

# The Challenges of Teaching Social Studies: What Teachers? What Citizenship? What Future?

## A Tribute to Joan Pagès Blanch

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### Introduction<sup>14</sup>

The impact of Professor Pagès work as a researcher and educator stretches far beyond UAB. Professor Pagès is one of the world's leading scholars on teaching history and social sciences. His scholarship has had a profound effect on the theory, research, and practice of teaching history and social sciences worldwide. The creative and collaborative scholarship of Professors Pagès, along with Professors Antoni Santisteban and Monserrat Oller, and members of GREDICS have made UAB one of the single most important sources of research knowledge, and new researchers, in the world.

The impact of Professor Pagès' work can be found in the research literature as well as classrooms and curriculum documents across the world and more importantly his influence is embodied in the many UAB graduates who are now teachers, scholars, and leaders in the field of teaching social science and history. Professor Pagès has lead the creation of a truly world-class teaching and research program here at UAB, which I have benefited from through my work with and connection to people such as Edda Sant, Renato Gazmuri, Breo Tosar, Gustavo González, Maria Espinet, as well as Liliana Bravo and Lucía Valencia.

Since my initial visit to Barcelona in 2012, I have had the opportunity to know Professor Pagès on a more personal level and, in addition to his scholarship, I admire his enthusiasm for life, his love of family, his support for Espanyol and his taste for cava.

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14 Please note that in my presentation today I use of the North American terms “social studies” and “social studies education” rather than “didàctica de les ciències socials”

- What Kind of Teachers?• Teachers and Curriculum
- Ideology of Neutrality
- Dialectics as Method

Thank you Joan for all of your many contributions to the field and the lives and work of your students and colleagues.

## **Social Studies Teachers and Curriculum**

Embedded within the language of schooling and the images and metaphors it fosters are certain assumptions about means and ends (e.g., how children learn, appropriate teacher-student relations, what knowledge is of most worth, the purposes of schools). For example, some common metaphors used to describe the work of teachers include: gardener, facilitator, guide, pilot, navigator, mapmaker, gatekeeper, change agent and activist. Each of these metaphors communicates certain assumptions about teaching and learning and the relationship between teachers and curriculum. What are our images of teachers and curriculum? How do these images shape our approaches to creating curriculum and teaching?

The distinction between teaching and curriculum is founded on the belief that decisions about aims or objectives of teaching must be undertaken prior to decisions about the how to teach. This is a distinction between ends and means. For researchers, this distinction provides a way to place boundaries on their inquiry into the complex worlds of teaching and schooling. In schools, this distinction fits into a bureaucratic structure that seeks to categorize areas of concern with an emphasis on efficiency in decision-making. The means-ends distinction has produced abstract categories of research and discourse that bear little resemblance to the lived experience of teachers in the classroom, where ends and means are so thoroughly intertwined.

Language use, educational practices, and social relationships contend with each other in the formation of teachers' professional identities and the institutional culture of schools. For example, when curriculum and teaching (ends and means) are conceived as independent entities, curriculum activities become the work of one group and curriculum implementation becomes the work of another. This division of labor, in turn, affects the social relations between these groups as one group defines the goals or conceptualizes the work and the other is responsible for accomplishment of the goals. The apparent "indifference" of educational research and bureaucratic decision-making to the reality of classroom teaching creates unequal participation and power relations.

The strict distinction between ends and means in curriculum work is problematic in a number of ways. First, the ends-means distinction does not accurately reflect how the enacted curriculum is created. Secondly, it justifies the separation of conception and execution in teachers' work, which reduces teachers' control over their work. Thirdly, it marginalizes teachers in formal curriculum decision-making.

The ends-means split between curriculum and teaching narrows the professional role of teachers to the point where they have little or no function in formal curriculum creation. Many teachers have internalized the ends-means distinction between curriculum and their work, as a result, they view their professional role as instructional decision-makers not as curriculum creators. But it is clear from studies of teacher decision-making that teachers do much more than select teaching methods to implement formally adopted curricular goals.

