
Social Studies for an Empire: Thoughts on *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*

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“**C**onspiracy” is a bold and reckless charge, viewed less as a credible description of reality than as a sign of its utterer’s idiosyncratic thinking. Its cloak-and-dagger and smoke-filled-room images usually do not sit well among one’s friends and colleagues. But conspiracy considered more broadly—as literally and figuratively breathing a common air—surprisingly becomes an apt way to comprehend the previous twenty years of education reform, especially of the social studies. In fact, it may be the only way to understand the strident tenacity of the proposals for civics education reform published once again by the Fordham Institute. I use “civics education reform” because the objective is to replace nearly a century’s worth of developments in social studies education with something else altogether.

Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong? (Leming, Ellington, and Porter-Magee 2003) begins with a legitimate concern about the need to educate youth to care

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about political life. This is a noble mission, dating at least to the Greeks. Unfortunately, rather than posing pragmatic questions to promote thoughtful discussions about social studies policy, editors James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter-Magee compile the work of social studies colleagues who appear frightened, persecuted, and only too willing to impose narrow, dogmatic restrictions on their chosen field. Faulting education professors for inculcating an ideology of progressive thinking, the editors describe their book in the introduction as a “critical analysis of some of the social studies theorists’ most-cherished and loudly trumpeted prescriptions for the schools,” and they offer readers “important reasons” why social studies is “a muddled, ineffectual curricular and pedagogical wasteland” (Leming and Ellington 2003, ii).

Alas, the reasons turn out to be general “common sense” claims and carefully selected information in superficial support of their beliefs about teaching, learning, and students. Their essays are, literally, diatribes against such much feared social studies topics as global education and multiculturalism and against teaching methods that involve student questioning and community ser-

vice. Admittedly, this is a conclusion I reached from, among other signs, the invective of phrases and chapter titles such as the “training of idiots,” “ignorant activists,” and “professors as lunatics.” They think of themselves as a few “brave souls” who are willing to speak against a morass of progressive ideas held by the ignorant masses of social studies students, teachers, and theorists (professors); and, being outnumbered, their sense of persecution strengthening, they resolve to show right-thinking people the correctness of their views. Most poignant, for anyone concerned about the future of civic education in the United States, is how Fordham’s exhortations to the public echo a larger philosophical and political agenda that is deliberately antidemocratic and classist.

I am not claiming to have discovered a secret meeting room where a cabal of men gather to determine educational policies (although, in some cases, ashes are still glowing in the ashtrays), but I will share some observations and readings that have emanated from discussions of the Friday Morning Club. (The Friday Morning Club has two live members. Jack Mallan, author of *No G.O.D.S. in the Classroom, Children and Their World*, and I have met regularly every few weeks—not always on

Friday—for the past fifteen years to discuss social studies, policies, theories and teachings. As my former academic advisor and professional mentor now retired, Mallan is still a conspiratorial colleague of mine.) We suggest that the editors and authors in this book, the Fordham Institute, a large group of academic and political leaders influenced by the teachings of Leo Strauss, and a few old Greeks are breathing air together, or at least inhaling the same air, and wish to control the air of everyone else. All of this takes place in the name of democracy, but a deeper motivation appears to be that ascribed by Karl Popper to the thinking of Heraclitus and Plato, with their terrifying fear of social change.

Nothing to Fear Except . . . Social Studies Theorists

In the opening section of *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*, Chester Finn Jr. laments that the dramatically unpatriotic response of social educators to the tragedy of September 11, 2001 was the “last straw” for him and his colleagues at the Fordham Institute, signaling that, if “left unchecked,” the “force” of social studies would “prevent the rising generation from learning our nation’s history, and thus erode America’s future.”

Sinking below the watchful eyes of governors, legislators, business leaders, and others who are apt to take a common sense view of it, (social studies) becomes gripped ever more firmly by the field’s own leaders, i.e., by ed school professors, textbook authors, state and local social studies supervisors *and their ilk*. (iii; emphasis added)

Finn’s fears are more historically rooted than he lets on. “Ilk” is neither a smooth nor innocuous word, and its choice signifies both Finn’s and Fordham’s deeply Platonic roots. Assuming the high air of being part of a wise but indignant group and dismissing as a class virtually everyone involved in social studies education over the last century from having common sense abilities bespeaks a tone of arrogance and elitism. More important, it punctuates their belief that the masses of social

studies educators represent an untrustworthy class of people and their fear that, left uncorrected in their university posts and state department positions, even more teachers and students will be added to this class. They must be stopped—social studies professors, that is—or America and all of Western civilization will sink, and, one presumes, the Contrarians and the Fordham Institute along with it.

