

Research and Practice

The Social Studies Wars, Now and Then

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“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Ron Evans to provide an historical perspective on the controversy that once again swirls around the social studies curriculum.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice”
Editor, University of Washington, Seattle.

In his foreword to *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*, published in 2003, Chester Finn blames the “deterioration of social studies in U.S. schools” on the “lunatics” who have “taken over the asylum,” and who are imparting “ridiculously little knowledge” to students. He lauds the volume’s intent to explain “where and how and why social studies went awry.”¹ The book has sparked a controversy over the current state of the social studies curriculum.

But is controversy over social studies new, and does it matter to those engaged in the day-to-day work of teaching in this subject area? My aims in this article are, first, to capture the main camps and patterns of the “social studies wars” since the beginning of the twentieth century and, second, to describe critical episodes from that long history that will help put the contemporary controversies in historical perspective. I’ll conclude by drawing three “lessons” that social studies teachers today might consider from this history of curriculum disagreement in social studies.

Pendulum swings are a regular feature of the curriculum landscape, and the primary pattern has been this: toward traditional and discipline-based curricula during conservative times; toward experimentation, child-centered and inquiry or issues-oriented curricula during liberal times. If you don’t like the current direction of curricular reform, take heart, it may not last.

Despite ever-changing curricular

fashions and trends, a set of competing interest groups is a relatively constant feature of the social studies arena. There are five major competing camps, as I described in a recent book, *The Social Studies Wars*, struggling at different times either to retain control of social studies or to influence its direction.² The first, traditional historians, supports history as the core of social studies and emphasizes content acquisition, chronology, and the textbook as the backbone of the course. This camp defined its approach in the 1890s and has experienced a revival in recent years. A second camp advocates social studies as social science and includes those who want a larger place for teaching of the social science disciplines in schools and those who support a structure-of-the-disciplines approach, which was at the heart of the 1960s new social studies movement. A third group, social efficiency educators, hopes to create a smoothly controlled and more efficient society by applying standardized techniques from business and industry to schooling. Most often, they have envisioned a scientifically constructed, more directly functional curriculum aimed at preparing students for various life roles. A fourth group is composed of social meliorists. These are Deweyan experimentalists who want to develop students’ reflective thinking ability and, thereby, contribute to social improvement. These theorists advocate a reflective or issues-centered

curriculum and often emphasize curricular attention to social problems. A fifth and related group is composed of social reconstructionists or critical pedagogues, who cast social studies in schools in a leading role in the transformation of American society.

Other camps may be identified as well, and other curriculum historians may provide a different breakdown. Herbert Kliebard, in a classic work, *Struggle for the American Curriculum*, described four main interest groups: humanists, developmentalists, social efficiency educators, and social meliorists.³ Hazel Hertzberg, in *Social Studies Reform*, discussed two main camps in social studies: federationists, who favor distinct disciplines, and unitarians, who favor curriculum integration.⁴ Regardless of how the interest groups are described, their rank and influence on schooling changes slowly over time. One is dominant, then recedes, as another comes to prominence. None disappears, but rather remains present with a lower profile. It is as if they are parallel streams; while one is flooded, another may be parched, nearly dry. Each of the streams has a history of advocates and defenders, of innovators and pretenders. Teachers can learn a great deal about their own affinities, and deepen their curricular identity, by examining the various strands in some depth.

Frequently, the social studies curriculum and textbooks have served

as a lightning rod, attracting comment and criticism regarding the nature of the field and the purposes of schooling, and reflecting competing visions of the worthy society, as if the curriculum was a screen on which critics of various stripes project their vision of a preferred future. Moreover, the social studies wars reflect the nation's cultural divide, manifest in the 2004 presidential election: red states versus blue states; democrats versus republicans; conservatives and cultural fundamentalists versus liberals and moderates. These are deep fractures, a reflection of long-term trends, and are not easily healed.

CRITICAL EPISODES

Since the inception of social studies in the early twentieth century, a number of critics have assailed the field for alleged sins against history, one or more of the social sciences, or mainstream values and the American way of life. Here I'll feature six critical episodes beginning with reactions to the 1916 *Report on Social Studies* and concluding with the 1980s' revival of history.

