

American Democracy at Risk

Mr. Neumann paints a dire picture of the state of democracy in the U.S. today. But he believes that it is possible to revitalize the skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship and that the public schools can be central to that effort.

By Richard Neumann



CONDITIONS in American society do not bode well for the health of democracy. As American soldiers risk their lives in Iraq for the stated purpose of establishing conditions wherein democracy can take root in that country, nearly half of voting-age Americans do not bother to exercise their franchise in Presidential elections.¹ The downward trend in voter turnout over the past 45 years means that we find ourselves second to last in voter participation among established democracies; Switzerland is at the bottom.² While an increase in voter turnout for the 2004 election was encouraging, it appears to have been no more than an uptick in a downward trend; turnout for the 2006 elections in the United States was 40.4%.³ Young people between the ages of 18 and 24, the most recent products of our education system, post the lowest numbers of any group. As America becomes a more educated society, its citizens vote less.⁴

Another factor crucial for the vitality of a democracy is an informed citizenry. As media critic and scholar Robert McChesney explains, "Media are the principal source of political information and access to public debate, and the key to an informed, participating, self-governing citizenry."⁵ If there is any truth to the aphorism that democracy requires a free and independent press, then Americans should be very concerned when respected journalist Bill Moyers tells us that the "independent press is under sustained attack, and the channels of information are choked. A few huge corporations now dominate the media landscape in America . . . [instituting] censorship of knowledge by monopolization of the means of information." Moyers asserts that "the media system we've been living under for a long time now was created behind closed doors where the power brokers met to divvy up the spoils."⁶

The key piece in the mass sell-off of the media was the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which Moyers describes as "that monstrous assault on democracy with malignant consequences for journalism, [which] was nothing but a welfare giveaway to the largest, richest and most powerful media conglomerations in the world." According to McChesney, the Telecom-

munications Act created conditions for the greatest corporate concentration of media in the history of communication.⁷ The seven current media conglomerates are Disney, CBS, Time Warner, News Corp, Bertelsmann AG, Viacom, and General Electric. Together, they control more than 90% of the media market.⁸

How did we arrive at this state of affairs where elected officials appear to have so little concern about setting democracy at risk? Some answers to this question, as well as some insight into the consequences of a media dominated by corporate and ideological forces, can be found in the results of two surveys. More than a year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and the Knowledge Network, housed at the University of Maryland, found that 57% of American adults believed "Iraq gave substantial support to al Qaeda." While 37% thought Iraq "was not involved in the September 11 attacks," 20% actually believed "Iraq was directly involved in carrying out" those attacks.⁹ In July 2006 a Harris survey of American adults found that more than half of them believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction when the U.S. invaded the country.¹⁰ "We've got to get alternative content out there to people," Moyers warns, "or this country is going to die of too many lies."¹¹ Thomas Jefferson issued a similar admonition more than 200 years ago:

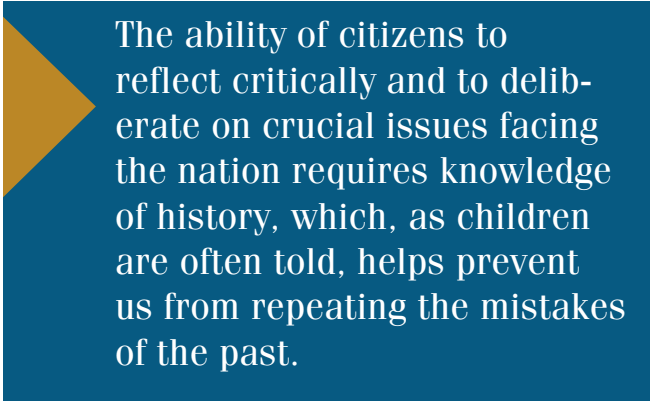
In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree.¹²

Further insight into the behavior of our electorate and the prospects for democracy in the United States can be gleaned from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) findings related to the education of youths for democratic citizenship. Among a selected sample of 38 questions provided by NAEP from the 1998 civics assessment for 12th-graders, the one most frequently answered incorrectly was "Explain two ways democratic society benefits from citizens actively participating in the political process." Only 9% of test-takers provided a "complete" answer to the question.¹³ On the 1998 NAEP civics assessment, 37% of public school 12th-graders scored below basic, while only 25% scored at or above proficient. In the newest release of data, the 2006 NAEP civics assessment reflects little

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change: 34% of 12th-graders attending public and private schools scored below basic, while 27% scored at or above proficient.¹⁴ This newest report does not disaggregate data for public school students.