The arguments of *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* rehash the claims of some of the same people who, in the 1980s, were on a mission to abolish the progressive ideas of social studies. Chester Finn Jr. explains in the foreword that

as recently as September 10, 2001, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation were throwing up our hands in frustration—and turning to other challenges. This, despite enormous earlier efforts by us and our antecedent Educational Excellence Network to diagnose and cure the problems of social studies. (iii)

Indeed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Finn and Diane Ravitch worked diligently, if not surreptitiously with their Educational Excellence Network, to erase nearly a century of progressive educational social studies thinking. Ravitch regards the pre-1916 era as a golden age for history and geography teaching in both the elementary and high school levels. Allying themselves with the National Geographic Society and the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, they also supported the initiation of the National Council on History Education, which provided an appearance of increasing professional legitimacy for their claims. Teachers, school board members, and policymakers were barraged with a raft of books and articles in professional journals and popular magazines from the Educational Excellence Network, supported directly or indirectly by the Department of Education, Lynne Cheney’s National Endowment of the Humanities, and groups such as the American Federation of Teachers and Freedom House. The nearly concurrent appearance in 1988 of Finn and Ravitch’s *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, E. D. Hirsch’s *Cul-*

tural Literacy, and Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* firmly established the conservative content and character of American culture as the substantive goal of education reform.

Modeling a CIA Strategy

Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong? reinvigorates earlier attacks on the social studies but with a stronger political edge. Leming and Ellington make a point to convince the reader that the authors of the essays in the book “are not naïve outsiders or newcomers to the field. With one exception, we are National Council for the Social Studies members and have held local, state, and national leadership positions in that organization” (v). Fordham’s hiring of, what Finn calls, a “small but plucky band of social studies ‘contrarians’” and renaming them a “band of reformers” (v) reverberates with the rhetoric and strategy repeatedly used by the CIA since World War II in deposing unwanted foreign governments. The strategy involves financial support for the activities of a small, vocal group of seemingly disenfranchised “freedom fighters” on the inside who will concede our governments’ objectives against the “oppression” of a “dominant elite” who are said to be ruining the chances of democracy. A not unusual outcome of this strategy is that an internal crisis is created and exacerbated, requiring outside intervention, establishing a regime consistent with U.S. interests.

The hopes for creating a social studies crisis rest on convincing teachers of their oppression by elite college professors and alerting policymakers and the tax-paying public that their money is being used to support radical ideas. In their section against multicultural education, Ellington and Eaton foreshadow such a crisis by calling on teachers to

reject the theorists and demand content-based multicultural teaching materials; alert policy makers and the public of radical leftists’ multicultural ideas that have been institutionalized in teacher education programs through such things as NCATE requirements that compel the nation’s future teachers to learn distortions of reality that are antithetical to what most Americans believe. We believe

that once policy makers and the larger public are fully informed that their tax dollars actually support the inculcation of radical multicultural notions in future and practicing history and social studies teachers, the stage will be set for changing these requirements. (88)

Exactly how the requirements will be changed and who will take responsibility is less clear, but Finn assures us that this book is only the beginning of a recharged attempt against the social studies. The Fordham Institute, supported by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, is also undertaking an analysis of state social studies standards for U.S. history and a review of secondary textbooks on American and world history. Finn promises more to follow in case “our small efforts” do not “have the desired impact on this enormous problem,” relieving the reader of any worry of participating in a doomed revolution by detailing that “we are not alone. A number of other organizations—from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Bill of Rights Institute to the Albert Shanker Institute—are embarked on complementary quests to refurbish this woebegone corner of the American classroom” (vi).

A New Political Stridency

At this point, it may seem that I am taking the idealism of Ravitch, Finn, and the Fordham Institute far too seriously. As a matter of fact, nearly twenty years ago when the Educational Excellence Network (forerunner of Fordham) first began their crusade, I reached that conclusion myself, sometime after my initial reaction in a little article called *Redefining the Social Studies, Absolutely* (1989), and ascribed their tiring efforts as the dues social studies would temporarily pay until the vacuous changes passing as education reform became apparent to parents, teachers, and policymakers. Today, it is commonly recognized among scholars that the education changes of the past twenty years occurring in the name of “academic standards,” “teacher accountability,” and “student testing” reflect, on one hand, the interests of large corporations and, on the other hand, a

surge of conservative activism and lobbying.