If we conceive of social studies teaching and learning as activities that require us to pose and analyze problems in the process of understanding and transforming our world, the limitations of an ends-means approach to curriculum is clear. Social studies teaching should not be reduced to an exercise in implementing a set of activities pre-defined by policy makers or a test. Rather, teachers should be actively engaged in considering the perennial curriculum question—what knowledge is of most worth?

Social studies learning should not be about passively absorbing someone else's conception of the world, but rather it should be an exercise in creating a personally meaningful understanding of the way the world is and how one might act to transform that world.

Thinking of curriculum not as disciplinary subject matter, but as something experienced in situations is an alternative to the traditional ends-means approach to curriculum. This is a conception of curriculum as experience, in which teachers and students are at the center of the curriculum.

American philosopher John Dewey argued that teachers must be students of both subject matter and “mind activity” if they are to foster student growth. The teaching profession requires teachers who have learned to apply critical thought to their work. To do this, they must have a full knowledge of their subject matter as well as observe and reflect on their practice. Dewey's notion of the classroom laboratory placed the teacher squarely in the center of efforts to understand educational practice and develop educational theory.

Problems of teaching and curriculum are resolved not by discovery of new knowledge, but by formulating and acting upon practical judgment. This aim presents problems in that sometimes teachers may not be conscious of the reasons for their actions or may simply be implementing curriculum conceived by others. This means that reflective practice must focus on both the explicit and the tacit cultural environment of teaching—the language, manners, standards, and values that unconsciously influence the classroom and school environment and the ways in which teachers respond to it.

Social studies teaching and learning should be about uncovering the taken-for-granted elements in our everyday experience and making them the target of inquiry. In this mode, teaching and curriculum making become problematic situations. Critical

examination of the intersection of language, social relations, and practice can provide insights into our work as teachers and uncover constraints that affect our approaches to and goals for social studies education.

The teacher and curriculum are inextricably linked. Our efforts to improve and transform the social studies education hinge on developing practices among teachers and their collaborators (colleagues, students, research workers, teacher educators, parents) that emerge from critical analyses of the contexts teaching and schooling as well as self-reflection.

### **Ideology of Neutrality and Deciding What Ought to be the Case**

While nearly all social studies educators agree that that the purpose of social studies is to prepare young people so that they possess the knowledge, values and skills needed for active participation in society, the devil is in the details.

Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) opens with a discussion of the way in which all societies use education as a means of social control by which adults consciously shape the dispositions of children. He argues that education as a social process that has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind. In other words, there is no "objective" answer to the question of what the purposes of social studies education should be, because those purposes are not things that can be discovered.

As philosopher Paul Taylor argues in his book *Normative Discourse* (1961), "We must decide what ought to be the case. We cannot discover what ought to be the case by investigating what is the case."

We—that is educators and citizens—must decide what ought to be the purpose of social studies. That means asking what kind of society (and world) we want to live in. Or, in what sense of democracy do we want this to be a democratic society? In order to construct meaning for social studies education, we must engage these questions not as merely abstract or rhetorical, but in relation to our lived experiences and our professional practice as educators.

Taking this approach to teaching presents an important challenge to social studies teachers, specifically, how do we overcome the ideology of neutrality?

Educators often reject openly political or ideological agendas for teaching and schools as inappropriate or "unprofessional." This type of thinking permeates society, particularly when it comes to schooling and teaching. "Stick to the facts." "Guard against bias." "Maintain neutrality." These are goals expressed by some teachers when asked to identify the keys to successful teaching. Many of these same teachers (and teacher educators) conceive of their roles as designing and teaching courses to ensure that students are

prepared to function nondisruptively in society as it exist. This is thought to be a desirable goal, in part, because it strengthens the status quo, and is seen as being an “unbiased” or “neutral” position. Many of these same teachers view their work in school as apolitical, a matter of effectively covering the curriculum, imparting academic skills, and preparing students for whatever high-stakes tests they might face. Often these teachers have attended teacher education programs designed to ensure that they were prepared to adapt to the status quo in schools. It is a paradox that some teacher education programs teach the importance of maintaining neutrality while advocating “social justice education.”

