

AFTERWORD

RECONSIDERING THE DEBATE: SOCIAL STUDIES, HISTORY, AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

JOHN K. LEE

The notion that we can argue history “versus” social studies requires that we commit to a troublesome dichotomy resulting in a partitioning of the two subjects into separate entities. As practiced in the schools, the courses consistently overlap. In fact, the commonalities are so extensive that often the terms social studies and history are used interchangeably or in tandem. Instead of “versus” we might want to consider what could be thought of as a disagreement between vested interests seeking to impose epistemological and ontological stances onto a mostly indistinct social studies subject. I would like to argue two reasons for why the debate on social studies and history is limited and suggest a new way to consider the purposes and the polemics of these two subjects.

First, and most broadly I would suggest that there is a deep difference between history and social studies at the university level, and because of these differences, comparisons between the two subjects is problematic. Social studies, unlike history, functions without a university generated scholarly or discipline base. Work in social studies at the university level is almost exclusively focused in teacher education; consequently social studies educators most often use scholarly knowledge from established academic disciplines such as history and geography when teaching at the precollegiate level.

Given that social studies lacks the fundamental characteristics of a discipline, namely what Joseph Schwab called substantive and syntactic structures, we have to wonder how social studies can establish an academic curricular life that is not dependent on established disciplines. Stephen Thornton, in his contribution to this journal issue, has made a deliberate effort to center social studies curriculum around subject matter that has some bearing on student life. This reasoning, according to Thornton, repositions social studies as a subject which may use other substantive disciplinary knowledge, particularly from history and geography, but that knowledge is derived from the interests of students. Barbara Slater Stern builds on Thornton’s reasoning by representing social studies as requiring purposeful engagement with other interdisciplinary substantive knowledge in order to facilitate a rigorous academic experience. Ruth Sandwell and David Hicks in their separate pieces, continue this line of reasoning by providing specific examples of how historical inquiry can serve the interest of social studies without being an end for the subject. They specifically position social studies as dependent on the syntactic structures found in the discipline of history. But, ultimately none of the four authors deal with the fundamental inability of social studies itself as a discipline to provide a scholarly source of substantive or syntactic knowledge.

For some 100 years, social studies educators have struggled to address this missing academic paradigm by grafting academic purpose onto the subject. Often this has been done by suggesting that social studies is a disciplinary amalgamation, capstone or hybrid, but ultimately social studies functions without its own academic or disciplinary form. Academicians in other fields (primarily history) have continuously argued that social studies should be a course centered in their own disciplines. The American Historical Association’s work through the National Education Association in 1893, 1899 and 1916 was directly focused on appropriating school social studies for the emerging discipline of history. Charles Beard made similar arguments in his work during the 1930s and this approach to social studies continues to be stressed by the AHA and leading historians. Many social studies teacher educators (presumably including all who have written in this journal issue) eschew these “other” disciplinary appropriations of social studies for a version of social study promoted by the National Council for the Social Studies. The NCSS version of social studies makes use of recalibrated disciplinary knowledge and tools for the deliberate purpose of citizenship preparation, but puts forth no original substantive or syntactic social studies knowledge.

The disciplinary vagueness of the NCSS definition of social studies relates to a second limitation to the debate on social studies and history, which is focused on the internal instability of social studies. There is a term in economics called fungibility that formally refers to the degree to which commodities are interchangeable. The more interchangeable or exchangeable a commodity, the more fungible it is, so gold is highly fungible (i.e., an ounce is an ounce is an ounce) while truffles with its extensive variety are not. We might want to think of the fungibility of social studies. Do we see the same thing or something similar in the hundreds of thousands of iterations of the subject in practice at any given time? I think it is fair to say that social studies, in practice, is not very fungible. We know that social studies can be wildly different from classroom to classroom—ranging from straight lecture, to active disciplinary inquiry, to social issue critiques, to community service work and more. The consequences are troubling, but understandable. Given that social studies has no consistent or universal academic substance, arguments about what social studies should be are bound to be contentious. In fact, the instability of social studies has contributed to the many efforts to graft other existing disciplinary structure onto social studies. As a school subject, social studies must have some fundamental structure that enables all that teach it to recognize it; in other words, social studies needs a greater degree of fungibility.

Considering the missing academic foundation in social studies and its lack of fungibility, the terrain of the debate between social studies and history needs to be reconfigured. Questions about social studies and history might be aided by constructing continuums across which various conceptualizations of social studies and history reside. Social studies, with its missing academic structure and internal instability, might be thought of as existing across a spectrum from a grafted disciplinary synthesis directed at civic preparation (NCSS version) to semi- or nondisciplinary work aimed at social change or a common good. History, as a formal discipline, might be thought of as stretching across a continuum which on its end conforms to Schwab's substantive/syntactic structure. If we were to lay these two continuums perpendicular to one another we would have four quadrants within which to critique the interplay between social studies and history.

Presuming the interplay between social studies and history is important, as all the authors in this edition have suggested, an analysis of the interplay might be quite productive. If we consider the four quadrants (social studies following history in this arrangement), they would be 1) social change/syntactic; 2) social change/substantive; 3) civic preparation/substantive; and 4) civic preparation/syntactic. Each of these potential manifestations of social studies/history should be evaluated for its "social" study and disciplinary value. Such work might move us closer to a course which meets the needs of all those with vested interests in social studies.