Other data on youths and politics give reason for concern. American National Election Studies data reveal that young people aged 18-29 in 2000 had much



The ability of citizens to reflect critically and to deliberate on crucial issues facing the nation requires knowledge of history, which, as children are often told, helps prevent us from repeating the mistakes of the past.

less political knowledge than their counterparts in 1964.¹⁵ These findings are substantiated by a survey of college freshmen in the class of 2002, in which only 26% said that “keeping up with politics” was important to them, compared with 58% in the class of 1970.¹⁶

The ability of citizens to reflect critically and to deliberate on crucial issues facing the nation requires knowledge of history, which, as children are often told, helps prevent us from repeating the mistakes of the past. But NAEP history assessments for public school 12th-graders are not encouraging. Scores remained virtually unchanged between the 1994 and 2001 assessments, on which 59% and 58% of public school 12th-graders respectively performed below basic; 11% and 12% respectively scored proficient or better. In the NAEP 2006 history assessment, some slight improvement was evident: 53% of all 12th-graders performed below basic, and 13% performed at or above proficient.¹⁷

Some Americans may comfort themselves with the notion that, if young people have not learned history and the skills and responsibilities of citizenship in high school, then they will surely learn these things in college. Findings from a survey of college freshmen and seniors on their knowledge of American history, government, America and the world, and the market economy, conducted by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), refute this notion. According to the ISI report *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship*, “If the survey were administered as an exam in a college course, seniors would fail with an overall average score of 53.2%, or F on a traditional grading scale.” The ISI survey, which involved 14,000 randomly selected college freshmen and seniors at 50 colleges and universities, claims to be the

largest statistically valid study ever conducted on college students’ knowledge of American history and institutions. ISI researchers report that, on average, seniors scored just 1.5% higher than freshmen. At 16 of the 50 colleges, including Yale, Brown, and Georgetown, seniors knew *less than freshmen* — a phenomenon investigators describe as “negative learning.” Among other results, the survey revealed that “more than half of college seniors did not know that the Bill of Rights explicitly prohibits the establishment of an official religion in the United States.” The ISI study also found that students who reported taking fewer than three courses in civics-oriented disciplines reported significantly lower levels of political participation.¹⁸

Critics claim that familiarity with names, dates, treaties, obscure historical events, and specific structures and processes of government that sometimes appear on assessments of historical and civic knowledge is not necessarily indicative of an individual’s ability to engage critically and effectively in democratic citizenship. While there is perhaps some truth to this assertion, NAEP and other assessments can help us understand young adults’ capacity for reflective civic engagement. And the messages we are getting from these studies are not good ones.

Perhaps even more discouraging than the NAEP and ISI findings is the fading radical idealism of youth. Although this decline is difficult to quantify, anyone who was a teenager or older during the Sixties era can attest to a diminution in young peoples’ concern about the welfare of their fellow citizens over the past 40 years. Many young people today seem to love themselves, but few appear to have empathy for others. Psychology professor and fellow San Diego State University faculty member Jean Twenge reports in *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — And More Miserable Than Ever Before* that narcissism and entitlement among college students are at all-time highs.¹⁹ In an interview about her recent analysis of data from 16,000 college students who completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory between 1982 and 2006, Twenge said, “Far from being civically oriented, young people born after 1982 are the most narcissistic generation in recent history.” According to Twenge, college students today are significantly more narcissistic than earlier generations: 30% more college students in 2006 had elevated levels of narcissism, compared to their counterparts in 1982.²⁰

The writing is on the wall, and it has been there for some time. In the 1990s numerous books reported on problematic conditions of our democracy. Among these was *The Public Voice in a Democracy at Risk*, which pre-

sented findings from an investigation of citizenship and leadership in the U.S. conducted by the Eisenhower Leadership Group (ELG). According to the ELG:

American democracy is at risk. Too many of us — either from complacency or despair, inertia or ignorance — are leaving the work of civic engagement to others. Too many of us are expecting someone else to carry all the water. The upshot? A democracy in which too few people do the public business, leaving many disengaged and disenchanted.²¹

