

A Social Studies Approach to Teaching Global History

by Alan Singer, editor, *Social Science Docket* (cataajs@hofstra.edu)

Historian Sean Wilentz (1997) of Princeton University argues that secondary school teachers must present the “pastness of the past” and not turn the study of history into a “mere prologue of the present” with topics selected based on their current “relevance to our own world.” I think Wilentz identifies the fundamental difference between an historian’s approach to teaching and understanding history and a social studies approach, which I endorse.

There are a number of problems with the traditional global history curriculum. The worst problem is probably that with the wealth of possible detail to include in a crowded curriculum, how do teachers decide what is important for students to know. What bears mentioning? What requires a lesson? What topics demand an entire unit? The abundance of information influences the way we teach history. There is tremendous pressure to race through epochs and regions, dictating names and dates, with little time available for an in-depth exploration of concepts and historical themes, the evaluation of primary and secondary sources, and for students to draw their own historical conclusions.

A second problem is that most social studies teachers have a significantly more extensive background in European and United States history than in the history of the non-Western world. The tendency to highlight the Western heritage in the global history curriculum is supported by the idea that what is really important to know about the history of the world happened in Europe. According to this Western triumphalist position, civilization started in ancient Greece, traveled through Rome to medieval and modern Europe, landed in the Americas along with Columbus, and reshaped the world through Enlightenment ideas (including democracy) and the power of industrial capitalism and imperialism. It finally culminated in U.S. global expansion after World War II. At best, the examination of the history of rest of the world is tangential to this process.

A Social Studies Approach to Teaching History

The Winter-Spring (v.6 n.1), Summer-Fall (v.6 n. 2) and Winter-Spring (v.7 n.1) issues of *Social Science Docket* present a very different approach to teaching global history that is organized around document-based packages addressing broader social studies concepts and themes. They use a social studies methodology designed to engage students as historians who are exploring events from the past in an effort to answer essential questions about humanity and history. It is an approach that is directly concerned with ideas and issues being discussed today. For example, teachers often ask me for interesting lesson ideas on relatively obscure topics such as absolute monarchy in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. The first question I always ask them is what they believe it is important for students to know about the topic. Most cannot think of reasons other than that it is in the textbook or might appear on a standardized test.

But if you think about the current world scene, significant reasons to examine absolute monarchy in Europe do emerge. Really we are looking at a case study in nation-state building. As the United States tries to develop democratic governments in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is legitimate to explore the process by which other countries developed democratic institutions in the past. Are there necessary stages that nations have passed through during this process? Have alternative strategies been attempted or successful? Can some stages be “skipped” and nation building collapsed in time? Have national unity and cohesion and the development of a viable political and economic infrastructure sometimes been enhanced by authoritarian regimes? In other words, were absolute monarchy in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe an essential step in the development of modern Western democratic societies?

One of the activity sheets in this issue has students compare the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico and asks them to discuss whether their designs are an example of cultural diffusion or parallel development. Other lessons focus on the devastation that was often caused by global interaction and challenge students to reconsider the idea of historical progress. Essential questions include: Why does change appear to emerge from the periphery? Is history determined or are events contingent? What happens when world’s collide?

Balancing Breadth and Depth

These issues of *Social Science Docket* offer an approach to social studies instruction based on the idea that teachers need to balance the breadth of historical coverage with occasional in-depth case studies. Everything cannot

be covered extensively, but for students to appreciate the historical process and the work of the historian, some things must be. Because it is a case study approach, examples can be drawn from outside what the teacher normally perceives of as the main historical narrative, creating space for more extensive examination of the non-Western world throughout the curriculum. One of the articles in this issue is a teacher-created play featuring the Islamic view of the clash with the Christian world during the European Middle Ages.

This issue of *Social Science Docket* provides teachers with document packages featuring non-Western global travelers such as Rabban Sauma, an ethnic Turk and Eastern Orthodox monk who was born in Northern China in the first half of the 13th century, Abu Abdullah Ibn Battuta, a north African merchant whose memoirs include reports on his visits to eastern and western Africa and the Indian sub-continent, and Zheng He, the 15th century Chinese admiral whose ships plied the Indian Ocean. However, it also includes lesson materials based on the journals of Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Bernal Díaz.

An overarching theme in this issue is “Global Interaction – what happens when world’s collide?” An historical piece by Alan Singer, which is intended to provide background for teachers, is called, “A Grossly Unequal ‘Exchange’: Looting, Slavery and Capitalism Transform the World.” Accompanying lessons focus on a description of the Huron people by Gabriel Sagard-Theodat and the impact of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade on the people of western Africa based on material from the life Olaudah Equiano.

