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Understanding and promoting social science education is not a simple matter. By their definition these subjects—history, sociology, geography, civics, economics, psychology—are not “hard” sciences. For a student to master them, she must be able to interpret information and think critically in a way that is not demanded of those acquiring basic numeracy and literacy. After all,  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  whether you're in Jakarta, Nairobi, or Paris. An apple is an apple, no matter what continent you are on. Making conclusions about the legacy of colonialism, the benefits and drawbacks of capitalism, or the appropriate role of women in society, however, can be a very different process across—and even within—national boundaries.

It is perhaps because of this “softness” that the international education community has, over the past few decades, tended to emphasize reading, writing, and arithmetic over the social sciences when shaping policy and assessing progress. The major international education assessments, “Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)” and “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)”, do not measure students’ attainment of social science material. The “Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)”, another well-regarded assessment, focuses on reading, math, and science, though it does include a small, cross-curricular component for measuring “problem solving.” PISA is only administered in 65 countries, and the most recent round of participants did not include a single sub-Saharan African country.

One global assessment, the “International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study”, does measure students’ historical and geographic understanding and civic competencies, but only 39 countries participated in the latest round, in 2009. Again, the list of participating countries lacked diversity; 64% were European, 15% were Latin American, 13% were Asian, and not a single African country was represented in the remaining percentage. In a move that could be seen as reflective of the primacy of math, science, and reading over social science in the minds of policymakers, George W. Bush’s Department of Education chose to remove the U.S. from participation in the IEA Civic Education Study, beginning with the 2009 round. This decision could have been prompted, conceivably, by the findings of the larger, more inclusive, and more influential

TIMSS and PIRLS, which saw the U.S. outpaced by a number of Asian and European countries in reading, math, and science attainment.

The overall picture around the world, in short, is one where social sciences usually take a backseat to the “harder” disciplines. The prevailing wisdom seems to be that for a country to be competitive in the global economy, its education system must focus on preparing workers to understand numbers and words. Preparing active citizens with a nuanced understanding of history, culture, and human behavior has become, in many ways, an afterthought as countries compete for their slice of what all see to be an increasingly small pie.

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A country that goes too far in abandoning instruction in history, sociology, or the other social science fields, however, does so at its own peril. Few dispute the importance of education for preparing a competent, able workforce, and it is for this reason that literacy and numeracy are and must remain in curricula. The human capital-building function is not the only reason why states invest in education, though. Schools are a place where young people learn the ways of citizenship and public affairs, where their social and political affinities are formed, where the divisions within a society may be replicated or transformed. For these reasons, the social sciences, too, do and must continue to have a place—some might say the most important place—in curricula.

This inherent tension between economic imperatives, which demand an able workforce, and social imperatives, which demand an engaged citizenry, is not endemic to any one part of the globe. It can be witnessed in rich countries and poor countries, long-established democracies and fledgling ones alike. Though one could write volumes on the topic of social science education around the world, in the interest of space I here limit our exploration to a handful of countries. There is such great diversity of curriculum and pedagogy in the social sciences internationally, it is a shame to have to leave most of it untouched here. My hope is that readers will have their interest piqued by this article, and take the initiative to learn more.

### For 'Good' or for 'Ill'

Before delving into the global picture of social science education, it is worth reminding ourselves, as educators, that education is not an unqualified good. Far too often and in far too many places, the social science curriculum is contorted into a tool for indoctrination and consolidation of state power. Rather than providing a safe haven where students learn to think critically about the problems facing their society, schools themselves become the arena where inter-communal battles are pitched. Regimes manipulate, distort, and even fabricate history to favor their preferred ethnic, religious, or linguistic group. While this abuse of schools is most common in areas suffering violent conflict, it finds a home in more stable countries, as well. The recent controversy over the social studies curriculum in the American state of Texas, where a group of right-wing members of the State Board of Education succeeded in amending the U.S. history standards to emphasize the role of Christianity and conservative political movements and figures, provides evidence of this.

