

THE SOCIAL STUDIES FOR A POSTMODERN AGE

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The social studies has remained an enigma for most of its existence. In rhetoric it is highly regarded; in the lived reality of schools it is perceived as a “soft option.” This article traces its origins and development in different contexts, and the epistemological debates and conundrums that still obscure what a study of the social is. The politics of knowledge illuminates its low status in organizational settings such as schools. A case is made for a return to the foundational principles espoused by social theorists, who see a study of the social as essentially that of being human. This knowledge is vitally important in a postmodern age where contradiction and fragmentation are increasingly the norm. Finally, it is shown that the Human Development Paradigm rests squarely on a deeper appreciation of the social, which can come from a reformulated social study.

Introduction

The social studies has been an enigma for almost a century. It has endured turbulence, conflict, and determined attempts to purge its seemingly ineffable character. At the heart of the enigma is a conundrum. In rhetoric the social studies is highly regarded. Since the development of *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS) (Bruner, 1966), and even before that, the social studies was seen as the major vehicle promoting an understanding about what it is to be human and the processes by which we could become more so. In the 1990s, these ideas were again articulated by educators, planners, and policy makers as the Human Development Paradigm (ul Haq, 1995), put forward as a framework for social and economic development in a postmodern age.

The case for the social studies is well made, yet it continues to be marginalized amongst the traditional disciplines (Barth, 1993). Therein lies the central conundrum. Its so-called weak frame (Bernstein, 1971) renders it susceptible to protagonists of different epistemologies. The enigma arises therefore within abiding controversies regarding what it

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is—is it a discipline or an area of studies; should it emphasize disciplinary social science knowledge such as history and geography or socialization, as in the claims made for citizenship education, or both; should its constituent elements be taught separately or integrated; and, most importantly, if axiological issues are to be emphasized, through what vehicles (Longstreet, 1990)?

The multiplicity of answers to each of these questions has limited the stature of the social studies in the eyes of teachers, students, and parents, who tend to interpret ambivalence and uncertainty as indications of some inherent weakness.

This article traces the ways in which the social studies has been made manifest in different times and places. It is intended to show that contextual realities have displaced the fundamental purposes of what a *social* study should encompass. It makes a case for deconstructing the enigma to show its relevance and importance to life in a postmodern age.

Disciplinary Dynamics

The United States of America

The nation state began as a refuge from persecution in the mother country and went to war to throw off the shackles of colonialism. These contexts inevitably fashioned an emerging social curriculum. The triumph of democracy, equality, and independence meant that these became cherished principles of the new republic to be taught to the young in order to be perpetuated.

These ideas about what was important to impart about society eventually coalesced into an emphasis on citizenship education. That goal became even more relevant as wave after wave of immigrants hit the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries (Dyyneson, Gross, & Berson, 2003). This mission of moulding the “good citizen” to enact social reform and ensure social stability competed with another view of the social studies as providing disciplinary knowledge in the social sciences, particularly history and geography, but also economics, anthropology, political science, sociology, psychology, and religion. During the latter half of the 20th century these conflicts came to a head as the social studies endured the deliberations of one commission after another over the direction it

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should take (National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, 1989; National Council for the Social Studies, 1993; Project Span, 1982a; Project Span, 1982b). Should it be discipline based so as to provide an adequate foundation in knowledge and skills for the study of the social sciences at higher levels and the world of work, or should it be student centred and concerned with the development of the good citizen who could enact social reform?

Great Britain

Quite different circumstances guided the development of the social studies in the UK. Mass schooling developed there at the same time, or even later, than it did in certain Caribbean countries. British society, dominated as it was by a royal line, an aristocracy, and rigid class codes, could not espouse freedom and independence. Even now, Garratt and Piper (2003) suggest that citizenship education in the UK is a non-starter because they “are subjects within a monarchy, and not citizens in the sense taken for granted by many nations” (p. 128). Personal, social, and health education became the emphases of the social curriculum in the UK. These themes aimed at personal well-being and a concern for social welfare, in which the disciplines such as history, geography, literature, economics, and others were integrated. There are strong links with this social curriculum and early education in the Caribbean where hygiene or health science, civics, and the Royal Reader stories promoted personal awareness of health, governance, and moral development.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s a tremendous furore occurred in higher education in the social sciences, particularly around sociology, *which should have had* far-reaching implications for the *social* studies. Although, the debates and controversies focused on the nature of the *social*, bringing a “new sociology of education” into being (Young, 1971), it inadvertently resulted in sidelining the social studies in schools. One reason for this was that the re-conceptualization prompted an expansion of social science disciplines in higher education. This was reflected shortly after in schools as the high-demand subjects of business and management, giving students other social science options.