Reactions to the *Report on Social Studies*

The first episode to be considered is the early period of reactions to and criticisms of the 1916 *Report of the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education*. This report called for a broad, interdisciplinary, and modern approach to social studies.⁵ And it called for a 12th-grade capstone course, Problems of Democracy (POD), which focused on social issues and fused government, economics, and sociology. Reactions from professional associations in the 1920s were mixed. The report received partial support from several disciplinary associations; however, the majority disagreed with curricular fusion and the creation of the POD course. Critics called instead for a strong grounding in the social science disciplines through separate courses in sociology, political science,

and economics. Only the National Association of Secondary School Principals gave a strong endorsement to the report.⁶

Criticism abounded during the 1920s, coming from advocates of traditional history and the social sciences. Anna Stewart accused the 1916 report of "many inconsistencies," and wrote disparagingly of the trends it had set in motion, like the move "to damn history in order to boost civics."⁷ Ross L. Finney, a sociologist, criticized the new POD course, arguing for a general social science rooted in the disciplines and weighing in against "the mere forensic exchange of ignorant opinion" that would occur in a course focused on "problems."⁸ Much of the criticism centered on POD's failure to advance "scientific study." But there was also criticism of the idea of "social studies," mostly from advocates of traditional history. Henry Johnson, for example, lamented the idea of "history controlled by present interests and problems."⁹ Because of these differences among the competing approaches, by the late 1920s the field's status was described by one observer as "Chaos in the Senior High Social Studies."¹⁰ Despite these controversies, the broad and modern approach to social studies, championed by the *Report on Social Studies*, became modal practice for much of the twentieth century, and POD became a common offering until its virtual disappearance from schools in the 1970s, superseded by a new wave of reform.

The Rugg Textbook Controversy

During the 1930s and early 1940s, controversy and criticism centered on social reconstructionism as embodied in Harold Rugg's avant-garde series of social studies textbooks. Social reconstructionists believed that social change could be directed by schools and wanted teachers and the curriculum to play a strong role in the social transformation of American society, spearheading an effort to overcome social injustice and the failures of capitalism.

The Rugg textbooks melded materials from history and the social sciences into an issues-oriented, unified-field approach to social studies. Virtually every topic was introduced through a social issue or problem connected to students' lives, and the series drew on recent scholarship from the "new" progressive historians and other "frontier thinkers." The writing was lively and engaging, and the series was thoroughly illustrated and filled with interesting charts and graphs. It became the best-selling social studies series of its time. For the ten-year period from 1929 to 1939, the series sold 1,317,960 copies at approximately \$2 each, and more than 2,687,000 workbooks.¹¹ Despite his professed aim of balance, Rugg's materials contained significant amounts of social criticism and raised serious questions about the traditional role of government in matters such as regulation of business, providing for social welfare, and treatment of the unemployed. The texts also critiqued advertising as wasteful and portrayed the framers of the Constitution as men of wealth interested in protecting their own interests.

Consequently, critics viewed the Rugg materials as "against private enterprise," as a "subtle, sugar-coated effort to convert youth to Communism," as part of a "reconstructed" educational system geared to teaching that "our economic and political institutions are decadent." Later critics accused the Rugg books and others of being "un-American."¹²

Attacks on the Rugg textbook series were at first centered in the New York City metropolitan area, and were orchestrated by an interlocking directorate of critics, including Amos Fries, E. H. West, and Augustin G. Rudd of the American Legion; Bertie C. Forbes, publisher of Forbes magazine; Alfred T. Falk of the Advertising Federation of America; and Merwin K. Hart of the New York State Economic Council, among others. The controversy intensified in 1939-1940 with a series of critical articles in nationally circulated magazines including *Nation's Business*

and the *American Legion Magazine*. The stakes were raised considerably on December 11, 1940, when the National Association of Manufacturers announced its “survey” of textbooks to see if it could find evidence of subversive teaching. Then, on February 22, 1941, a headline at the top of the front page of *The New York Times* read: “Un-American Tone Seen in Textbooks on Social Sciences: Survey of 600 Used in Schools Finds a Distorted Emphasis on Defects of Democracy, Only a Few Called Red.” Rugg’s textbooks were featured prominently in the story.¹³

Rugg and many of his colleagues at Columbia University and elsewhere organized a defense, and Rugg engaged his critics directly, often in person.¹⁴ Despite the protests, corrections, and replies that followed, the damage had been done. The controversy generated a national media feeding frenzy and left the lingering impression that social studies was some sort of radical plot.