Given that it is the right of all people to receive an education that, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Promote[s] understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and...further[s]... the maintenance of peace," it behoves those of us in the education field to fight for the rightful place of the social sciences in schools, both in our own countries and abroad. If we share the ideals of peace, security, and the common dignity of all people, it is our responsibility to ensure that all learners, no matter the context in which they live, are given the tools to think, act, and participate as equals.

### The Global Picture

The recently published *World Social Science Report 2010*, a joint effort of UNESCO and the International Social Sciences Council, notes that international dialogue on the social sciences has been driven largely by North America and Western Europe. This is perhaps unsurprising, as these regions are home to the world's oldest democracies and are the birthplace of the institution of the public school as it is understood in modern times. In the United States, public schools are seen as a vital means of preserving and strengthening the democratic system.

The U.S., unlike the vast majority of countries, has a decentralized education system. There is a Federal Department of Education, but for the most part, schools are planned, managed, and funded at the state and local level. Approximately 83% of education spending comes from state and local governments, and the responsibility for crafting standards and assessing student progress lies at those levels. Despite this decentralization, there are curricular commonalities across states, and one is that all students are required to learn about the history and government of the country. This is an outgrowth of the view of America's founders, who believed that no democracy could survive if its citizens were not educated. John Adams, the 2<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States, wrote, "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people."

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Public schooling in the U.S. truly took off beginning in the 1830s, under the leadership of Horace Mann. He shared the founders' ideals of molding democratic citizens through schools. In line with that view, social science education in the U.S. was and is geared towards equipping youth with basic knowledge of the workings of their government, an

understanding of rights that emphasizes the individual, and a fundamental trust in institutions that is essential to the continuation of the system. As Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "Our children should learn the general framework of their government and then they should know where they come in contact with the government, where it touches their daily lives and where their influence is exerted on the government. It must not be a distant thing, someone else's business, but they must see how every cog in the wheel of a democracy is important and bears its share of responsibility for the smooth running of the entire machine."

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While social science education is and always has been a central part of American schools, however most Americans, exhibit poor levels of political knowledge. Social science advocates are, therefore, dismayed by the government's decision to no longer participate in the IEA Civic Education Study, as it sends a disheartening message that knowledge of history, geography, and civics is not worth measuring. Beyond the struggle to secure the place of these fields in curricula, though, the social science community in the U.S. is frequently bogged down by internecine squabbles as to what exactly should be taught. At the risk of oversimplifying what is a quite complex debate, the issue may be painted as one of "multiculturalists"—who wish to see a curriculum that is more international in flavor and highlights the social and historical contributions of minorities—versus "traditionalists," who favor a focus on heroic figures (e.g. George Washington) and patriotic narrative. Because of the decentralized nature of the education system, American students in more liberal

districts tend to receive social science instruction that is more multicultural in nature, while those in conservative districts learn through a more traditional lens.

Australia, too, has a decentralized system, where states and territories are principally responsible for the schools. Also like the United States, Australian students' attainment of the civic competencies imparted through social science instruction is lackluster. The Australian government's report on the IEA Civic Education Study states that "only half of Australian students have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy. They are not strong in their understandings of what constitutes their civil rights...[they] do not have a strong grasp of the impact of economic issues in the functioning of a democratic system." In addition to the need to remedy this, Australia faces intractable issues of poverty and unequal opportunity among its indigenous population, and the government frequently faces accusations that it doesn't do enough to fix the problem by ridding the social science curriculum of its Eurocentric bias. A new draft of the Australian national curriculum is currently in the consultation process, and if it succeeds in addressing the flaws in the social science standards it may offer a model to other countries for empowering disadvantaged groups.