In *The Manufactured Crisis*, David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1995) popularly exposed the empirical deceit of the charges of the business community about the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of American K–12 education. They amassed a preponderance of evidence that international test score comparisons were statistically misleading, that economic and social claims of educational critics were logically contradictory, and that education reforms were primarily a ruse to deter public attention from more serious economic and social issues. Gerald Lacey, who published the “Annual Lacey Report” in *Phi Delta Kappan*, had even earlier begun to refute empirically the wild claims of critics calling for education reform.

A different stripe? There seemed to be consensus among those who rallied to the sermons of William Bennett. As Secretary of Education, Bennett emphasized the “three Cs” for all students, that is, content, character, and choice. But the selection and use of certain words is part of a distinctive writing style among conservatives, and to those familiar with the Platonist meaning of justice—everyone knowing his or her place—the reformer’s chants for excellence and equity signaled a deceptive appeal to conservatives and liberals alike. Benjamin R. Barber corroborates this ruse in saying that “the great divide is less between modern conservatives and modern democrats than between ancients and moderns.” He explains that

[Bloom] opposes democratic values . . . as a philosopher wedded to reason in a world in which reason is under siege; even (he would insist) as an old-fashioned antistatist suspicious of the “tyranny of the majority” and untrusting of the all-too-sovereign people. It is not really the last twenty years that disturb Allan Bloom but the last two hundred years. The last two thousand, for that matter. For the problem finally is not just American democracy run amok, but the Enlightenment run amok. Machiavelli’s Renaissance gone wild. (1992, 156)

Bloom’s brand of conservatism, learned from his philosophical master, Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago,

is based on Plato’s three-tiered republic, where a class of able philosopher kings (Strauss’s students) rule over the ignoble masses (the rest of consumer society, including political scientists and political liberals). The Great Books were not to enable everyone an opportunity to participate in the life of the mind and community; rather, the Great Books were to prevent those less qualified at interpreting their “secret writings” from wrongly assuming a false equality in society. If, by historical accident or popular design, the vulgar masses were given the unnatural opportunities a liberal democracy would provide, the democracy that was innately fitted for the more able class would collapse.

Bloom was directly influenced by his teacher Strauss, and Strauss by his mentor, Carl Schmitt. In *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, Anne Norton reports that Schmitt believed “Strauss understood him better than any other man, better, perhaps, than he understood himself” (2004, 40). Schmitt, as one of the architects of the Third Reich, authored Proposition 138, which allowed the chancellor unlimited powers. According to Shadia B. Drury’s account in *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, Schmitt had an abiding and classically rooted hatred of liberalism, defining it as a “democracy” of mankind where every person is equally entitled to citizenship” (1999, 83). He believed true democracy is not “indiscriminately equalitarian” but, in fact, naturally limits equality to citizens who are the same physically, culturally, morally, and linguistically. Beginning with the Enlightenment, the overemphasis on the innate worth of individuals leads to demands for “political and economic equality on a global scale.” In Schmitt’s view, this “global character of liberal equality makes it meaningless. Where everyone is equally privileged, no one has any privileges. Politics is about distinction and inequality” (Drury 1999, 83). It is clear why social studies in the twentieth century has been a problem for the conservatives at Fordham. While riven with qualifications about the inherent dangers of unbridled freedom, its curriculum generally

emphasizes the growth of human rights and expansion to previously marginalized groups, a trajectory that conflicts with a belief in a natural order of inequality.

The solution for Schmitt's problem was later worked out through Strauss's philosophical teachings on political theory. Fearing the growing effect of liberalism on the world, Strauss wrote, "the

and distinctively conservative politics. They came to power and have influenced the character of governance in the United States. This is also, therefore, a story of American conservatism. (2004, 2)

Indeed, it is a story of the power of a set of conservative philosophical political ideas and testimony to the importance of the political office of teaching. The rise of an aggressive brand of conservatism—

The story of Leo Strauss is a story of the power of a set of conservative philosophical political ideas and is, also, testimony to the importance of the political office of teaching. Believers in Strauss's philosophy have gone from the classroom to positions of political power.

salvation of the West must come, if it is to come, from the United States. The salvation of the United States, if it is to come, must come from the Republican Party. The salvation of the Republican Party, if it is to come, must come from the conservative party within it" (Norton 2004, 8). In the course of his teaching career at the University of Chicago, a plan that was launched philosophically took political root with his students.