The Caribbean

The social curriculum in Caribbean schools in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries reflected the colonial bias of civilizing the immigrant population into English values and customs (King & Morrissey, 1988). Interestingly, when the revisions occurred in the social science disciplines in higher education in the UK, the Caribbean, now experiencing decolonization and independence, turned its attention to the New Social Studies movement in the USA. The New Social Studies advocated inquiry and communication skills, and social science disciplines with a decided emphasis on citizenship education (Howe & Marshall, 1999), and was a response to the clamour made by the American public after the successful launch and orbit of the Russian satellite, Sputnik. It was in this context of educational reform designed to put the US on a more competitive footing with its rivals, that rigorous, disciplinary knowledge became dominant (Gardner, 1970). The humanist or progressivist orientation to the social studies as a means of social reform was now marginalized, though not removed, and it is this new conception of the social studies that was adopted in Caribbean curricula in the 1960s and 70s.

It should be remembered though that the organization of schooling in the Caribbean still largely followed the British model, and so the context of the school now became important in charting the fortunes of the social studies. Schools are social organizations within which the social and political meaning of the curriculum emerges. A discussion of the politics of knowledge is instructive in further refining our understanding of the epistemic controversies affecting the social studies in Caribbean schools.

Whilst the social science disciplines in higher education comprise the foundational content from which any social curriculum in schools should be drawn, the primary and secondary social studies curricula retain little of the controversial and contested nature of the concepts as they are understood in economics, sociology, political science, and the like. Rather, such curricula show efforts to simplify social issues focusing largely on history, geography, consumer education, and citizenship, as can be seen in the present Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) social studies syllabus (1999). White (2003), discussing this issue in the USA today, says that, "social studies education often avoids controversy and the hard issues in history and society in favour of transmission of

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essential knowledge and values" (p. 752). In fact, the school's curriculum actually censors complex knowledge and controversies such as those that affected the social sciences in Britain (Patterson, 1970).

Censorship pares away at the fundamental ideas of the disciplines that should undergird a *social study*, and what is left is virtually a commodified body of knowledge. Whilst curriculum developers may find it necessary to simplify social science content for primary and secondary school students, what conception of the *social* is left when controversies, debates, and critical insights are purged from the knowledge base? The decision by Caribbean educators to opt for the US model, and turn away from the controversies being raised in the social sciences in the UK, meant that the social studies in schools turned away from investigating the social to accepting a commodity with an already formulated view of the social. The social and political meaning emerging from such an orientation was system maintenance and, possibly, that was understandable in an era of decolonization and independence.

However, this version of a *social study* had adverse effects on the status of the social studies in schools. The predicament of the social studies as it had been conceptualized and operationalized in schools was that, being largely a sanitized version of social science content, it could not be pursued at higher levels of study. In our inherited system of education in the Caribbean, the status of a subject is tied directly to its instrumental value in accessing the higher rungs of the educational ladder, ultimately being helpful in securing a place in the world of work. The organization of schooling contributed to this perception of low status by confining the social studies to the lower forms of the secondary school. Some high-achieving schools did not offer it all (King & Morrissey, 1988). Where it was accepted as important, it was as a neutral, commodified body of knowledge that came to a stop at fifth form. These organizational arrangements signalled to parents, teachers, and students that the social studies was not a serious discipline. In fact, its weak framing had already sent that message to secondary school teachers, most of whom were specialists in the traditional disciplines.

Further, with successive attempts to refine and re-cast the social studies as a serious discipline, the politics of knowledge consistently reared its head. At the university level, there was no social studies department to help in spearheading the development of the discipline. Special offices

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were set up to do so (Beddoe & Seepersad, 1985; Morris, Morrissey, & King, 1996) where local materials were developed, though the problem of interdisciplinarity went largely unresolved. However, while people in universities could discuss interdisciplinarity at great length, the fact was that teachers in schools had to practise it. The materials emanating from the universities—largely from the social sciences—to be used as curriculum guides were disciplinary in focus. Thus, in schools, teachers had to go it alone (Morris et al., 1996), not for want of helpers, but because the bodies set up as some sort of authority, in lieu of having social studies departments in universities, were the very ones to advocate a less politicized and less critical sampling of social science knowledge. They could not find a workable means of creating an interdisciplinary focus. Even today, social studies teachers see the lack of relevant resource materials as the major problem they face in teaching social studies (Griffith, 1999). The social studies in schools, then, largely reflected these epistemic dilemmas and came to be seen as a body of knowledge in search of some direction.