The Controversy over American History

A third controversy occurred in the 1940s. At its center were charges from a respected historian, Allan Nevins, that U.S. history was no longer sufficiently taught in the nation’s schools. Nevins wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* that “requirements in American history and government” are “deplorably haphazard, chaotic, and ineffective,” and he cited uneven laws requiring American history in schools (22 states had no law). He argued that this “neglect” undermined the “patriotism and unity of the country” needed in a time of war.¹⁵ The article led to a *New York Times* survey of college level history teaching and a *New York Times* test on American history that was then given to 7,000 college freshmen at 36 institutions across the nation to collect evidence on their lack of knowledge in the subject. Nevins’s own experience with his daughter’s schooling, “without any American history whatever,” apparently lay behind his concerns. Once again, the bogey was social studies.

Hugh Russell Fraser, who joined what came to be referred to as *The New York Times* crusade against social studies, blamed “extremists from NCSS and its twin brother, Teachers College,” for the decline in the teaching of history.¹⁶

These charges led to a spirited and heroic defense of social studies from Edgar B. Wesley, Wilbur Murra, Erling M. Hunt, and others who provided evidence that U.S. history was a “universal requirement” in the nation’s schools.

Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting social studies—and disproving the claims made by Nevins—many of the charges stuck, again undermining social studies in the public mind. The controversy over American history combined with the turmoil over the Rugg textbooks to serve as a major turning point, transforming a turf battle among competing camps into a war on social studies.

The Cold War Years

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a growing crescendo of criticisms aimed at “progressive education” emerged—with many of the most negative observations focused on social studies—packaged and marketed under colorful titles such as *Educational Wastelands*, *Quackery in the Public Schools*, *Progressive Education is REDucation*, and *Who Owns Your Child’s Mind?*¹⁷ Arthur Bestor, a historian and one of the most respected critics, called social studies an anti-intellectual “social stew.”¹⁸ The authors critiqued the “scrambling” of history, geography, and government into the social studies; they bemoaned the “anti-intellectualism” of educators who they derisively called “educationists”; and they frequently linked progressive education to Communism.

Educators responded with articles and books countering the charges—though it was a relatively muted response, reflecting the times. In 1955, the Progressive Education Association went out of business. And in 1957, the journal *Progressive Education* ceased publication. By the late 1950s, the

National Council for the Social Studies had largely caved in to the critics and followed their recommendations for a social studies curriculum built around the disciplines. The 1950s critiques were the culmination of a trend begun much earlier, and amounted to the villainization of social studies as a kind of national sport.

Aftermath of the New Social Studies. Another round of criticism occurred in the aftermath of another period of innovation, the era of the “new” and “newer” social studies during the 1960s and 1970s. The “new” social studies focused primarily on inquiry and the “structure” of the disciplines, with the notable exception of the public issues model developed by Donald Oliver and associates. According to Jerome Bruner and other theorists, each discipline had a structure, including key concepts and forms of inquiry, that could serve as the basis for an inquiry approach to teaching and learning. Students would become “little league” historians and social scientists, emulating the scholar’s approach to knowledge. A prime example was the work of Edwin Fenton who developed an approach to teaching history through historical “problems” using primary source documents.¹⁹

The newer social studies, which followed on the heels of the new social studies, embodied a flurry of interest in teaching social issues and the subsequent mini-course explosion. This was a time during which traditional social studies courses were frequently broken into short courses with a topical, thematic, or issues focus (e.g., the Civil War, the Presidency, Minorities in American History, Revolutionary Movements, or Human Sexuality).

These movements spawned a number of disagreements, among them academic freedom cases involving teachers Keith Sterzing and Frances Ahern, in which teaching innovations were literally put on trial. Book and textbook controversies occurred in Kanawha County, West Virginia, and in the state of Georgia, the latter involving the Fenton textbook series. But the most famous

controversy of the period centered on *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS), a project of the new social studies era initially led by Bruner. MACOS drew on anthropological sources, and focused inquiry on the question “What is human about human beings?” It was described by Congressman John B. Conlan as a “dangerous assault on cherished values and attitudes,” because of its “approving” depiction of “killing the elderly and female infants, wife-swapping and trial marriage, communal living, witchcraft and the occult, [and] cannibalism.”²⁰ In defense of social studies, NCSS issued statements on academic freedom, and organized the NCSS Legal Defense Fund. The Wingspread Conference, organized by NCSS in 1976 in response to the MACOS controversy, focused on understanding and overcoming the criticisms, but had little impact. Aside from MACOS, these academic freedom cases appear largely forgotten.