Similar findings were reported in Daniel Yankelovich's *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, which analyzed the public's growing alienation from the political process, its manipulation by politicians, and its willingness to entrust public policy decisions to so-called experts. Other accounts of our alienated citizenry and the need for a more critically prepared, deliberative electorate came from David Mathews in *Politics for the People* and William Greider in *Who Will Tell the People? The Betrayal of American Democracy*. Greider's book also chronicled the influence of transnational corporations on American politics in the 1980s and early 1990s. In *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath*, one-time Washington insider Kevin Phillips provided details on the concentration of wealth in the 1980s that widened the chasm between the "two different Americas" that John Edwards decried in the 2004 presidential campaign.²²

It could be reasonably argued that American democracy has always been at risk, but its trajectory has been toward broader enfranchisement and greater public voice. In this light, the conditions described above could be perceived as a slight deflection of the trajectory that will correct over time. Some recent books, however, suggest a more serious interruption of democracy's course. Most notable among these is Henry Giroux's *America on the Edge*.²³ Giroux contends that our society is becoming increasingly authoritarian, nationalistic, and militaristic. He describes an insidious corporate power encroaching on our culture, penetrating deeper into the education system, displacing the goals of democratic citizenship with the preparation of human capital for industry. A market society driven by corporate/political alliances is permeating our lives, replacing concern for community with narrow self-interest. Like Twenge, in her portrait of young adults in *Generation Me*, Giroux sees American culture succumbing to an ethos of acquisitiveness.

Other recent books on problems in our democracy include *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, by David Shipler, which chronicles the miserable struggles of

impoverished Americans working full time. The book updates a story told 45 years ago in *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, by Michael Harrington, which was admired by the sitting President, John F. Kennedy. Shipler's book has not found such favor in the Oval Office, but it makes a good companion to Kevin Phillips' *Politics of Rich and Poor*. In *Liars! Cheaters! Evildoers! Demonization and the End of Civil Debate in American Politics*, Tom De Luca and John Buell argue that "personal character and characteristics [have] become surrogates for policy disputes and even leadership in American politics." Demonization, they continue, "culminates in and is reinforced by a process of condemning policy agendas through examination of the life — including the private life — of the political leader." While demonization has always existed in politics, De Luca and Buell contend that it is much worse today and is closing off dialogue, reinforcing polarization, and deepening partisanship. More unsettling accounts come from former CIA consultant Chalmers Johnson, whose book *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* warns of the instability of our political system and of the risk of losing democracy to a domestic dictatorship if the United States continues its course of foreign imperialism. And then there is Chris Hedges' *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, which reports on a radical "Dominionist" movement whose call for a Christian state and ideological mobilization efforts resembles similar activities by the fascist movements in Germany and Italy in the 1930s.²⁴

There have always been books on the ills of society, but in recent years they have become particularly ominous. The explicit and implicit critiques of democracy in many of these books portend dire consequences should

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certain trends continue. Something is happening here, and Americans should be very concerned. Should we not have achieved something better by the 21st century?

WHAT TO DO?

Assessing the health of democracy and democratic character in the American public is an exceedingly complex matter; entire volumes have been devoted to examining the subject. Even an overview of this extensive literature is beyond the scope of this article, and an outline for improving the state of American democracy is out of the question. Nevertheless, the conditions described above, particularly those concerning the preparation of youths for democratic citizenship, warrant serious attention and reflective deliberation that culminates in corrective action. Below I describe some encouraging examples of citizen engagement in the political process, ideas for improving voter participation, and a proposal for instituting an education reform that is crucial to the regeneration and viability of our democracy.

Although the selected indicators I addressed briefly above do not support an optimistic prognosis for the health of our democracy, some recent developments and ideas offer possibilities for a more hopeful future. With regard to the media, the public has recently gained a presence in hearings about the communication industry, which are no longer held behind closed doors. Public activism in relation to the AT&T and Bell South merger has resulted in a “protection of access” provision for the Internet that will prevent Internet providers from controlling what users see on their screens. In January 2007, Sens. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Me.) introduced the Internet Freedom Preservation Act to require fair and equitable access to all Internet content. Activism to halt the progress of humanly created global warming is another encouraging display of concern for the common good that is emblematic of democratic character and values. As for improving voter turnout, Martin Wattenberg has made some practical suggestions: change Election Day to a more convenient time, extend the election period to several days, make Election Day a national holiday, and simplify the electoral process. Implementation of a few of Wattenberg’s ideas should yield some increase in voter participation.²⁵

Improving voter turnout is a desirable goal. When distributed evenly across groups, states, and regions, high voter turnout injects the voice of the people into the democratic process. Voting is a fundamental means

of shaping policy in a democratic political system. However, simply having more ballots cast by voters with minimal ability for critical reflection and consequent poor understanding of social issues and how they have been historically constructed is not a prescription for improving the health of our democracy.