On the other side of the globe, in Western Europe, education is generally a centralized affair. An old joke suggests that the French education minister could, on any given day, check his watch and be able to tell you precisely what lesson is being taught all across France. Indeed, a defining characteristic of social science education in France has been its uniformity in promoting deference to the central state and a monolithic French identity. France and its neighbors, including the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries have found the role of social science education challenged, however, by two major changes on the continent. The first is the wave of immigration from Africa and the Middle East, which is forcing these democracies to pause and take stock of how tolerant and egalitarian they truly are, and to conceive of possible broader notions of what it means to be French, Danish, German, etc.

The second change is the establishment and growth of the European Union, which demands that curricula strike a balance between inculcating a particular national narrative on the one hand, and promoting an appreciation of the EU members' political and economic interdependence on the

other. National governments in Europe must deal with this challenge delicately, as the benefits of union are countered by a strong skepticism towards the EU on the part of many voters. In some ways, it is not unlike the tug-of-war between the multiculturalists and the traditionalists in the U.S. Because they play a key role in forming citizens' political and national identities in ways that other subjects do not, the social sciences seem always to be stuck between two (or more) competing visions of how society ought to look and function.

In the world's newer democracies, such as those in Africa and the former Soviet bloc, this same tension between tradition and progress is evident in the social science curriculum. These countries tend to be more socially conservative than the U.S. and Western Europe and are not as likely to emphasize critical thinking and individual agency. Even so, they recognize that they "need the social sciences more than ever, in order to confront the major challenges facing humanity, such as poverty, epidemics and climate change" in the words of the *World social science Report 2010*. Ironically, much of sub-Saharan Africa's inability to address civic competencies through education is exacerbated by the structural adjustment programs imposed by the global North, which force poor countries to cut education spending. The expressed desire of rich countries to aid new democracies is unlikely to bear fruit if those democracies are unable to prepare their students for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Furthermore, research findings as to the effectiveness of social science education indicate that a participatory, learner-centered pedagogy is the best means of teaching civic concepts. That pedagogy is far more prevalent in the global North than in the global South, where the more traditional method of teacher-centered rote learning is the norm. Despite these challenges, some African countries are making strides in social science education, a feat made particularly impressive by the history of conflict in many of these places. In Rwanda, for example, the Ministry of Education has not shied away from requiring that students learn about the 1994 genocide, including the role of the

media in the violence between Hutus and Tutsis. In South Africa, which is still toiling to heal the wounds of apartheid, the national curriculum strives across subject areas "to be sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality, race, gender, age, disability, and such challenges as HIV/AIDS." It is certainly no easy task to face the demons of the past, but only by telling its students the truth about their history can a country hope to build a peaceful future.

Iraq is a country coming to grips with its recent past and figuring out how to address it in schools. A recent *New York Times* article, "In Rewriting its history, Iraq Treads Cautiously," illuminates the difficulty of overhauling the social science curriculum in the midst of conflict. Noting that history education in Iraq was, up until the ouster of Saddam Hussein, "a tool for indoctrination into the ways of the Baath Party and a mechanism to promote the cult of Mr. Hussein," the piece shows that since his death there has been no agreement among the various sects in the country over whose version of history should be taught in schools.

Again, the tension here over who gets to define social science standards echoes the struggle elsewhere in the world, between multiculturalists and traditionalists and Eurocentrists, between EU supporters and EU skeptics, and between participatory pedagogy and rote learning. While it is easy to become discouraged in the face of these seemingly unbridgeable different points of view, it is also possible to create out of the discord a teachable moment, and as educators, that is what we must do. As the *World social science Report 2010* reminds us, social science education helps us to "understand how the world works from the ways humans interact." The debate over how best to deliver social science education is itself a lesson for the next generation of citizens; if we can address our disagreements with civility and a sense of shared purpose, we will be showing them what it means to be responsible and engaged members of the global community. Indeed, finding solutions to our gravest shared challenges—from poverty to war to climate change—depends upon how effectively we teach social science today.

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