A Conspiracy of Ideas

In writing the preface to her book, Norton evokes a sense of biblical "begats" to establish her credence in writing about the academic, political, and military leaders who call themselves "Straussians." Herself an academic granddaughter of Strauss at the University of Chicago, having been a student of Joseph Cropsey, who was Strauss's student, she writes that the story of Strauss is

[p]roperly two stories: the story of the philosophic lineage that came from Leo Strauss, and the story of a set of students taking that name, regarded by others—and regarding themselves—as a chosen set of initiates into a hidden teaching. These latter, and lesser, Straussians were bound not simply by descent from a common teacher or a love of learning. They were bound by politics as well: a distinctly

neoconservatism—in American foreign policy has sent political and philosophical writers into the annals of academia, foundations, boardrooms, and memories, prompting a claim that Strauss is the "most widely discussed writer on philosophy in our time" (Shorris 2004, 65). Strauss supported the idea of Plato's noble lie, condoning the need for leaders to conceal the truth from their less capable followers; he had an unwavering belief in the existence of absolute knowledge and was contemptuous of modernity and the empirical experiences from which modern knowledge derived. But Shorris seems only to have a hazy understanding of the route between Strauss's ideas and their implementation into actual policies as an indirect process. He writes, "The ideas in books somehow manage to wiggle through the morass of individuals and information in large modern societies and become effective. The way is not clear . . ." (40).

As a former insider, Norton sees things more clearly and describes the paths leading directly from the classroom to positions of political power. At many leading colleges and universities, Strauss's students, or students of his students, have continued to attract followers. In fact, at most, they have taken on the identity of a cult, refusing to read other scholars' works, consider alternative

viewpoints, or even hire non-Straussians. Her stories about the Straussian Truth Squads harassing the classes of liberal professors when Strauss was still alive rival Orwellian tales. Many of these Straussian disciples have gained "powerful and long-standing influence" in the military, politics, universities, think tanks, intelligence community, corporations, private foundations, and war colleges. Norton names more than thirty influential Washington Straussians, as of 1999, prompting Arthur Schlesinger to comment that "given the practice of ideological hiring reminiscent of the Communist Party, there must be more than double that number today scattered among government agencies, military academies, war colleges, and think tanks" (2004, 40). According to a listing from Drury, he is undoubtedly correct (1999, 83). Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Irving Kristol and his son William are examples of that practice.

Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, describes the effect of this generosity in "Tentacles of Rage: The Republican Propaganda Mill, a Brief History," drawing on extensive data compiled and presented by Robert Stein. Stein evaluates the Republican message machine as "perhaps the most potent, independent institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system" (quoted in Lapham 2004, 32). Fifty funding agencies of varying dimensions and ideological intensity spent over three billion dollars in thirty years in their common hatred of liberalism to

- publish "expensive and cleverly promoted tracts" (Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose*, Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, and Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*);
- promote "a steady flow of newsletters from more than one hundred captive printing presses" (among them those at the Heritage Foundation, Accuracy in the Media, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Center for the Study of Popular Culture);
- generously distribute "academic programs and visiting professorships" (to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford universities)

- pass along “sound-bite slanders” (to Bill O’Reilly and Matt Drudge);
- formulate “newspaper op-ed pieces” (for the *San Antonio Light* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as well as for the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Washington Times*) (Stein quoted in Lapham, 33).

This strategically planned reactionary program against liberal democracy began in 1968, at a meeting of San Francisco’s Bohemian Club, comprised mainly of “American haute bourgeoisie” panicking over the social chaos of riots, hippies, assassinations, and new demands for civil rights. Lapham writes that they “knew they were in trouble, but didn’t know why” (citation) Lewis Powell’s “Confidential Memorandum: Attack on the American Free Enterprise System,” distributed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, proved to be a manifesto for organizing the collaborative funding of united action against rapid social changes. The money was provided by what is now a familiar cast of foundation names: Richard Mellon Scaife, Lynde and Harry Bradley, John Olin, the Smith Richardson family, Joseph Coors, David and Charles Koch; Lapham claiming each of them entertaining “visions of an America restored to the safety of its mythological past . . . including Currier and Ives prints . . . [and] politicians as wise as Abraham Lincoln and as brave as Teddy Roosevelt” (2004, 34).