Democratic citizenship involves more than casting a ballot on Election Day. It involves a disposition for social responsibility and civic engagement; it involves participation in groups concerned with advancing foundational principles of liberty, justice, and equality and with improving human welfare and the environment of the country and planet. Effective citizenship requires critical habits of mind and the ability and inclination to deliberate and debate conscientiously on matters of social importance. What is needed is a more holistic approach to democratic health, and a central dynamic of that approach is education, more specifically, social education.

THE GOALS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING

The relationship between education and the well-being of democracy has been long recognized. The ultimate goal of Thomas Jefferson’s plan for education was effective citizenship.²⁶ George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and other Founders also advocated schooling that would prepare citizens to make wise decisions. Horace Mann, champion of public education in the 19th century, argued that schools should be held accountable for teaching principles of republican government. The influential National Education Association report, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, commissioned by the federal Bureau of Education and published in 1918, advised developing in young people “good judgment” in political matters and democratic dispositions.

Today, organizations like the Intercollegiate Studies Institute; the American Civic Literacy Program; the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, managed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship; and other, similar organizations advocate improving civics learning in K-12 public schools. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find an American who does not think civics education and the broader domain of social studies are important to sustaining our democracy. The issue with regard to social studies in public schools is not whether to teach it, but rather how much time in the school day should be devoted to it. And the more controversial — indeed, fundamental — question involves the curriculum: What should be taught?

Implicit in the question of how much time K-12

public schools should devote to social studies and the preparation of young people for political participation is the issue of the goals of education. In addition to sustaining democratic citizenship, many other goals have been advocated for public schools: preparation of a competitive work force, transmission of cultural heritage, and attention to the psychological needs of children are among those frequently advanced. Although many would maintain that all of these goals are valuable, the kind of education young people experience and the outcomes of schooling that society realizes depend on what is chosen to be the primary obligation of K-12 public education.

Numerous books and articles have been written on educational goals and which goal should have primacy over others. While a review of this literature is not practical here, the position I advance in the following paragraphs — though it may already be evident — needs some explanation. The arguments made for reforming curriculum to strengthen social education are based on a conviction that public schools serve the public interest and that the primary interest of a democratic society is to maintain itself. This conviction echoes the imperative affirmed by Jefferson and other Founders with regard to democracy's dependence on an educated, politically capable citizenry. In contemporary thought on the matter, the ranking of preparation for democratic citizenship as the first and primary obligation of public schools has perhaps been most convincingly argued by Amy Gutmann:

We can conclude that “political preparation” — the cultivation of virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation — has moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society. Political education prepares citizens to participate in consciously reproducing their society, and conscious social reproduction is the ideal not only of democratic education but also of democratic politics.²⁷

Many of those who hold positions of political power do not share Gutmann's view. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, arguably one of the most influential pieces of legislation on the conduct of schooling in the last half century, says nothing about preparation of democratic citizens. The focus of NCLB is reading and math, and in many elementary schools that focus has resulted in a decline in social studies education. Studies by the Council for Basic Education and the Center on Education Policy report that NCLB has produced a narrowing of the curriculum, with social studies being one of the subjects experiencing a substantial reduction in the amount of time students spend



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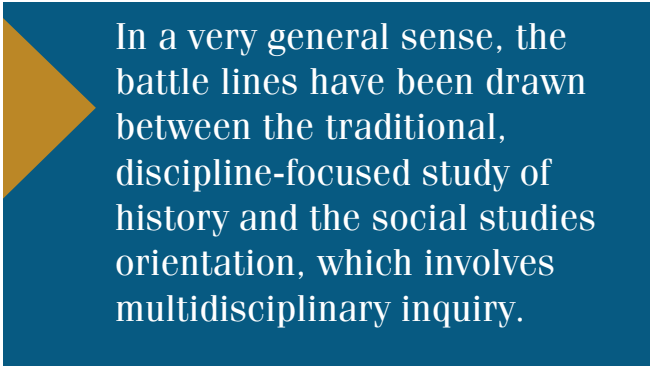
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on it.²⁸ Attempts to ameliorate the decrease in attention to social studies through the integration of historical topics into Open Court reading programs²⁹ and the implementation of such odd curricula as GeoLiteracy and GeoMath attest more to the displacement of democratic citizenship as a goal in public education than to sensible curriculum planning.³⁰

