Today’s social studies experts preach an anti-western ideology
The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon led to a revival of patriotic feelings across the nation. Yet the mood was quite different among prominent experts within the social studies field. In the pages of Social Education (the premier journal of the National Council for the Social Studies) and in rapidly assembled curriculum supplements, a clear effort was made to temper any hint of patriotic excess in the classroom and to stress instead the need for therapeutic healing. The concern for children who may have been traumatized by the televised carnage was of course laudable and necessary, as was the insistence that students be urged to show tolerance toward their Muslim and Arab neighbors. The trouble was that the overwhelming emphasis on these themes crowded out efforts to teach students anything of political or historical relevance.

Moreover, the history curricula promoted by social studies experts insisted that teachers ought to encourage their students to look more critically at U.S. policy in the Middle East in the hopes of understanding the terrorists’ motives. This focus shocked many Americans, as was clear from the bad press the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teacher union, received when some of the curricula posted on its website suggested that teachers avoid attributing blame for the attacks—despite the fact that the attacks were a clear product of a well-organized terrorist group. Yet anyone aware of the global education ideology, which has captivated social studies experts ever since the end of the cold war, was not surprised. This ideology is deeply suspicious of America’s institutions, values, and role in the world, while celebrating other nations and cultures without a hint of skepticism. (Of course, it should be noted that many rank-and-file teachers usually soften or ignore the ideology as they cope with the practical tasks of teaching about the world beyond our shores.)

As a general trend, the increasing coverage of nonwestern societies is welcome. Cosmopolitanism has intellectual benefits on its own, and America’s expanding role in the world and the steady globalization of both trade and popular culture make knowledge of other nations a necessity. Much less desirable is that a highly dubious ideological agenda is driving this effort. The global education ideology is being pushed by a variety of professional associations, foundations, and professors in schools of education. Perhaps most important, global education’s believers exercise a strong degree of influence among textbook publishers, whose teams of multicultural advisors examine curricular materials for hints of bias or cultural insensitivity.

The global education agenda has three core elements:

- Multicultural celebration: An all-pervasive focus on the concept of “cultural diversity” and the need to expose students to as much of it as possible. This does help to counter a traditional overemphasis on western societies and an ethnocentric bias in the treatment of other societies. In recent years, however, textbooks and curricula have gone overboard in correcting for these deficits. Nevertheless, many educators still insist that a pro-western bias infects the teaching of world history and cultures.

- Cultural relativism: Global education’s advocates seek to promote respect and understanding across cultures. This is all to the good. However, true respect and sympathy cannot be based on a completely relativistic approach to culture. By discouraging students who might wish to criticize negative aspects of other cultures, teachers seek to suppress an irrepressible human tendency to make moral judgments. Such pres-
sure only generates cynicism and indifference in students, not a true spirit of tolerance.

* Transnational progressivism: Hudson Institute scholar John Fonte coined this term to refer to a hostility toward the liberal democratic nation-state and its claims to sovereignty. As Fonte puts it, the aim of transnational progressives is to redefine “democracy from a system of majority rule among equal citizens to power sharing among ethnic groups composed of both citizens and non-citizens.” Now, a devotee of the American political system can hardly object to institutional arrangements that call for the sharing of power among multiple interests and groups. But transnational progressives go well beyond traditional commitments to federalism and the separation of powers within a nation. Instead, they endorse a concept of postnational (global) citizenship and seek to shift authority to an institutional network of international organizations and subnational political actors not bound by any clear democratic, constitutional framework. This view is not dominant among classroom teachers or even in the way textbooks are written. However, it is a dynamic theme pushing the social studies field forward. Those who embrace it are not content with a mere celebration of diverse societies and cultures. They see this “essentialist” view of distinct cultures as insufficiently global, and they focus instead on global trends, transnational cultural interchanges, and worldwide problems, especially those that can be depicted as rendering the nation-state obsolete. Clearly many global education advocates want Americans to doubt the ability of their national civic society to deal with global challenges.

The global education ideology deeply influences textbook publishers, whose advisors examine curricular materials for hints of cultural insensitivity.

AP Global Education
Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of the growing influence of global education is the new Advanced Placement (AP) “World History” course, which in 2001...
took its place alongside AP courses in U.S. and European history. The world history course emphasizes nonwestern societies, with no more than 30 percent of the course focusing on the West. Just as important in this regard is the program’s stress on broad social, cultural, and economic trends and cross-cultural comparisons at the expense of a continuous narrative of world-shaping personalities and key historical moments. Consequently, the AP world history course, an otherwise reasonable idea, could well accelerate harmful trends in social studies by promoting the questionable global education ideology.

