

## **BOOK NOTE**

### **Rethinking Assumptions**

C.A. Bowers, *Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future*. Lanham and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

*Mindful Conservatism* moves beyond political discussions to delve into the linguistic basis for eco-critical thinking. This text is not about who is “liberal” or “conservative” but what these phrases stand for, how they need to be understood, and what this understanding means for anyone concerned about the future of our environment.

What is it, exactly, that today’s “conservatives” are trying to conserve? According to Bowers, conservative movements like the Wise Use movement have as their goals “the colonization of other cultures as new markets and as sources of natural resources” and the opening of public lands to the mining and petroleum industries “so that Americans can drive sport utility vehicles” [p. 52].

Bowers points out that these actions are the opposite of true conservatism, which is “deeply rooted in intergenerational knowledge of life-sustaining community-Nature relationships” and “involves a sense of caution and concern with ensuring that the life-enhancing traditions, including traditions that have the smallest adverse impact on the environment, are not weakened or lost by embracing a new idea or technology” [p. 53]. As part of his central argument, Bowers insists that environmentally-minded people retrieve the true meaning of conservation in order to create a functioning mindful conservatism that is promulgated by small communities, governmental policies, and global activists. In *Mindful Conservatism*, Bowers recognizes the community’s role as an agent for change, and that if the community is to foster change to an ecologically sustainable existence, it must respect and incorporate the intergenerational voices of all people—not just those of the white and wealthy.

Through the prism of linguistics, Bowers examines meaning, thinking, and educating within the environmental movement, including how these actions affect environmental justice, governmental policies, and eco-minded academics. As Bowers thoughtfully explains, in order to have a clear discussion about the environment, we need a clearer understanding of the language we use to discuss it. Bowers asks “If conservatism has to do with the well-being of communities, families, and individuals—and now with conserving natural systems so that the quality of life of future generations is not diminished—it is difficult to see how the alliance between corporate America and recent Republican presidents represents a defensible form of conservatism” [p. 30]. In this argument, Bowers recognizes that capitalism and conservation are incompatible, as long as capitalism continues to stand for big business and the bottom line, rather than the long-term well-being of our planet.

Following the Burkean (Edmund Burke) tradition of conservation, Bowers emphasizes that change made thoughtfully with the future in mind and with the voice of the

community, is necessary to generate an environmentally-minded plan for our planet. Change need not occur for the sake of “progress,” as is the case now.

In *Mindful Conservatism*, Bowers delves into the assumptions that make up much of American thought: the heavy reliance on progress and linear thinking that bulldozes tradition as well as our dependence on the idea of the autonomous individual; both ideas are part of and espoused by the classical liberal thinking entrenched in our educational systems. This “liberal” thinking, which champions progress for progress’ sake, is destructive to our future- and takes away from intergenerational tradition and communities that understand the concept of organic dependence. A sustainable world can only be created, Bowers maintains, through mindful conservatism and careful reflection of our thoughts and actions.

Despite the strength of Bowers’ argument, it is weakened by its presentation in this text. Each chapter is broken up into so many sections that the argument seems to lack a cohesiveness which is baffling in a text that valorizes connectedness. The first few chapters make a number of important points that are not elaborated upon until much later in the text, which makes it difficult to follow for readers who are not already familiar with Bowers’ ideas. For instance, “Linguistic and Biological Diversity: Another Argument against Globalization” would have been better interwoven into the shorter chapter on “The Practice of Mindful Conservatism” in order to give more helpful demonstrations of the global impact and ramifications of a community-focused environmental movement.

That relatively minor criticism aside, overall, Bowers offers critical arguments that must be considered if humanity wants to create a change for the better, for the future, for our environment and, redundantly, ourselves.

—Teresa Coronado