The emphasis on reading and math — to the detriment of social studies and other subjects — that NCLB has brought about began decades ago with the media-fabricated “literacy crisis” and back-to-basics movement of the mid-1970s. The momentum established by those back-to-basics advocates accelerated during the 1980s as a result of *A Nation at Risk*, the report prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which promoted an economic utility purpose for public schooling. *A Nation at Risk* claimed that our economy was suffering and that American-registered corporations were losing ground in the global marketplace because of the inadequacy of our education system. According to the report, America's future economic success required better management of its human capital: “Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the raw materials of international commerce.” The ensuing pursuit of “excellence” in the production and management of human capital inspired

initiatives that focused on the ultra-basics, and standardized curriculum and standardized testing became the foundation of the reforms kicked off by *A Nation at Risk*.³¹

This reform agenda focused on producing gains in reading and math, the most basic materials for the economic machine. Politicians and educators began retooling schools in order to improve the market share of certain American corporations that had declined as a result of that purported “rising tide of mediocrity” in



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public schools. But it was not only reading and math education that underwent revision, but also social studies. Judging by the conditions in our democracy described above, the school reform effort that began in the mid-1970s, coalesced in the 1980s, and continues today has done little to strengthen democracy and may actually be weakening it.

CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL EDUCATION

Since the early 19th century, there has been considerable disagreement about social education in public schools. Ronald Evans, in *The Social Studies Wars*, contends that “what began as a struggle among interest groups gradually evolved into a war against progressive social studies that has strongly influenced the current and future direction of the curriculum.”³² In a very general sense, the battle lines have been drawn between the traditional, discipline-focused study of history and the social studies orientation, which involves multidisciplinary inquiry — history, geography, government, and sociology. Some progressive educators have advocated an integrated approach to social studies that focuses on examination of social issues and problems. Although proponents of issues-centered social studies have mounted successful campaigns in the curriculum war, a disciplined-focused curriculum and history courses in particular have tended to dominate.

Progressive approaches to social studies have arisen during periods of social unrest, with the most recent, significant resurgence having occurred in the late 1960s

and early 1970s. This last era of the “newer,” issues-centered social studies succumbed to sustained attack from “national reform movements promoting the revival of history and geography and a return to the disciplines . . . [which have had] a significant impact on course offerings and credit.”³³ Leaders in the assault on issues-oriented social education have included organizations such as the Bradley Commission and proponents of traditional academic courses such as Diane Ravitch and E. D. Hirsch, who object even to the multidisciplinary concept of social studies and argue that the distinct discipline of history, emphasizing content knowledge and what Ravitch calls “a story well told,” be taught in schools. Although many advocates of discipline-centered history courses extol the intellectual virtues of historical analysis, this is rarely what public school students get.

History instruction, Evans tells us, has by and large been textbook-centered and commonly aimed at developing good, patriotic citizens. It has often “served to glorify the nation’s past by instituting fact, myth, and legend for historical analysis, and asked few questions about the structure of society or the direction in which it was headed.”³⁴ A similar analysis is provided by John Haas. Assessing the status and direction of social studies education in the late 1970s, Haas argued that a “Conservative Cultural Continuity” (CCC) approach had dominated American public education in every era and seemed likely to continue its preeminence:

The potency of the CCC position lies in its support of the status quo and the highly selected sequence of causal events that form the chain of inevitability from past to present. It is an approach peculiarly suited to legitimizing those in power and to conveying an interpretation of history as the natural evolution of the concept of progress (i.e., today is always better). . . . The CCC position relies heavily on *tradition* in Western civilization and in American society; on *history* as selected facts and events that enhance the glory of the United States as the fulfillment and culmination of Western culture; on *political science* as the justification of the superiority of American republican democracy as a form of government and for the idealization of the citizen as the repository of power; and on *political and economic geography* to legitimize national destiny, state destiny, imperialism, and the United States economic system.³⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

Details on the CCC approach and the “story well told” are provided by James Loewen, who reports findings from his examination of 12 leading U.S. history textbooks in a book titled *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. Addressing the issue of racial slavery, Loewen argues that its treatment in history textbooks avoids examin-

ing the white supremacist superstructure of racism and its belief in the inferiority and nonhuman quality of African Americans. Textbooks also skim over the economic purposes for which the social structure of slavery was created. In Loewen's view, the struggle over racial slavery may be the predominant theme in American history, but history textbooks present it in a superficial, largely uncritical manner — so too the treatment of Native Americans and the experience of the working class. According to Loewen: "From Indian wars to slavery to Vietnam, textbook authors not only sidestep putting questions of right and wrong to our past actions but even avoid acknowledging that Americans at the time did so." Moreover, "history textbooks offer students no practice in applying their understanding of the past to present concerns, hence no basis for thinking rationally about anything in the future."³⁶