The “ideology of neutrality” that dominates current thought and practices in schools (and in teacher education) is sustained by theories of knowledge and conceptions of democracy that constrain rather than widen civic participation in society and functions to obscure political and ideological consequences of so-called “neutral” schooling, teaching, and curriculum. These consequences include conceptions of the learner as passive; democratic citizenship as a spectator project; and ultimately the maintenance of status quo inequalities in society.

The question in teaching is not whether to allow political discourse in schools or whether to advocate or not, but the nature and extent of political discourse and advocacy.

It is widely believed that neutrality, objectivity, and unbiasedness are largely the same thing and always good when it comes to schools and teaching. But, consider the following. Neutrality is a political category—that is—not supporting any factions in a dispute. Holding a neutral stance in a conflict is no more likely to ensure rightness or objectivity than any other and may be a sign of ignorance of the issues.

It seems better not to require that schools include only “neutral” teachers at the cost of including ignoramuses or cowards and getting uperficial teaching and curriculum.

Absence of bias is not absence of convictions in an area, thus neutrality is not objectivity. To be objective is to be unbiased or unprejudiced. People are often misled to think that anyone who comes into a discussion with strong views about an issue cannot be unprejudiced. The key question, however, is whether and how the views are justified.

A knowledge claim gains objectivity as a result of exposure to the fullest range of criticisms. Thoughts and beliefs that depend upon authority (e.g., tradition, instruction, imitation) and are not based on a examination of evidence are prejudices. Thus, achieving objectivity in teaching and the curriculum requires that we take seriously alternative perspectives and criticisms of any particular knowledge claim. How is it possible to have or strive for objectivity in schools where political discourse is circumscribed and neutrality is demanded? Achieving pedagogical objectivity is no easy task. The objective teacher considers the most persuasive arguments for different points of view on a given issue; demonstrates evenhandedness; focuses on positions that are supported by evidence, etc.

This kind of approach is not easy, and often requires significant quantities of time, discipline, and imagination. In this light, it is not surprising that objectivity is sometimes regarded as impossible, particularly with contemporary social issues in which the subject matter is often controversial and seemingly more open to multiple perspectives than in the natural sciences. However, to borrow a phrase from Karl Popper, objectivity in teaching can be considered a “regulative principle,” something toward which one should strive but which one may never attain.

## What Methods Should Teachers Use?

Reality is more than appearances and focusing exclusively on appearances—on the evidence that strikes us immediately and directly—can be misleading. Basing an understanding of ourselves and our world on what we see, hear, or touch in our immediate surroundings can lead us to conclusions that are distorted or false.

As Bertell Ollman argues,

Understanding anything in our everyday experience requires that we know something about how it arose and developed and how it fits into the larger context or system of which it is a part. Just recognizing this, however, is not enough ...

After all, few would deny that everything in the world is changing and interacting at some pace and in one way or another, that history and systemic connections belong to the real world. The difficulty has always been how to think adequately about them, how not to distort them and how to give them the attention and weight that they deserve. (Ollman, 1993, p. 11)

Dialectics, Ollman explains, is an attempt to resolve this difficulty by expanding the notion of “anything” (e.g., concepts, objects, events, narratives) to include (as aspects of what is) both the process by which it has become that thing and the broader interactive context in which it is found.

Dialectics restructures thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of “thing,” as something that has a history and has external connections to other things, with notions of “process” (which contains its history and possible futures) and “relation” (which contains as part of what it is its ties with other relations). Or, as Sciabarra puts it, dialectics is the “art of context-keeping ...”

