

## Minireview

# Comments on John Willinsky's Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End

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**John Willinsky's view that imperialism and its legacy remain the driving force that divides the world into "superior" and "inferior" cultures fails to take into account other forces that also encourage peoples of different cultures to emphasize the differences between themselves. He is correct in noting that imperialism led to much injustice and inequality in the world, but he is insufficiently attentive to some of what can only be considered to be positive outcomes as well. The real strength of Willinsky's analysis lies in his view that education must be reformed to account for and temper the tendency of different peoples to develop affinities with those most like themselves and to be suspicious of contact with those perceived to be outsiders.**

**Key words:** Civilization, Colonialism, Dividing the World, Education, Imperialism, Multiculturalism.

## INTRODUCTION

In this small volume, John Willinsky is concerned with the educational legacy of imperialism, a legacy that he believes continues to act to divide the world according to definitions of races and culture that set different peoples apart and encourage perceptions of each other as "superior" or "inferior" beings and equally important perceptions of, in his words, "a profound sense of who belongs where" (Willinsky, 1988). In Willinsky's view, imperialism, and its residue in education and other facets of life, is the driving force that has encouraged such divisions. In his view,

Imperialism afforded lessons in how to divide the world. It taught people to read the exotic, primitive, and timeless identity of the other, whether in skin color, hair texture, or the inflections of taste and tongue. Its themes of conquering, civilizing, converting, collecting, and classifying inspired educational metaphors equally concerned with taking possession of the world metaphors that we now have to give an account of, beginning with our own education. (Willinsky, 1988).

The central theme is that in a variety of ways colonial conquerors and rulers regarded their conquests—both people and places—primarily as exotic, and that out of the strangeness grew the justification for their own feelings of superiority and their imposition of western "civilization" on the rest of the world. In Willinsky's view, the perceptions of difference that arose out of the colonial period remain

today, both for the descendants of the original colonists and colonial rulers and for the descendants of those colonized.

There is evidence to support Willinsky's thesis, but it may not be just to attribute to post-Renaissance European imperialism the entirety of humanity's combative divisiveness. Much of what Willinsky so attributes can as easily be attributed to the entirely normal human tendency to categorize objects and people by their most readily observable characteristics. Considering that tendency together with the equally strong tendency to be a bit distrustful of that which is not entirely familiar, a tendency that probably has sound evolutionary roots, can lead to an equally credible explanation of the world's divisions. Likely, many factors have contributed to the development of the divisions with which Willinsky is concerned, but this does not mean it is unprofitable to study and pursue change through one of them. Certainly, education can be a powerful force for either division or unity, and it is certainly reasonable to hope that as it has contributed problems so it can subsequently contribute solutions.

## DISCUSSION

Early in Chapter 1, John Willinsky offers as evidence of the world's divisions examples of ethnocentric speech and

writing: a young woman described as “parenthetically Chinese;” another student who says, “My ethnic background is Chinese but...;” and street graffiti that admonishes, “Save a Young Mind, Stop Multiculturalism.” He credits these attitudes in large part to the effects of imperialism in the educational system that arose as European powers colonized the world. They are, he says, holdovers of the attitudes of separation, superiority, at times inferiority, and perceptions of threat that arose specifically out of educational systems that, however well-intended, have fostered or at least reinforced a tendency to establish identity in terms of what one is and is not.

Willinsky gives imperialism far more blame...or credit...whatever...than it actually deserves, I think. For without denying that imperialism and colonialism have indeed fostered a certain amount of divisiveness in the world, the primary sources of division among peoples is much older than the formal, European colonialism of the preceding five or so centuries. As Sam Huntington (1996) noted in *Clash of Civilizations*, if you put a Frenchman and an Englishman in the same room, you have two people, one of whom identifies himself as “not English” and the other who identifies himself as “not French,” while identifying the other in exactly the reverse of those terms. Add an Arab, and you will have two people who identify themselves as “not Arab,” and one who identifies himself as “not European.” In large part, we, and Willinsky, are describing nothing more complicated than the xenophobia that has been around and encouraged at least since biblical times.

Huntington’s thesis, of course, has drawn some disagreement. Archar (2002) directly challenged Huntington with a small volume whose title is a takeoff on Huntington’s own. According to Archar (2002), there is more to eastern antipathy to the United States than simply the “not western” identity described by Huntington (1996). In his view, the United States’ role as the dominant imperial power has a great deal to do with that antipathy and with the motivation for September 11 and other terrorist acts. Archar (2002) noted at the time that the terrorists’ attack was not leveled at the secular governments of Western Europe, but at a specific government seen to threaten Islamic interests. This argument may be viewed with some skepticism now that significant terrorist attacks have also targeted governments in Western Europe as well.

Willinsky’s observation that Canadian whites are less likely to identify themselves as white and that this is as a result of colonialism’s influence also bears scrutiny. Individuals who are born into and live in societies in which they are clearly “like” the majority of others in the society probably feel less pressure to identify themselves explicitly as being one of the majority. The same may be true of individuals who are clearly “like” those who occupy positions of power or prestige even though their group may not amount to a numerical majority or even plurality

in the larger society. Willinsky rightly recognizes that perceptions of division among members of a society can come to threaten the integrity of the larger society itself, and they can. Canada forms a perfect example with its distinctions between French and English Canada. But to credit imperialism as the primary cause of xenophobia is taking things at least one step too far. People may very well fear that which is different whether or not they perceive it as an encroaching empire. It is doubtful, for example, that current opponents of “guest worker” programs in the United States view impoverished Hispanic immigrants as “an encroaching empire.” But they do fear the dilution of the familiar by the unfamiliar.