As for more recent history, Loewen tells us that textbooks ignore the influences of multinational corporations on American foreign policy and mystify the relationship between economics and politics. He describes six attempts by the United States to subvert foreign governments — among these, Iran-Contra and the executive branch running outside of the control of Congress and the people. Further, he cites the failure of U.S. history textbooks to examine Watergate in a similar context of subversion. With respect to income and wealth distribution, Loewen finds that textbooks neither report the facts nor provide a theory of justice to explain the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Textbooks also do not address mechanisms of unequal schooling that help the upper class maintain its position.

Loewen asserts that publishers and textbook adoption committees apparently believe that American democracy will flourish with citizens who do not examine their country's social structure, economic system, and domestic and foreign policy in any sophisticated or critical fashion. "In short, textbook authors portray a heroic state, and, like their other heroes, this one is pretty much without blemishes. Such an approach converts textbooks into anti-citizenship manuals — handbooks for acquiescence."³⁷

Although some history teachers complement their courses with supplemental materials and engage students in an examination of contemporary social issues and debates, many rely heavily on the textbook for instruction. As teachers attempt to "cover" a mile-long list of detailed history standards, it becomes impractical to wade more than an inch deep into analysis of central themes, controversial issues, and complex problems. In the race to the final chapter of the ever-length-

ening story of the nation's history, U.S. history teachers face the immense challenge of finding time to engage students in critical reflection on contemporary issues and policies that affect young people's immediate lives and futures.

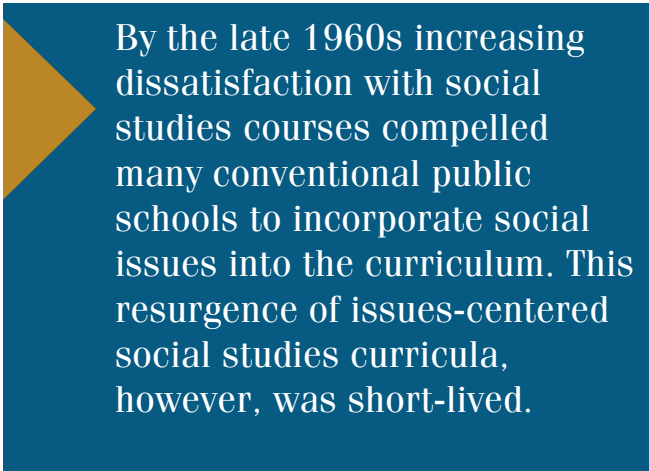
As mentioned above, there are alternatives to having students store in their short-term memories excessive quantities of details, however well told. Among these alternatives are approaches that emphasize critical reflection, depth of analysis, and goals of social justice over content coverage and transmission of cultural heritage. Many of these approaches were developed in the early decades of the 20th century during the Progressive Era.

The Progressive Era, historian Lawrence Cremin tells us, was "a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life — the ideal of government by, of, and for the people — to the puzzling new urban-industrial civilization that came into being during the latter half of the 19th century."³⁸ While some progressives concerned with the Americanization of immigrants and the efficient management of society explored ways in which schools could improve transmission of Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage and prepare young people for work, others found inspiration in the ideas of John Dewey, who argued that "education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."³⁹

Dewey's conception of the public schools' mission as social improvement was interpreted by progressives such as Harold Rugg to require social education that would engage students in examination of controversial issues, problems, and potential reforms. In the 1920s, Rugg promoted his issues-centered approach in a series

of pamphlets for teachers, and in the 1930s he published textbooks that were purchased by many schools. The inherent multidisciplinary nature of Rugg's issues-centered curricula promoted the examination of society from a variety of perspectives and reflected a decidedly different orientation from that adopted by traditional history courses.