[Dialectics] counsels us to study the object of our inquiry from a variety of perspectives and levels of generality, so as to gain a more comprehensive picture of it. That study often requires that we grasp the object in terms of the larger system within which it is situated, as well as its development

across time. Because human beings are not omniscient, because none of us can see the “whole” as if from a “synoptic” godlike perspective, it is only through selective abstraction that we are able to piece together a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon before us—an understanding of its antecedent conditions, interrelationships, and tendencies. (2005, para. 8)

Abstraction is like using camera lenses with different focal lengths: a zoom lens to bring a distant object into focus (what is the history of this?) or using a wide-angle lens to capture more of a scene (what is the social context of the issue now?) This raises important questions, such as: Where does one start? and What does one look for?

The traditional approach to inquiry starts with small parts and attempts to establish connections with other parts leading to an understanding of the larger whole. Beginning with the whole, the system, or as much as we understand of it, and then inquiring into the part or parts of it to see how it fits and functions leads to a fuller understanding of the whole.

For example, many people of various political persuasions have pointed out the paradox of the growing wealth of the few and the increasing poverty of the many, as well as connections between the interests of corporations, the actions of governments, and of being powerless and poor. As Ollman (1993) points out, despite awareness of these relations, most people do not take such observations seriously. Lacking a theory to make sense of what they are seeing, people don’t know what importance to give it; forget what they have just seen, or exorcise the contradictions by labeling them a paradox.

The problem is that the socialization we undergo (in and out of school) encourages us to focus on the particulars of our circumstances and to ignore interconnections. Thus, we miss the patterns that emerge from relations. Social studies education plays an important role in reinforcing this tendency. The social sciences break up human knowledge into various disciplines (history, geography, anthropology, sociology, etc.) each with its own distinctive language and ways of knowing, which encourages concentrating on bits and pieces of human experience. What existed before is usually taken as given and unchanging. As a result, political and economic upheavals (such as the revolutions of 1789, 1848, 1917, and 1989) are treated as anomalous events with discreet explanations.

Dialectical thinking, on the other hand, is an effort to understand the world in terms of interconnections—the ties among things as they are right now, their own preconditions, and future possibilities. The dialectical method takes change as the given and treats apparent stability as that which needs to be explained (and provides specialized concepts and frameworks to explain it). Dialectical thinking is an approach to understanding the world that requires not only a lot of facts that are usually hidden from view, but a more interconnected grasp of the facts we already know. What Citizenship?

## The Dangerous Kind

The notion of dangerous citizenship is something I developed with Kevin D. Vinson.

Early on we were inspired by the work of the Situationists, and the events of May 1968 in Paris. We asked ourselves how we could use the work of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem in particular, to understand and respond to contemporary education contexts.

May 1968 in France was a revolutionary moment aimed at transforming the social and moral aspects of the “old society” and was focused in particular on educational institutions. Hundreds of thousands of university students and their allies – including high school students, but not trade unions and established left – took over universities and battled with police and the military while invoking Situationist inspired slogans such as: *Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible* (“Be realistic, demand the impossible”). 1968 saw student rebellions around the world in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, across Europe and the United States. In many cases the state responded violently. In Mexico, police and military occupied UNAM, the largest university in Latin America, and massacred hundreds (perhaps thousands) of students at Tlatelolco [La-te-lo-co].

It is quite clear that exercising popular democratic rights with the aim of transforming the “old society” is a dangerous undertaking. Schools have always been about some form of citizenship education, framed primarily from an essentialist view of good citizen as knower of traditional facts, but there have been attempts to develop a social reconstructionist view of the good citizen as agent of progressive (and even radical) social change. Given its fundamental concern with the nature of society and with the meanings of democracy, social studies education has always been a contested territory.

Dangerous citizenship is about crafting an agenda dedicated to the creation of education that struggles against and disrupts inequalities and oppression. Classroom practice that is committed to exploring and affecting the contingencies of understanding and action and the possibilities of eradicating exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence in both schools and society.