The contexts and locales in which the social studies emerged—international, national, and organizational—subverted the original purposes of what a study of the social should involve. To unearth the foundational elements of *a social study* we need to go back and examine the ideas of those who have reflected on what constitutes social science knowledge, namely, social philosophers and social theorists.

Social Studies for the 21st Century

The postmodern age

Whether we agree with the term “postmodern” or not, we are likely to acknowledge that many of the social issues facing the world today seem to arise from the nature of the clash between the contradictory forces of globalization and nativism, and how they seem to intensify the problems associated with an emphasis on human difference. It is being suggested here that the social studies, if it is conceptualized in a manner that is faithful to its foundational principles, can be a resource *through* which individuals can come to better understand the complexities of living in the postmodern world. At present, it is seen as a tool to educate *in* certain precepts—such as social studies *for* citizenship.

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Complexity, indeterminacy, fragmentation, inclusion, global unifying themes, nativist sentiments, and multiple and conflicting views are being increasingly recognized as the “normal,” contradictory conditions of living in society today (Farganis, 2000). The social studies presented as certain knowledge, with prescriptions about the good citizen and instruction in certain values, finds itself increasingly irrelevant in today’s world. Reflection and reflexivity rather than certainty are more likely to help students recognize the importance of the **ALL** as in Education For All and Health For All—key tenets of the Human Development Paradigm. These tenets focus on human relationships as the pivot for development requiring that **ALL** people should have the same sets of opportunities to lead the good life. To be able to participate effectively in this development thrust, there must be an understanding of what the social is—one that does not present certain knowledge and one that recognizes the commonalities amongst peoples. A *social* study that is not cognizant of the fragmentation in postmodern society and does not see the need to educate persons to live effectively in such a world is an *anti-social* study.

Social theorists and social philosophers recommend that we go back to first principles and examine what the social means. Winch (1958) and other social theorists pose as central to this project, engaging in how we come to know, an epistemological undertaking that sees the social as inherently about Man and his ways of knowing and understanding and generating culture. Reflexivity is at the heart of this undertaking, as culture itself needs to be addressed in our assessment of knowing and knowledge. The fundamental purposes of the social studies emerge as the study of human society—reflecting on what being human means, how can we become more so, and how do we judge our acts and those of others. It requires a consciousness of being human.

A view of the *social* as being human

These ideas all centre on one theme—that the social is about being human. For example, the only reason we should study uniqueness or difference is to understand *what is general in the unique*. This is the message about human affairs—that all the uniqueness and difference must be studied, *but it must be understood as an aspect of what it means to be human*. Fay (1996), another social philosopher, makes the point that in studying the social, how one understands something is not the goal but

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how others understand it as well, necessitating a scrutiny of how we come to know, in the interests of not privileging one's own views.

Several examples may clarify these ideas. A *social* study should:

- begin with the nature of human society and not with cultural products such as history or economics, which are specific aspects of cultural knowledge
- question history, anthropology, and the like to see what aspects illuminate the study of the social in human society
- use history to illustrate that the unique events chronicled—the French, Russian, and Haitian Revolutions—are only studied to demonstrate the *general* aspects of human life *in the unique*
- explore how we construct our thoughts, noting that *it is the construction* that is the real knowledge that we are after, in the human sense
- induct students into an examination of social relationships—that they can change and have changed over time and that individuals could effect change
- be reflexive and try to illuminate the flux of social life.

The three questions in MACOS are still relevant today as we re-formulate a *social* study for the postmodern age:

- What is human about human beings?
- How did they get that way?
- And, how can they be made more so? (Bruner, 1966, p. 74)

Thus, whilst there is a continued press to clearly articulate goals for the social studies (Brophy & Alleman, 1993), it may be instructive for those concerned to revisit the foundational principles on which a study of the *social* should rest.

