett chapter, the most valuable chapters for the art educator fall in the middle section of the anthology titled "Metaphors and Methods of Practice." It is here where issues of educational methodology, cultural conservation, cultural invasion, cultural presentation, and folklore's relationship to social work take place. Gerald Davis' article does a good job of addressing issues of how we have to discover and try new ways of representing diverse cultures. Working as an African American in an African American community, he gives us examples of how this can be done. Other models are presented, such as Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva who used animation techniques to represent those aspects of Hopi religious life which are forbidden to the eyes of outsiders. Two of the most enjoyable chapters were those by Susan Roach and Richard Kurin; both authors know how to tell a good story while they educate. Roach utilizes a lot of narrative from folk artist David Allen, as she relates to us how this African American cane carver from rural Louisiana gained visibility and popularity. Economic, social, and technical issues emerge along the way, demanding certain actions or inaction which Roach effectively addresses. Kurin presents the experiences he had while involved in a Soviet-American cultural exchange program with the Smithsonian, during Perestroika. While the Soviets had expected to be given a packaged Disney-like program, the American folklorists were determined to send "community-based artists who have learned in a traditional way and who perform in an authentic nonstylized manner" (p.193). In addition, the Americans insisted on sending not a singular group, but groups which could, in some way, reflect the diversity of American society. Kurin's chapter beautifully

raises issues similar to the kinds which art educators continually face: How does one teach a particular perspective in a social or educational system that has such different goals? How does one successfully present artistic products out of context? Which cultures and their art should be selected for presentation when time and resources are short? Likewise, the kinds of questions raised by Nicholas Spitzer should be continually entertained by art educators:

Does cultural conservation orient us to a primarily pastoral, bucolic, and uncritical view of culture? Does cultural conservation suggest that we see ethnic groups as somehow always reviving certain accepted cultural traits and bounded not just from mainstream society, but also from other groups? Could cultural conservation suggest restrictions on cultural change that might be beneficial to a social order? (p. 96)

This volume makes good use of photographic portraits, often those of the authors. Since I have never seen Bess Lomax Hawes, and she is such a legend in the field of folklore, I was grateful to have been greeted with her image. The list of contributors is placed at the front of the book instead of the back, giving the reader a flavor of how folklorists think and what they see as important. Sadly, only three of the eighteen authors (including the editors) are women.

Most of the writing is autobiographical which I find refreshing and easy to read. What most Social Theory Caucus members will find somewhat lacking in the anthology is an overt political and social agenda. Although Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asks that public folklore go beyond the idea of celebration to "address the root causes of the marginalization of particular groups and cultural practices" (p. 33), there is not enough of this kind of inquiry, except perhaps in Davis' chapter

where he refers to activists and authors like Notzake Shange, Malcolm X and Mao Tse-Tung. Overall, however, this book is careful and conservative. While it mentions social and political experiences, it does not *focus* on issues of oppression, gentrification of communities, racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, or ageism; and it seems to me it should. The marginalized group most often discussed is the public sector folklorist. As I was thinking about this criticism, I was reminded of a conference I attended a few years ago where public sector folklorists commented on how much more freedom academics have to be overtly political. The academics in attendance, myself included, protested that it was not easy to be radical or politically different at universities. One can pay the price for activism, whatever the context. Curiously, I remember art teachers telling me and other academics, many times now, how they would be fired from their positions if they were to deal with some of the issues which others and I ask them to consider, no matter how much they are convinced of the appropriateness or rightness of such acts. Perhaps this criticism of *Public Folklore* is as unfair as it would be for me to criticize art teachers who are not more politically active in their classrooms. They, like public sector folklorists, are confined more clearly by their organizational systems and their funding structures.

In summary, I recommend this book for art educators dealing with organization theory/practice issues and those who care about multicultural issues, which should be all of us. In closing, I would like to encourage art educators to seek out the public sector folklorists in their regions in an effort to work more closely with them. I think we have a lot to share with each other, and perhaps we can help each other become more politically and socially engaged in our professions.

One last note about folklorists. When I was doing my doctoral work in the early '80s, a friend asked me if folklorists

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did anything besides collect folklore. I replied that they did quite a bit more than that; they studied how the folklore functions in our worlds to help define who we are. But I believe the field of folklore is beginning to take a powerful step in another direction. During the business meeting at the 1992 American Folklore Society Conference, a passionate and emotional discussion took place on whether the Conference should be held, as planned, the following year in Oregon, a state which had proposed a referendum (Proposition 9) which would legally permit discrimination against gays and lesbians. There was a strength of commitment to support homosexuals that I have never witnessed by an academic professional organization before. Members wept over the hatred, gave testimony, and were prepared to sacrifice to do the right thing. Never have I been more proud to be associated with a professional group of people than I was at that moment. Folklorists, like many art educators, are just beginning to see power in their field of study and their organizational groups.

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