In essence, dangerous citizenship requires that people, individually and collectively, take on actions and behaviors that bring with them certain dangers (like the students in 1968, for example); it transcends traditional maneuvers such as voting and signing petitions, etc. And instead strives for a praxis-inspired mindset of opposition and resistance, an acceptance of a certain tactical stance. Of course, the implication is that dangerous citizenship is dangerous to an oppressive and socially unjust status quo, to existing hierarchical structures of power.

Dangerous citizenship embodies three fundamental generalities: political participation, critical awareness, and intentional action. Its underlying aims rest upon the imperatives of resistance, meaning, disruption, and disorder. In essence, dangerous citizenship



is a conceptual container for the developing a radical critique of education as social control and a collection of strategies that can be used disrupt and resist the conforming, anti-democratic, anti-collective, and oppressive potentialities of education and society.

The premises of dangerous citizenship include: (1) democracy and capitalism are incompatible; (2) teachers and curriculum have been subjected to intensifying policy regimes that attack academic freedom and discourage critical social analysis; (3) Capitalist schools are aimed at social control and winning over children to be loyal, obedient, dutiful and useful to the ruling classes; and (4) Civil obedience, not disobedience, is the problem we must overcome to transform education and society.

Dangerous citizenship challenges assumptions about the state of the world and requires exploration of questions that make some uncomfortable: Given what we know about the lack of democracy in the world today, is it even possible to teach for a democracy that is not dominated by capital? Do we want to teach for capitalist democracy? Is there an alternative? Is the concept of democracy bankrupt? Is democracy as a concept and practice even salvageable? If democracy is salvageable then it seems to me that teaching about and for democracy in contemporary times cannot be done without engaging the complexities and contradictions that have come to define what really existing (or non-existing) democracy is. It is a practice that must be understood as difficult, risky, and even dangerous.

I have long been intrigued by the public pedagogy of politically inspired performance artists who aim to creatively disrupt everyday life through creative resistance, much like the Situationists, and I see these as powerful imaginaries for a pedagogy of dangerous citizenship.

## **What Future? Individuals, Institutions, Social Change, and Critical Pedagogy**

The core idea of critical pedagogy is to submit received understandings to critical analysis, with the aim of increasing human knowledge and freedom. Ira Shor offers straightforward description of critical pedagogy:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surfacemeaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor, 1992, p. 129)

Critical pedagogy as a practice has been critiqued both internally and externally. For example, McLaren laments “the domestication of critical pedagogy,” that is cri-

tical pedagogy efforts that have been accommodated to mainstream liberal humanism and progressivism and “marked by flirtation with but never full commitment to revolutionary praxis” (2000, p. 98).

On the other hand, postmodernist Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) maintains that the discourse of critical pedagogy gives rise to repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination where “objects, nature, and “Others” are seen to be known or ultimately knowable, in the sense of being ‘defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained, and diagnosed’ at a level of determination never accorded to the ‘knower’ herself or himself” (p. 321). In response to critical pedagogy Ellsworth offers her preferred version of classroom practice as a kind of communication across difference:

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and ‘the Right thing to do’ will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (p. 324)

Ellsworth’s critique identifies an important blind spot within critical pedagogy regarding the individual, the personal, and identity.

In his excellent history of the democratic free school movement of the 1960s, Ron Miller (2002) revives the legacy of John Holt. Holt was a moralist and reformer, a thinker described as a social ecologist and constructive postmodernist, who became closely associated with the deschooling and homeschooling movements in North America.

Holt’s emphasis on the personal dimension of social reality addresses a blind spot within critical pedagogy, which too often privileges the institutional analysis at the expense of existential authenticity, that is the individual person’s concern that his or her life is meaningful and fulfilling. Holt described his deepest interest as, “how can we adults work to create a more decent, humane, conserving, peaceful, just, etc. community, nation, world, and how can we make it possible for children to join us in this work?” (Miller, p. 86).