There was a palpable growth of this conservative network. In the decade beginning 1971, the number of foundations more than doubled from the original seven, and the Business Roundtable was formed by the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies (Lapham 2004, 34–35). The Roundtable has since been instrumental in sponsoring the Third National Education Summit and in maintaining “public” pressure supporting testing and standards reforms. Other notable policy tracts include the Heritage Foundation’s *Mandate for Leadership* provided to Ronald Reagan as he took office, and Newt Gingrich’s *Contract with America*. Irving Kristol, considered by Lapham as

one of the four or five key leaders in what Kristol himself called an “intellectual counterrevolution” served as an “adjunct sage at the annual meetings of the Business Roundtable” and persuaded corporate leaders to use their control of advertising dollars to manipulate the media’s social messages.

Lapham laments that “the liberal consensus had not survived the loss of the Vietnam War” and universities were “amuse[ing] themselves with the crossword puzzles of French literary theory” (2004, 37). Meanwhile, conservatives were spending one hundred million dollars annually for their ideas to become policies, ultimately affecting every public institution of society, and even transforming the meaning and importance of the idea of “public.” According to Lapham, the late 1990s witnessed a decided change in the tone of conservatism. As a personal example, he recounts that, whereas Kristol was always an engaging conversationalist, William Podhoretz, exemplifying the more stridently conservative voices of the right, was “dreary in the Soviet sense,” believing “everything he wished to prove, and could prove everything he wished to believe” (39).

Norton confirms that Straussians veered more rightward in the 1990s, abandoning traditional conservatism’s reliance on historical tradition for guidance and adopting abstract principals and utopian projects, exactly the historicist action that Strauss had rejected. Why the change? She muses that it might be an intoxication with

too much power, obtained too quickly. Perhaps like Jefferson faced with the offer of Louisiana, they believed that opportunity should overcome restraint. Perhaps a conservatism bred in the American context to be primarily occupied with domestic matters found itself unmoored when considering foreign policy. Perhaps fear bred fear until the once conservative could no longer distinguish friend and enemy in the fog of an unending war. Perhaps it was the allure of empire. (2004, 180)

Perhaps it is the allure of empire that finds Straussians, in Norton’s perspective, seemingly at variance with Strauss’s conservatism. But perhaps in the Straussians’ world (which would

include Strauss), contradicting a few abstract principles matters far less than rectifying a real world that has been out of control with liberalism. In *Ignoble Liars: Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the Philosophy of Mass Deception*, Earl Shorris encapsulates some Straussian justifications for neoconservative policies that sound unnervingly similar to Orwellian phrases, and not contradictory to Strauss’s teachings:

The greatest clarity is contradiction

Wise men tell noble lies

All men are not created equal

Democracy is the rule of the unwise over the wise

Nature abhors a contract

The best friend is an enemy

The study of history is the road to perdition (2004, 67–70)

A Civics Education for Empire?

In *The Social Studies Wars*, Ron Evans (2004) concludes that although for most of its history, social studies involved the struggle of competing interest groups, the latest conflicts amount to a full-scale war. *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* is a warlike attack not only on social studies but also on progressive education and liberal society.

The recommendations it contains provide a civics education for a Straussian society of compliant citizens. Carnes Lord, a prominent Straussian who teaches at a military college, provides an educational rationale befitting the sentiments expressed in Fordham’s publications. In *The Modern Prince* he writes that

political leaders have every right to form and express judgments about the teaching of national history and to take action to shape public school curriculums in this area. More generally, they have every right to expect that the schools will provide at least the rudiments of civic education, promoting not only patriotism, but also an understanding of democratic principles and the fundamentals of personal and civic morality. (2004, 138–39)

As if heeding Lord’s cue, the authors of *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* recommend teachers to

1. “reaffirm” the need to study subject matter content, especially American history, geography, and civics (27, 133)
2. provide a “common factual basis” in our teaching before promoting thinking skills (133)
3. promote American heroes and achievements (27)
4. show both the negative and positive characteristics of other groups and cultures so that students can fairly compare the perspectives, contributions, fallibility, and knowledge of each instead of believing all cultures are equal (87)
5. engage students in “appropriate” activities such as simulated voting, but not force “volunteer” service nor social activism (27)
6. build a “reasoned patriotism” by providing a strong grounding in the knowledge and values of the American system so that fewer students become doubters and cynics of its economic, political, and social system (27)
7. present ideology-free materials so that students will develop their own interpretations and analysis of history and culture (88)