In *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940), the sociologist Fernando Ortiz examined the impact of tobacco and sugar production on the development of Cuban history, culture and society. Central to Ortiz’s work is the concept of *transculturation*, which was adopted by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski at Yale University. While not a Marxist, Ortiz examined the dialectical nature of colonialism and imperialism as both destructive and constructive forces in human history. An example of how transculturation operates is symbolized by the annual celebration of Puerto Rican Discovery Day in June. Puerto Ricans as a culture and people, and other Latin Americans, are a direct result of the Colombian exchange, an exchange that also led to the extermination of indigenous people in many areas and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Assimilation or Transculturation?

While terms such as cultural diffusion, acculturation and assimilation usually suggest benign processes, transculturation focuses on the dislocation of people’s lives. Latin American societies, for example, combine elements of indigenous American, European and African cultures in a seething caldron that frequently “bubbles over” in social conflict, not a slow simmering melting pot or a bowl of mixed fruit. The concepts of acculturation and assimilation also imply that the acquisition of another culture is a uni-dimensional process experienced by new arrivals to a country. Transculturation, on the other hand, suggests that entirely new cultures are created as old patterns of behavior are destroyed and new ones are formulated. A good example of this aspect of transculturation are the numerous “Creole” or blended languages that are invented in slave communities in the Americas.

Three overlapping chronological units with thirty-five single or multiple-day lessons provide a framework for the in-depth activities in this issue of *Social Science Docket*. They are “Global Interactions (750-1450),” the “Emergence of Western Europe as a World Power (1300-1650),” and the “Age of Exploration and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Reshape the World (1500-1750).” – Alan Singer

Global Interactions (750-1450)

1. How did Islam develop in the Arabian Peninsula?
2. What were Islam’s contributions to world culture?
3. The Crusades: What happens when world’s collide?
4. How did economic growth transform feudal Europe?
5. How did the Gupta empire shape Indian society?
6. Why did central Asian armies dominate the region and threaten Europe?
7. Why was the Tang Empire of China a model for other Asian people?
8. Could the Mongols reshape China?
9. Why did the Emperor of China have his fleet turn back?
10. What were the major achievements of West African civilizations?
11. What happened when Islam and West Africa met?
12. Admiral Zheng He’s Indian Ocean Voyages – Why did China turn back?

Emergence of Western Europe as a World Power (1300-1650)

13. Why did a revival of trade lead to broader social change in Western Europe?
14. How did internal strife lead to reorganization in Europe?
15. Was the European Renaissance a rebirth or a new direction?
16. How is art a window into the Italian Renaissance's way of seeing the world?
17. Why do Japan and Europe take different paths?
18. How did technology change the European world?
19. Why did Europe turn outward?
20. How did the voyages of discovery and the Columbian Exchange transform the world?
21. Why did Protestants and Catholics battle for the "soul" of Europe?
22. What was life in India during the Mogul empire?
23. How did the Ottomans and Safavid empires integrate southwest Asia?
24. How did Japan emerge as a nation?
25. How did a divided region on the periphery of great empires become the dominant force that reshaped the world?

Age of Exploration and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Reshape the World (1500-1750)

26. How did geographical conditions help and hinder the growth of American societies?
27. What were the achievements of the Mayan, Aztec and Inca Empires?
28. What was the impact of the Columbian Encounter on the indigenous people of America?
29. How did the Columbian Encounter change life in Europe and West Africa?
30. How did the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade reshape the world?
31. Why did European nations build colonial empires?
32. How did Africans resist slavery?
33. Why did Asian societies open to western commerce and culture?
34. How did commerce, technology and industrialization change Europe society?
35. How did the resources of the Americas and the labor of Africans contribute to the industrial revolution?

In addition, the NCSS suggests that the following essential questions from world history, geography, economics and civics be examined throughout the Global History curriculum.

World History

- How are the concepts of time and space vital to the understanding of history?
- What defines a turning point?
- To what extent is life a constant struggle between continuity and change?
- Do belief systems unite or divide people?
- What factors contribute to the rise and fall of civilizations?
- How do aspects of a civilization continue to be influential long after it falls?
- Can the individual change history?
- Are conflicts between nations and/or people inevitable?
- How does current scholarship change our view of world history?

Geography

- How do physical and human geography affect people and places?
- How has human behavior affected the global environment?
- How have the movements of people and ideas (cultural diffusion) affected world history?
- How have technological innovations changed world history?
- To what extent has the spread of disease (smallpox, plague, AIDS) changed the course of world history?

Economics

- How have different societies structured their economic systems to meet their basic needs and wants?
- What goods and services shall be produced and in what quantities?
- How shall goods and services be produced?

For whom shall goods and services be produced?

What impact have regional and global trade networks had on world history?

Civics, Citizenship and Government

What are the basic purposes of government?

How are decisions made under different political systems?

Does government exist to support the people or do the people exist to support the government?

What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens and those who have power?

How do the concepts of justice and human rights differ across time and place?