The place of history in a social study

History occupies a contentious place in the social studies, especially in the epistemic debates in the USA, and if we follow the ideas of social theorists about what a social study should involve, history would be a necessary part of such a study. It may be enlightening to discuss how history can illuminate a study of the social to help us understand what makes us human. For example:

- The idea of human progress in history comes largely out of the Enlightenment as unfolding in a linear manner with certain forms and ideologies becoming dominant and others dying. This masks important understandings of human life. When, for example, socialism declined as an important force in world development, it did not mean that the world capitalist order would enjoy unmitigated dominance. We have seen the USA, without any “bear in the woods” face serious challenges from alternative ideologies. The message here is that progress should not be simply thought of as linear. Even as socialism declines and alternative forms spring up, human progress continues in how we understand dominance and the challenge to it – it is irregular and takes place on different fronts.
- It is somewhat fashionable today to decry technological progress because of its deleterious effect on the environment. However, through a historical study of these developments we may learn more about how to protect and rehabilitate the environment, adding to our store of knowledge, and the face of technological progress itself will change as this knowledge is embraced.
- While there may be some universal understandings about morals and values, history can show how this varies over time and place. Thus, moral relativism is not to be decried out of hand, but describes a certain kind of “givenness” about the world. Each place and time will have justifications for certain acts using moral precepts. The lesson here is that one can learn a lot about being human by comparison and contrast – why something was legitimate in the past and is not so now in this society but continues in another.
- Some forms of history may deal in the unique, but a *social* study tries to find what is general in the unique. Through history, then, one can

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come to a better sensitization about human difference; one that differs from conventional ways of dealing with difference, as if exceptionality was all there was to be seen.

These are some of the reasons why the social studies should claim history at all—because it is able to do all this. While history is a good vehicle to teach about human life, the content and context should be selected with this in mind. The case made above is not in the interests of privileging history over that of the other social science disciplines but rather to clarify this point about selection of content and context. In choosing to emphasize in a *social* study how *context* shapes *human* life—be it progress, morality, values, or relationships—the teacher will be keeping in the forefront of the lesson what is human about human beings. And the social sensitivity arising from such a course of study ought to be helpful in negotiating the fragmentation of a postmodern world.

Emphasis on human development

To counter the conditions of a postmodern world, we need to address the conundrums besetting the social studies. Redefining and re-asserting the fundamental purposes as stated by social theorists have been shown to be in the interests of being human. Today, human development is the espoused goal of national and global development. The Human Development Paradigm (ul Haq, 1995), which is the vision underlying this goal, is very similar to what can be accomplished through a thoughtful social studies programme. The four pillars of human development are:

1. Equity - This speaks to increasing opportunities for **ALL** by broadening choices. As social beings we need to understand what choices exist and which ones can be described as human choices—for example, longer life or more money are not sensible choices if good health and safe environments are not a part of that choice. The emphasis on **ALL** directs our attention to the adverse effects that forms of prejudice have had on human development, and is specifically aimed at eliminating prejudice. This is the nature of the challenge if we are to be more human.

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2. Productivity - This is the human dimension of a concept that in the previously dominant ideology of *human capital* was understood as being increased through skills. In *human development*, it is envisaged that once persons make choices about what they want to do, they can execute or do their jobs in ways that actually contribute to their humanity. Thus work, or whatever activity or opportunity is undertaken, should through proper legislation, practices, and cultures (or relationships) enable human beings to add to their progress.
3. Empowerment - This is a necessary corollary if these conditions make persons feel that they are becoming more human through what they do.
4. Sustainability - In the conventional economic version of development this idea has been difficult to implement. Based on an understanding of what it is to be human and how that is promoted through the previous three pillars, sustainability is more likely to be a normal part of social life.

A social studies reformulated to stress its foundation principles and the tenets of the Human Development Paradigm is a necessary strategy in preparing our youth to deal with the conditions of a postmodern world.

The Way Forward

It is not the intention of this paper to emphasize an *approach* to teaching and learning in social studies so much as an *awareness* of some a priori assumptions about what it means to be human, and how one can learn that through social science content. The first step in generating a proper social studies is for the persons involved at all levels to be conscious of its purposes, as outlined by social theorists. The purposes constitute the major part of its subject matter. Therefore, everyone who treats with it must understand and get on the inside of these purposes—from the university right through to curriculum developers, teachers, and students. Its reflexive nature must be captured in how curricula are developed and how pedagogy is planned. Weak frames should not lead to its marginalization if we understand what the purposes are, and if we try to get them enshrined in how the social studies is conceptualized and operationalized. This is an ideological struggle.

Secondly, there must be a thoughtful working through by university personnel about their contribution to the development of the discipline, and the same should be said for Ministries of Education and schools where organizational arrangements reinforce the status of a subject. These deliberations, though, must be collaborative and participatory, or else the fundamental purposes will be undermined. Thirdly, through an organized publications thrust, which is state driven, there is more likelihood that materials could be developed which are faithful to the fundamental principles of the social studies, where standards are developed and disciplinary bias reduced.

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