In the 1920s, new approaches to social education appeared in schools in the form of civics, economics, sociology, and integrated courses with titles such as "social problems" and "problems of democracy." Various interpretations, this new curriculum of "social studies" challenged the dominance of history, which curriculum traditionalists had long asserted should be the centerpiece of social education, sometimes to the ex-



By the late 1960s increasing dissatisfaction with social studies courses compelled many conventional public schools to incorporate social issues into the curriculum. This resurgence of issues-centered social studies curricula, however, was short-lived.

clusion of other disciplines. It was during the 1920s that the battle began between advocates of history and promoters of social studies — and between proponents of discipline-centered social studies and backers of integrated courses. That battle continues today.⁴⁰

In 1932, George Counts delivered a speech that inspired many progressive educators — especially those involved with social studies — to advance the social-transformational mission of schools. Later published under the title *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* the speech called on teachers to use their collective intelligence in working with young people to collaboratively plan the best society possible. The challenge to schools to play an important role in restructuring society was further promoted in a collection of essays by Counts, Harold Rugg, William Heard Kilpatrick, John Dewey, and others, which was published as *The Educational Frontier*. The thesis of this work was that education should "prepare individuals to take part intelligently in the management of conditions under which they will live, to bring an understanding of the forces which are moving, [and] to equip them with the intellectual and practical tools by which they can them-

selves enter into direction of these forces." This view of the schools' mission as an agency for preparing democratic, transformative intellectuals was also advanced in the progressive education journal *Social Frontier*, edited by Counts, which served as a forum for articulating and debating a social-reconstruction goal for public education.⁴¹

The social-improvement mission of schools promoted by Counts and like-minded progressives reached its peak of influence in the 1930s. In the 1940s, it came under increasing attack by conservatives concerned with promoting patriotism during the war years and allegiance to a capitalist economy in the face of spreading socialism and the onset of the Cold War. By the end of the Forties, Rugg's textbooks had virtually disappeared from schools. The sustained assault on the social-transformational mission of schools and on progressive education in general in the 1950s led to a reinstatement of a 19th-century, discipline-centered curriculum and a "traditional" form of pedagogy in many secondary schools. The dominance of history courses that required students to memorize details of a glorified national story strengthened.

In the mid-1960s dissatisfaction with the traditional, so-called intellectual curriculum of facts and information, which critics such as Diane Ravitch lament had been displaced by progressives, began to grow among students and parents. Students wanted curricula that engaged them with the pressing social issues of the time. Many educators also became disillusioned with the program in schools. Some created private free schools in resistance to the "technocracy" they perceived to be controlling young people's lives; others created public alternative schools within the system. By the late 1960s increasing dissatisfaction with social studies courses compelled many conventional public schools to incorporate social issues into the curriculum. This resurgence of issues-centered social studies curricula, however, was short-lived. Once again, the cyclical pattern of change in education that David Tyack and Larry Cuban chronicled so well began to recur.⁴²

By the mid-1970s, a conservative restoration was getting schools "back to basics" and minimizing students' examination of social issues and institutions in classrooms. The focus on reading and math and the ensuing reliance on standardized testing to measure student achievement began to narrow the curriculum in many schools, to the detriment of social studies and issues-centered curricula in particular. Since the ability to reflect critically on and debate various social issues and possible outcomes of different policy solutions is difficult to measure with standardized tests, may be

troublesome for some politicians, and is not considered particularly crucial by many employers, it is not difficult to understand how these things became marginalized. Moreover, when students engage in critical examination of social institutions, they threaten those whose positions of power may be undermined by demands for a more just and equitable society; hence, those most interested in maintaining the status quo will seek to minimize this sort of student activity.

Thus we have arrived at this place where “the cultivation of virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation” in schools has been subordinated to the demands of economic productivity. We are busily creating a society in which citizens are more educated but participate less in the political process than they did a half century ago.

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

If there is wisdom in Jefferson’s imperative for schools to prepare democratic citizens and if we can agree that political education has moral primacy over other goals of public schooling, then educators and citizens need to take action to expand social education in schools and demand that the “cultivation of virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation” be the first and primary obligation of public K-12 education. If we do not think society has achieved liberty, justice, and equality, then citizens need to transform the institutions that impede our progress toward realizing these goals we profess to be the foundation of the good life. If John Dewey’s assertion that “education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform” is correct and if we seek to realize our society’s foundational principles, then social justice should be a central goal of social education in schools.

Should society choose to take the course sketched in the preceding paragraph, the literature on critical pedagogy offers a good deal of theory on preparing teachers to be transformative intellectuals in service of the school’s mission.⁴³ Essentially, critical pedagogy conceives of the educator’s role as helping students develop critical consciousness about the nature of reality, particularly in relation to various forms of domination. In addition, students learn to apply skills of careful examination and deep reflection to imagining social, political, and economic arrangements that are moral and just, and they learn to take the action necessary to achieve these conditions.