Holt emphasized the connection between the social and the individual, between the political and the existential. Human beings could not grow whole in a fragmented or violent culture, but at the same time a decent culture would only emerge when people personally experienced meaning and fulfillment. (Miller, p. 86)

Holt held several fundamental principles that should be taken seriously by critical educators:

- the dignity and value of human existence and faith in the human capacity to learn;

- concern for freedom and belief that it was being seriously eroded by the impersonality of large organizations and the forms of surveillance and control practiced in social institutions, particularly schools;
- opposition to centralized political and economic power that rests on scientific-technological management of natural and human resources;
- the driving concern for the need of each person to find a meaningful, fulfilling sense of identity in a mass society that makes this difficult. (Miller, p. 83)

Holt “sought a thorough renewal of culture that would be as concerned with personal wholeness and authenticity as with social justice” (Miller, p. 85). In the tradition of Thoreau, he saw himself as a “decentralist” who “leaned in the direction of anarchism,” he “did not so much seek to reform social institutions as to circumvent and thus deflate them” (Miller, p. 85). Holt was primarily concerned about human growth and learning, but he focused on the relationship between social institutions and human development.

Miller argues that what distinguishes Holt’s position from “progressive” critiques was his insistence that reform of social institutions alone was not sufficient for cultural renewal. For Holt, the source of violence, racism, and exploitation was not in institutions as such, but in the psychological reality people experience as they live in society. The implication for critical pedagogy is that its focus on institutional transformation has neglected the existential dimension of meaning, too often ignoring personal desire for belonging, community, and moral commitment.

To be clear, neither Holt nor I am advocating a perspective that is merely personal or individualistic. Holt was very aware of political forces and expressed his concern that the worship of progress and growth was inevitably leading to fascism. In his 1970 book, *What Do I Do Monday?* Holt suggests that alienation bred by authoritarian education could “prepare the ground for some naïve American brand of Fascism, which now seems uncomfortably close.” Miller quotes a letter Holt wrote to Paul Goodman, in 1970:

I keep looking for and hoping to find evidence that [Americans] are not as callous and greedy and cruel and envious as I fear they are, and I keep getting disappointed. ... What scares me is the amount of Fascism in people’s spirit. It is the government that so many of our fellow citizens would get if they could that scares me—and I fear we are moving in that direction. (p. 89).

Unfortunately, Holt was prescient about politics in the United States, as well as about institutional, particularly school, reform, as an effective path for social change. In 1971 Holt wrote in *New Schools Exchange Newsletter*,

I do not believe that any movement for educational reform that addresses itself exclusively or even primarily to the problems or needs of children can progress very far. In short, in a society that is absurd, unworkable, wasteful, destructive, coercive, monopolistic, and generally anti-human, we could never have good education, no matter what kind of schools the powers that be permit, because it is not the educators or the schools but the whole society and the quality of life in it that really educate ... More and more it seems to me, and this is a reversal of what I felt not long ago, that it makes very little sense to talk about education for social change, as if education was or could be a kind of getting ready. The best and perhaps only education for social change is action to bring about that change...

There cannot be little worlds fit for children in a world not fit for anyone else. (Quoted in Miller, 2002, p. 90)

In his 1972 book, *Freedom and Beyond*, Holt grappled with the key concepts of critical pedagogy: social justice, racism, poverty, and class conflict, arguing, as Miller points out, that schools were contributing to these problems rather than helping to solve them. He wondered whether “we are trying to salve our consciences by asking our children to do what we can’t and don’t want to do” (1972, p. 232).

Holt concluded that schools “tend to take learning out of its living context and turn it into an abstraction, a commodity” (Miller, p. 95). Or as he once said, “I’m enough of an anarchist to feel that things are improved in general when they are improved in their particulars.” And this is the principle that addresses, at least in part, the concerns Ellsworth famously raised in her critique of critical pedagogy.