The overall pattern seemed a replay-boom and bust, innovation followed by criticism and reaction. These incidents again contributed to the impression that social studies was influenced by radicals with an un-American bent, and they combined with the “failure” of the ‘new’ and ‘newer’ social studies to leave the field seemingly directionless.

The Revival of History

Into the void left by the failure of the new and newer social studies stepped the revival of history in the 1980s. Historian and former assistant secretary of education Diane Ravitch made social studies a scapegoat for the “decline and fall of history teaching,” portraying it as a vacuous form of “tot sociology.”²¹ Ravitch and other critics charged that social studies was poorly defined and directed by fashion. This was largely a revival of the disparaging commentary on social studies from the 1950s and earlier. In essence, the revival of history represented the citizenship education wing of a much larger conservative restoration in schools and society. The movement gathered steam with formation of the Bradley Commission and received

substantial funding from the conservative Bradley Foundation. Despite several criticisms of the revival of history from social studies scholars, the response from NCSS leaders was to create a new consensus definition for social studies and to lend support to the standards movement via creation of NCSS standards.²² The new definition developed by NCSS offered social studies as an umbrella for the teaching of history and the social sciences, and further weakened support for alternative approaches. The net result was an increase in course-taking in history and the social sciences, notably in world history and geography, and a decline in elective social studies offerings.

Recent years have witnessed the increasing pressure of money on the social studies wars through the well-heeled influence of conservative foundations and interest groups. Wedded to the corporate, business-driven agenda for schools, they have emphasized traditional history, geography, and civics; promoted curriculum standards and high-stakes testing; and sought to vacate the term “social studies” from curriculum governance.²³

Lessons for Teachers

What lessons might teachers take away from this long, colorful, and controversial past? As a curriculum historian, I use the term “lessons” advisedly. There are no hard and fast lessons. History is open to interpretation. But here are a few of my thoughts on what we who teach can gain from a study of the social studies past.

One important lesson is that teachers have choices. Among the options are those offered by each of the camps in the social studies wars: traditional historians, who support history as the core of social studies; advocates of social studies as social science education; social efficiency educators, who hope to create a smooth-running and efficient society; social meliorists, who want to develop reflective thinking and contribute to social improvement; and social reconstructionists, who want social studies in schools to play a leading role in the

transformation of American society. For these choices to matter, teachers need to examine the alternatives and develop their rationales and teaching practices thoroughly.

An important corollary to the first lesson is that freedom is powerful, and fleeting. Academic freedom is essential for democracy to flourish, and for teachers to enact thoughtful visions to guide their work. Teachers need to defend the integrity of the field and the rights of teachers and curriculum workers to make educated choices from among the alternatives. The freedom of the child to learn, and of the teacher to make well-informed curricular decisions within broad parameters, is the essence of professional practice in education.

A third lesson is that, in the social studies wars, the traditional discipline-based approaches seem to have staying power.²⁴ This may be due to the fact that the disciplines have a large number of ready advocates in colleges and universities across the nation, along with their allies in the teaching field. It is also a reflection of the fact that social studies educators and scholars often get little respect outside schools of education. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a number of scholars have elaborated well-grounded and persuasive arguments for alternatives to a strict disciplinary approach as the defining framework for the field, and that these have a strong, if small, following. As we have seen, in the 1920s Rugg developed a unified-field approach to social studies, framing and melding the study of history and the social sciences in a manner that would illuminate perennial issues. In Rugg’s words, “To keep issues out of school curriculum is to keep meaning out, to keep life out!”²⁵ During the 1950s, Oliver criticized the traditional discipline-based approaches on the grounds that they often failed to take into account the “ferment and conflict over competing ideas and values” in American society. Later, with James Shaver, he developed an approach to social studies centered on the study of “existing and predicted conflicts” in our society.²⁶ In addition, a number of

other scholars have addressed the costs of strict adherence to the traditional disciplines as the basis for social studies in schools.²⁷

Far from being simply an academic matter, controversy over the teaching of social studies in schools represents a tangible forum through which Americans have struggled over competing visions of the good society and the desirable future. At its heart, this is a struggle over both the nature of social studies and the kind of society in which we want to live. 📖

Notes

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