He is especially taking things a step too far when he seems to argue that literature, film, and even commerce should not treat the differences between societies or hint at the exotic, as he seems to do in decrying what he calls on page 12 the “colonial nostalgic” embodied in such films as *The African Queen* and *A Passage to India* or a tea company’s search for tea leaves from “the backwaters of Ceylon, India, and Africa.” If it is “bad” to search for “the most treasured tea leaves,” what can there possibly be that would be innocuous? Willinsky decries the inability of even post-imperial education to address the history and legacy of identity, but again he is well beyond the bounds of reason when he calls it “...the history of identities that imperialism has bestowed upon us....” As noted earlier, Willinsky claims that imperialism “taught people to read the exotic, primitive, and timeless identity of the other,” but there is good reason to believe that people read these things quite naturally without any instruction from imperialists. Whether colonizer or colonized, normal people simply do recognize and respond to that which is different. Perhaps the real failure of imperial education was to not recognize the need to counter that natural tendency with lessons in tolerance and acceptance of others who are different.

Willinsky seems equally over the top when he describes the book as being “...about the accumulation of learning that proved eminently useful to Europe and often detrimental to the larger body of humanity.” It is difficult to imagine learning of true and real things that is detrimental to any part of humanity unless it is to harm those who would deliberately deceive or perpetuate myth for their own purposes of power or economic gain.

Willinsky is on sounder ground in the next three chapters, when he describes as major influences in imperial educational systems the aims of imperialism as: “taking a knowing possession of the world, on setting that world on public display for the edification of the West, and on developing the principal forms of schooling that might serve both colonial state and colonized native.” It is not unreasonable to expect that an educational system will reflect the values and objectives of those who put it in place. Clearly, the objectives of colonial powers were to further their own power and wealth. Even if some of them brought with them a sense of *noblesse oblige*, they could

hardly have been expected to bring with them educational systems that did not reflect their own values and prejudices. And this would have been true even as their discoveries and “conquests” expanded dramatically their view of the world and the people in it.

Many educators in the occupied colonies were representatives of major religious denominations. The first of these were the Catholic missionaries who brought with them both secular education and “salvation” of the spirit from whatever local “evils” might have been extant. There is, of course, in the very essence of evangelism a presumption that one is bringing to the table something vastly superior. Melding education and proselytizing was a particular genius of the religious educators who accompanied the conquerors and appointed governors of the new territories.

To the colonizers, it was a given that European training and scholarship were superior to the forms found locally. Macauley said it best with his observation that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole of native literature of India and Arabia.” He saw English education as a means of extending and securing the empire, enabling colonial masters to govern and conduct commerce effectively because they had developed a class of people with whom and through whom they could do business with those they governed. Unfortunately, and probably deliberately in most instances, the educational opportunities afforded the natives were designed to keep them subordinate to their colonial masters. In this sense, then, Willinsky is correct that the imperial view of education served to reinforce distinctions between the governors and those being governed.

It seems an overstatement, however, to say that this view was the sole cause of people dividing along those distinctions. People were dividing along cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries long before the Europeans started colonizing the world, and they continue to do so. Many have noted the tendency of people to live in communities that are populated mostly by others similar to themselves (Brunell and Grofman, 2005) even while noting the value of diversity in opinion and viewpoint to a healthy political culture (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). But it seems a stretch to attribute this tendency to congregate with others of similar outlook to the residual influence of imperialism as opposed to a normal human tendency. At the same time, noting that such tendencies are normal human behavior does not mean that education cannot be called upon to ameliorate the negative effects of such preferences.

A review of educational materials that derives from the colonial period, even if not used in the colonies (discounting, for example, Canada and the United States as colonies), reveals a distinct bias in the direction of western philosophies in the main subjects. Students study “western civilization,” in which various historians or philosophers call attention to the “superior sense of freedom” of westerners, the ways in which mapping conventions emphasize the centrality of western culture

and religion, the ways in which reportage of “exotic” cultures seemed to stress the ways in which they failed to rise to western standards of learning and behavior, the canonization of race as a “scientific” concept and organizing principle for the world, the emphasis on instruction in the languages of commerce that were perceived necessarily to be the languages of the colonial conquerors, and the tendency to pronounce western literature as that which was “good” and worth study. Perhaps Willinsky was writing too soon, however, to recognize the challenge that Chinese is likely to pose to English as a world language. Numbers do appear to count for something as China takes its place as a leading player in world commerce, and the sheer size and growth of the Chinese economy is prompting many Asian-Pacific nations to encourage study of Chinese as a preferred “second language” of commerce for the future.

Finally, Willinsky begins to approach reality more effectively when he argues that subsequent educational systems and philosophies must recognize and account for the tendencies of all people to identify themselves as “separate” from others who show significant differences of language, culture, or geography. Such a taking of account might very well yield opportunities for educators to draw on the experiences of cultures and disciplines outside their own in developing educational methods and technologies that will be effective across the boundaries that remain in an increasingly interconnected world. Perhaps the greatest value in Willinsky’s study of the lingering effects of imperialism would come if educators and students are able to recognize it as a metaphor for all the factors that divide us and make what is effective for some ineffective for others. Such recognition might very well lead to expanded opportunities to innovate. But more importantly, it might lead to a greater willingness to innovate and try new strategies, exploring how differences might become sources of strength for all rather than stumbling blocks that must be overcome.

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