Holt argued that attempting to change society through schools was an evasion of personal responsibility because authentic meaning cannot be cultivated en masse. “People don’t change their ideas, much less their lives, because someone comes along with a clever argument to show that they’re wrong” (Holt, 1981, p. 66). So, critical educators, are left with a conundrum.

The question becomes how can we create a better balance between the abstraction (a focus on the general nature of things) and authenticity (a focus on the particulars) within critical approaches to teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

Social studies is the most dangerous of all school subjects. Its danger, however, is a matter of perspective.

Like the schools in which it is taught, social studies is full of alluring contradictions. It harbors possibilities for inquiry and social criticism, liberation and emancipation. Social studies could be a site that enables young people to analyze and understand social issues in a holistic way – finding and tracing relations and interconnections both present and past in an effort to build meaningful understandings of a problem, its context and history; to envision a future where specific social problems are resolved; and take action to bring that vision in to existence. Social studies could be a place where students learn to speak for themselves in order to achieve, or at least strive toward an equal degree of participation and better future. Social studies could be like this, but it is not.

In practice, social studies has been and continues to be profoundly conversing in nature.

Social studies is the engine room of illusion factories whose primary aim is reproduction of the existing social order, where the ruling ideas exist to be memorized, regurgitated, internalized and lived by. Social studies too often teaches myths instead of encouraging critical explorations of human existence. Schools are fundamentally authoritarian, hierarchical institutions, they produce myriad oppressive and inequitable by-products and social studies is an integral component in this process.

The challenge, perhaps impossibility is discovering ways in which schools in general and social studies in particular can contribute to positive liberty. That is a society where individuals have the power and resources to realize and fulfill their own potential, free from the obstacles of classism, racism, sexism and other inequalities encouraged by educational systems and the influence of the state and religious ideologies. A society where people have the agency and capacity to make their own free choices and act independently based on reason not authority, tradition, or dogma.

In 1843, Arnold Ruge overcome with revolutionary despair, wrote a letter to Karl Marx lamenting the impossibility of revolution because the German people were too docile: “our nation has no future, so what is the point in our appealing to it?” To which Marx replied “You will hardly suggest that my opinion of the present is too exalted and if I do not despair about it, this is only because its desperate position fills me with hope.”

This is an example of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “the courage of hopelessness.” The courage of hopelessness is an optimistic response to pessimistic circumstances. The equivalent of responding to the criticism that you are “being too idealistic” with “be realistic, demand the impossible!”

The hegemonic system of global capitalism dominates not because people agree with it. It rules because most people are convinced “There Is No Alternative.” Indeed, the dominant approach to schooling and curriculum, particularly in social studies education, is aimed at indoctrinating students into this belief.

Utopian thinking allows us to consider alternatives/pedagogical imaginaries, in attempt to open up spaces for rethinking our approaches to learning, teaching, and experiencing the world. These imaginaries are necessary because traditional tropes of social studies curriculum (e.g., democracy, voting, democratic citizenship) are essentially lies we tell ourselves and students (because democracy is incompatible with capitalism; capitalist democracy creates a shallow, spectator version of democracy at best; democracy as it operates now is inseparable from empire/perpetual war and vast social inequalities).

We certainly have plenty of fuel for our hopes. The challenge we face as social studies educators is to not warm our students' hearts with empty hopes, but rather confront what are seemingly hopeless times for freedom and equality with a pedagogy and curriculum that come from a courage of hopelessness.

Our aim should be to rethink social studies so it becomes a site where students can develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and recognize they have agency to act on the world, to make change. Social studies should not be about showing life to students, but bringing them to life. The aim is not getting students to listen to entertaining lectures, but getting to speak for themselves, to understand people make their own history (even if they make it in already existing circumstances). These principles are the foundation for a new social studies, one that is not driven not by standardized curriculum or examinations, but by the perceived needs, interests, desires of our students, our communities of shared interest, and ourselves as educators.