

Book Review

Review of *Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future*, by C. A. Bowers. Lanham; New York; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, 192 pp.

Review by Rolf Jucker

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How on earth can you call a book about sustainability “*Mindful Conservatism*,” you might ask. Please don't let your preconceptions and the current use of the term *conservatism* make you turn away from this important and timely book.

C. A. Bowers opens up one of the most crucial debates that we should lead if we are serious about an ecologically sustainable future. We generally shy away from this discussion because of its potential pitfalls, misunderstandings, and a tradition of abuse of the term *conservatism*.

The central question of the book is: What do we need to conserve in order to have a more sustainable future and just world order? This question clearly calls for a complex answer: it is arguably the most important question we can ask if we want to turn our destructive, exploitative, overdeveloped, and overconsuming global world order into something that can sustain itself within the limits of the ecosphere.

In a very differentiated and perceptive manner, Bowers tries to wrestle the term *to conserve* from a history of abuse and misrepresentation. His central question already makes clear that we need to assess whatever we and others do in the light of whether it contributes or further destroys our ability to achieve an ecologically sustainable future. This means

that we have to overcome a number of deeply ingrained cultural assumptions, at least “we” in the West:

- Self-assigned liberals and progressives should start to recognize that the automatic assumption that change leads to progress is utterly wrong. Bowers shows, very forcefully, that our obsession with progress and technological innovation has led to planned obsolescence and a commodified lifestyle that destroys natural resources as much as cultural fabric, values, and identity.
- Conserving traditions, on the other hand, is not necessarily any better. Bowers stresses that there is a clear “need of distinguishing between oppressive and community-sustaining traditions.”
- Just because politicians and the media label somebody as “conservative” does not mean that these people want to conserve anything other than their privileges and power. Bowers carefully exposes how so-called conservative politicians (such as Buckley or Limbaugh), anti-environmental groups (such as the Wise Use Movement in the United States), or scientists (such as E. O. Wilson or Dawkins) are *either* classical liberals, subscribing to the values of the industrial model of production, which, in fact, is the “most powerful cultural transforming force” in history, destroying cultural and natural diversity the world over (for example in the name of globalization); *or* merely reactionaries who try to preserve their vested interests and wealth against just re-distribution and down-sizing of their overconsumption.

Rather than falling for commonly used and misleading (political) labels, Bowers suggests that we adopt a much more sophisticated and penetrating approach: “What is being conserved needs to be continually reassessed in terms of whether it contributes to community self-sufficiency and thus to a smaller ecological footprint.”

By teasing out what, in fact, are the parameters of a sustainable future—conserving, or where lost, renewing the viability of communities and families; revitalizing intergenerational knowledge and responsibilities that contribute to community self-reliance and less commodified lives; enabling environmental, economic, social, and intergenerational justice—Bowers is able to highlight the need for a thorough rethink of the taken-for-granted convictions of both mainstream “conservatives” and “liberals”/ “progressives.” We have to transgress the limitations of the current political discussions and get real; that is, learn to differentiate between good and bad traditions as well as good and bad change and innovation. Bowers also shows that similar things are true for the educational discourse: both educational

“conservatives” and so-called progressive reformers share the core convictions of industrialized capitalism, which makes their theories ill-suited for achieving sustainability. Nor is the educational reality different; on the contrary, a university degree currently certifies “the modern industrial, consumer-oriented mind-set.”

By looking at examples of “morally coherent and ecologically responsible communities” around the world (Apache, Quechua, Inuit, Aboriginal, Chiapas, Amish, etc.), Bowers is in a position to compile a catalogue of prerequisites for a move towards a sustainable future. In order to *conserve* the self-sustaining capacity of the Earth and the resilience of diverse cultures, we in the West need to *change*:

1. from so-called autonomous individuals to human beings embedded and sustained through relationships and dependent on nature;
2. from ego-centred individuals to human beings owning up to responsibilities toward nature as well as past, present, and future generations;
3. from so-called culturally neutral/universal technology to the appreciation of cultural and social embeddedness of any application of technology, its true costs and benefits, the responsibilities of scientists, and the over-arching importance of the precautionary principle;
4. from the commodification of everything to values that guarantee long-term sustainability of communities and nature;
5. from the myth of “development” to the recognition that overdevelopment and overconsumption are the prime reasons for the unsustainability of the Western model; and
6. from a monetised and consumption-orientated notion of wealth to one that centres around the life-enhancing qualities of what we do.

I believe that Bowers’ book is hugely important because it emphasizes throughout the concept of mindfulness, as opposed to preconceived convictions. It challenges us “to rethink our traditional political categories” and to question what the media and politicians want to make us believe. We have to learn to step out of the box because the traditional political vocabulary simply is not fit to cope with the sustainability challenge.