Like any world history course, the AP course must combine breadth with depth. Clear unifying principles must guide the selection of the facts, nations, and trends to be emphasized. The AP course attempts to avoid overwhelming the student with details by focusing on a few key themes, such as global interaction, change and continuity, technology, social structure, and gender. Yet the multicultural drive to cover all cultures equally makes it difficult to sustain the focus on themes and imposes on the course an impossibly broad reach. Moreover, by limiting coverage of the West, the course rejects what could provide a unifying principle for at least the past 500 years of world history—the central role of the West.

The thematic approach of AP world history also results in a downplaying of politics. As the course description puts it, “Knowledge of year-to-year political events is not required. The traditional political narrative is an inappropriate model for this course.” The reduced attention to politics mutes the most important way in which individual human agency drives human experience.

The new AP course also deemphasizes the role of nation-states in human affairs, another characteristic of the global education ideology. The organizers of the AP world history course tell us that the past 1,000 years of history consist, essentially, of “processes that, over time, have resulted in the knitting of the world into a tightly integrated whole.” In a sense, this is a truism. However, recent events should warn us about taking it too far. Our “tightly integrated” world system has not yet found a way to overcome deep religious, political, and cultural divisions. Nor does it appear to have found a way to dispense with nation-states as the preeminent players on the world stage. Downplaying the nation-state’s role in history is not, or at least not yet, justified by evidence. It is an expression of ideology, not historical scholarship.

To be sure, the focus in U.S. high schools is still on U.S. history: 241,000 students took the AP exam in U.S. history in the spring of 2003, compared with 72,500 in European history and 34,000 in world history. This reflects, mostly, the fact that only 1,474 schools offered AP world history. By comparison, 3,643 and 9,202 schools offered the AP European history and U.S. history courses, respectively. However, the number of students taking AP world history increased by 64 percent from 2002 to 2003, while the increases in European history and U.S. history were just 7 percent. In any case, the story here is the creation and rising influence of a world history course that is clearly a product of the global education ideology.

Neither “Multi” nor “Cultural”

World history textbooks in Wisconsin devote substantial space to describing the internment of Japanese-Americans in the United States during World War II, according to a recent review by Paul Kengor of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. Meanwhile, Kengor found little mention of Japan’s treatment of POWs and other Japanese atrocities in the war, in particular the rape and murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Nanking in 1937.

This is characteristic of the global education ideology, which seems to hold America to far higher standards for human rights than it does other nations. Why? To put it simply, multiculturalism has less to do with any rigorous study of other cultures than it does with ethnic, gender, racial, or other subgroup tension within the nations of the West, the United States in particular. Lacking a clear, consistent, and nonideological definition of culture, global education advocates and other advocates of multiculturalism exhibit a strong tendency to identify such subgroups as “cultures,” especially when they can be depicted as victims of a “dominant culture.” The result is that students are taught to view the world not as multicultural but as bicultural—as a world of oppressed vs. oppressor. A key corollary is the view of the West as the one region where such subgroup “cultures” have been most grievously oppressed.

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The cultural relativist stance so common in the global education field today represents a refusal to apply any universal ethical standards in judging another culture. Yet this denial

This is multiculturalism as a colorful ethnic travelogue, an incredibly superficial treatment of cultural differences around the world.
of universal standards is itself a universal standard, usually called "tolerance." Tolerance is an admirable quality, within limits. But if tolerance is our sole universal value, are we not then called on to tolerate the intolerable? And if so called on, are we even capable of performing such an act of mental jujitsu? In fact, the pressure not to apply moral standards is more likely to produce an ethic of indifference, not one of true tolerance—as young people learn not to pass judgment on all kinds of horrendous practices, especially when they are nonwestern.

Another way to handle the challenge of tolerating the intolerable is denial. This has certainly characterized the response of many educators to the threat of Islamic radicalism. In countless ways, such educators have insisted on misinforming students about this threat by denying its links to any aspect of Islam as a religion or to the broader Muslim societies of the Middle East and Asia. And when such links cannot be ignored (as, for example, in the cases of the horrendous treatment of women by the Taliban or the rulers of Saudi Arabia, the clear calls for holy war against the infidel by many Muslim clerics, or the widespread dissemination of Nazi-level anti-Semitic propaganda throughout the Arab world), students are still exhorted to tolerate the intolerable by "understanding" its cultural or historical context to the point of excusing it all away.