Unfortunately, the lexicon of critical pedagogy renders much of this literature inaccessible to many class-

room teachers. Moreover, the literature does not offer a lot in the way of practical advice about implementation — lesson plans and supporting resources. Critical pedagogy is further constrained by a dearth of curriculum standards that require teachers to engage students in an examination of social institutions and issues and problems of social life. Given the current state of public education, it does not seem likely that exposing educators and preservice teachers to theory on critical pedagogy or a more general diffusion of this literature will alone bring about the desired reform of schooling.

In light of the current dominance of curriculum standards, one practical approach to strengthening the cultivation of democratic citizenship and the attendant mission of social improvement in public schools is to work toward revision of social studies standards to engage students intensively in the examination of social institutions and contemporary social issues, including foreign policy. Here are a few such prospective standards:

- High school students should be able to explain and provide contemporary examples of the relationship between economics and politics, including the influence of corporations, political action committees, and lobbyists in the development of policy and legislation.
- Students should be able to describe contemporary examples of injustice, inequality, and domination and explain the social, political, and economic forces that contribute to these conditions.
- Students should be able to define such terms as racism, prejudice, exploitation, segregation, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism and describe contemporary examples.
- Students should be able to explain the relationship of the media to democracy, to understand the value of a free and independent press, and to demonstrate critical media literacy skills.

More generally, greater attention needs to be given to the formulation of standards that concern students’ demonstration of critical habits of mind, including judicious skepticism, awareness of varying viewpoints, and the ability to weigh evidence.

Adopting standards that strengthen students’ preparation for democratic citizenship and that work toward a more just and equitable society will require allocating additional time and resources to social studies in public schools, particularly at the secondary level. Existing courses may need to be enhanced or transformed to integrate disciplines in order to address standards that require reflective deliberation on contemporary issues. Courses that deal explicitly with “social problems” and “problems of democracy,” which once ap-

peared in high school schedules, might be resurrected to supplement or supplant courses that are now offered. Whatever the case, social studies requirements for graduation that emphasize student demonstration of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for democratic citizenship are imperative.

Another complementary strategy for improving social studies to fortify democratic citizenship is the development of issues-oriented curricula. Social studies scholars might build on the work of Harold Rugg and other progressives. Currently, there are a few books, such as *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, that offer theory, justification, and even some specific ideas for lessons that examine contemporary social issues.⁴⁴ But overall there is not much curricular material available in this area for classroom teachers.

History textbooks need to be improved with regard to accuracy and student engagement in higher-level thinking — the application of historical knowledge to analysis of contemporary issues and judgment of policy. In a social studies curriculum oriented to social issues and social justice, distinct courses in history would ideally be horizontally integrated with multidisciplinary courses with titles such as “social problems” that students would schedule simultaneously in their program. The content studied in history courses would support the examination of issues in multidisciplinary courses. These courses would in turn be vertically integrated with subsequent social studies courses.

Finally, preparing young people for democratic citizenship in the context of an authoritarian school is a contradiction that is all too obvious. It is not difficult to understand how adults may be inclined to offload

the work of civic engagement to others when as students they were not involved in decisions about the life of the school, the community that was central to their lives. Educators need to provide students with opportunities to make decisions about their education. Student task forces might be created to survey student interest in topics that faculty members could integrate into existing courses or develop into separate minicourses. Teachers can invite students to collaborate with them on defining the goals and activities of a course. Students can be given greater input into the design and presentation of course projects and thus greater ownership of their own work. Educators can involve students in shaping school policy and school operation, from the dress code and discipline policy to block scheduling and student judiciary bodies.

Americans concerned about the condition of democracy and the nation could benefit from Dewey’s counsel on education as the fundamental means for social improvement. The current Presidential race and the debates on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act are opportune occasions for raising consciousness on educational goals. Appeals to Americans’ commitment to democracy by coalitions of concerned educators, citizens, civic-minded organizations, and sympathetic journalists could bring the relationship between democracy and education into the limelight and contribute to an effective campaign for making the goal of preparing students for democratic citizenship preeminent in public education.

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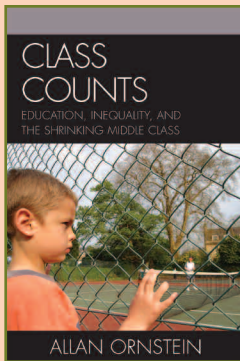
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