Academically refuting each of these vacuous assertions is not worthwhile because this Fordham document is not intended as a framework for reasoning about the best preparation for democratic citizens. Understanding the philosophical context and political network behind these recommendations, however, helps us understand the seriousness of the platonic challenge they represent to our American experiment in democracy. The authors assert that they know the best preparation, and it is one based on common sense—theirs. They resentfully rail against the dominating oppression of a progressive social studies ideology from higher education but demand to replace it with a class-based ideology of fear. They deceitfully call for a fact-based history and geography curriculum, while recognizing the value-ladenness of content in asking for the promotion of American heroes and achievements. They request that teachers use ideology-free materials for students to develop their own interpretations but falsify their reporting of empirical evidence to show that students

are unable to engage in conflicting reasoning about events, policies, people, or their own experiences. Their rants and phrases emulate Straussian obfuscations, secret writings, and contradictions, amounting to a noble lie about their real beliefs and intention. Their recommendations propose a civics education for empire.

Countering the “Intellectual Counterrevolution”

The contemporary culture war in social studies is not only one “between the ancients and the moderns,” as Benjamin Bloom offers but also one that the ancients fought among themselves; and, as it is said, “the rest is history”—or at least a certain version of history. Alfred North Whitehead’s comment that “all of Western civilization is a series of footnotes to Plato” suggests that most of our knowledge is riven with conceptual and ideological barriers to a full democracy. Plato’s fear of social change discourages the extension of democracy beyond philosophers; his assertion of the “essential” nature of knowledge places its examination above our human experiences; his need for stability and order and his fateful historicism have formed the basis over twenty-five-hundred years for dogmatic theologies and totalitarian political systems—including versions of Catholicism, Fascism, and Marxism. If the future of civics education is based on this tradition, as the recommendations in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* lead us, we may indeed be in deep trouble.

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper reminds us of a different tradition of knowledge among the Greeks—that of critical and rational discourse. He credits Thales of the Ionian school for “actively encouraging criticism” by his students, a revolutionary departure from dogmatic thinking that changes the relationship between the master and students, encouraging a

plurality of doctrines which all try to approach truth by means of a critical discussion . . . leads, almost by necessity, to the realization that our attempts to see and to find the truth are not final, but open to

improvement; that our knowledge, our doctrine, is conjectural; that it consists of guesses, of hypotheses, rather than of final and certain truths; and that criticism and critical discussion are our only means of getting nearer to the truth. (1966, 148–51)

It is this tradition, and not Plato’s and Aristotle’s, Popper asserts, that is responsible for science and the growth of democracy within Western civilization.

A progressive strand of social studies has grown and persists not because of the blind ideology of social studies theorists, as the Fordham group, ideologues themselves, would like us to think, but because its ideas resonate with the experiences of good teachers and their students—teachers who know that students can learn to engage in thoughtful, critical reasoning about questions that, from our deep-seated and culturally-instilled fears, are too often avoided about democracy, fate, and the human potential for design. Ideas are important, as the success of the Straussians demonstrates. I recall advice offered by the late professor emeritus Shirley Engle to a group of impatient social studies upstarts to “bore from within” the content rather than launch frontal political and organizational attacks on those with whom you disagree. The ideas supporting “multiculturalism,” “constructivism,” “postmodernism” and other aspects of critical theory do both, exaggerating the fears of the Straussians, the Fordham Institute, and our very own social studies contrarians.

Rather than allow the terms of civic education to be defined for us by these reactionary groups, progressive-minded social studies educators need to conspicuously launch their own “conspiracy” for conserving the critical tradition of knowledge that is needed for a liberal democracy. In doing that, we need help from our university colleagues in the various subject matter disciplines who are beginning to realize they are not immune from the K–12 standards and accountability movement. We need help from more of our mainstream professional educational organizations to publish newsletters, books, and materials about critical discourse for teachers and policymakers. And we need to help each other in retooling our own language, not

giving up French literary crossword puzzles but making our discourse more inviting for students to do exactly what the critics wish to prevent—studying and debating the history of ideas, especially liberalism and democracy. It may be the only enduring defense against the contemporary intellectual counterrevolution of knowledge.

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