Take the Islamic concept of jihad. Here is the definition provided in a lesson on Afghanistan in a recent issue of Social Education:

**Jihad**: Arabic term meaning striving or effort in the service of God. It refers to an individual's struggle to overcome personal traits that are in conflict with the Koran. It is often used [italics added] to describe a war undertaken by Muslims as a sacred duty—a political or military struggle on behalf of Islam.

For most of Islam's history, the vast majority of Muslims, including Muslim scholars and religious leaders, have clearly understood jihad to mean primarily a holy war to expand and defend the realm of Islam. Students, however, would never know this from the passive construction of that last sentence. They might even conclude that only Eurocentric westerners see it that way. The redefinition of jihad as peaceful self-struggle is part of a more general tendency to soften Islam's harsher edges in dealing with it in the classroom.

This will appear cynical to students, who need only to read the daily news to learn that these are euphemisms. As Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes writes, the notion of jihad as mere peaceful self-struggle contradicts the headlines students see each day:

It suggests that Osama bin Laden had no idea what he was saying when he declared *jihad* on the United States several years ago and then repeatedly murdered Americans in Somalia, at the U.S. embassies in East Africa, in the port of Aden, and then on September 11, 2001. It implies that organizations with the word "jihad" in their titles, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad and bin Laden's own "International Islamic Front for the Jihad Against Jews and Crusade[rs]," are grossly misnamed.

What accounts for this unwillingness to deal honestly with unpleasant truths about Islam? After all, educators who deny any link between Islam and violence are often perfectly happy to take note of similar facts about Christianity's past. Few textbooks today slight the Crusades, the Inquisition, the wars of religion, the persecution of witches, or the arrogance of missionaries. In fact, dwelling on such defects is seen as a necessary corrective to Eurocentric bias in world history materials and courses. This glaring double standard causes many global educators to regularly overlook or whitewash forms of injustice and brutality in other cultures that they roundly denounce in western societies.

*The Unbearable Blandness of Diversity*

Any worthwhile world cultures course needs a systematic concept of culture taught and then used consistently to compare societies. Such a concept would define and explain linkages between family structure, kinship grouping, language, technology, religion, art, and ethical norms and laws. Far more common instead is a seemingly random selection of disparate elements, often superficial or exotic: clothing styles, food, holidays, religious observances, leisure activities, rituals, and other customs. More often than not such features are stressed mainly to provide a sense of difference and to "celebrate diversity"; they do not have much context to give them real meaning. Rarely is anything included that might strike a typical western student as objectionable, such as female circumcision, slavery in the Sudan, China's one-child policies, or religious discrimination.

Consider a popular world history textbook intended for use in grades 9–12, *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction*, published by McDougal Littell, a Houghton Mifflin imprint. The book devotes a page to African textiles under the heading "History Through Art." Brief paragraphs describe the various kinds of cloth and the "cultures" that produce them. The text claims that historians can learn much about each group's myths, celebrations, and social roles from these fabrics. What students learn from this page, however, is a good deal less than that. Take a representative paragraph on Kuba cloth:

Made by Kuba people of the Congo, this cloth was made...
The passage manages to turn one of the century’s worst acts of genocide into a “civil war” that inadvertently advanced the rights of women!

Amazingly, the passage manages to turn one of the century’s worst acts of genocide into a “civil war” that inadvertently advanced the rights of women! Even the issue of women’s rights in Rwanda is itself unlikely to be understood outside a modern western framework. This is the key point about the blandness of diversity. Without solid historical context and a strong grounding in their own western cultural heritage, students will not be able to grasp fully how other cultures differ from that heritage. To understand the role of women in Rwanda, for instance, one needs to know what ideas prevail there about the relationships among individuals and family, community, and state. Moreover, to fully appreciate these relationships as “different” from their own, students also need some awareness of western ideas about the individual’s relationship to authority as these have evolved from feudalism and the Magna Carta, to Locke and Jefferson, to the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” and on to Seneca Falls and the modern women’s rights movement.

The global education ideology detailed here results in excessive breadth of coverage as well as a lack of rigor in the study of world history and the evaluation of other cultures. In its most concentrated form, it instills a deep skepticism about the political worth of the nation-state and support for a divisive, anti-western form of multiculturalism. It claims to offer a broader, more tolerant approach to world culture and history. And it claims to offer students a more active learning experience, one that will move them to participate as global citizens in building a better world. But in fact, by suppressing the student’s natural tendency to make—and to want to make—moral judgments; by relentlessly denigrating the student’s core western cultural heritage; and by pandering to the supposed victim status of some cultures in relation to others, this ideology is a recipe for further alienating a generation already too comfortable with a fashionable distrust of authority.

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