**Instructive, Inspiring, and Dangerous:**

**A Review of *Social Studies for a Better World***

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# Abstract

In *Social Studies for a Better World*, Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) transcend critical rhetoric by offering pragmatic advice for putting social justice ideals into practice in the primary grades. Their work holds promise as a textbook for collegiate social studies methods courses and stands to impact the praxis of veteran educators as well. While some mainstream approaches to social studies are pinpointed as blatantly ethnocentric, the authors also equip readers with the capacity to recognize how even well-intentioned attempts at diversifying the discipline can be oppressive. The book goes beyond a critique of practices that reinforce dominant norms by also providing a comprehensive anthology of print and online resources that will help social studies teachers better amplify counter narratives. Readers will appreciate the book’s conversational and orderly flow but should proceed with caution given the contentiousness surrounding critical theory in PK-12 settings and a slight tendency of the authors to make bold claims without citing sources. While social justice advocates on the New Left will find the text to be a suitable guide for producing a more woke generation of pedagogues, those that favor more traditional celebrations of patriotism in the classroom will experience cognitive dissonance with Rodríguez and Swalwell’s vision for *a better world*.

*Keywords*: Anti-oppressive pedagogy, social studies methods, preservice teachers, elementary social studies

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In defining how social studies can create *a better world*, Noreen Naseem Rodríguez and Katy Swalwell (2022) share an unabashedly liberal vision for challenging dominant narratives and amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized in elementary classrooms. Their approach is a sharp departure from the tradition of using social studies classrooms for celebrating American exceptionality and subliminally reinforcing dominant norms (*The 1776 Report*, 2021; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Walker & Soltis, 1997). Written by two veteran instructors of collegiate social studies methods courses, *Social Studies for a Better World* is a veritable textbook for cultivating a more woke generation of educators and will generally enrich the syllabi of like-minded instructors. Beyond the Ivory Tower, in-service teachers, administrators, and those with a role in curricular decisions will also find the book to be helpful for rethinking Eurocentric practices and increasing young learners’ enthusiasm via discipline-specific rigor. In short, this instructive, informative, and controversial *anti-oppressive* pedagogicaltreatise is a long-awaited, modern how-to guide for explicitly promoting social justice and implicitly democratizing the learning process in the primary grades.

The book is split into three sections and the authors invite readers to peruse chapters out of order *only* after reading the opening section to ensure that their anti-oppressive framework is appropriately contextualized (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021). The middle section helps readers explore commonly problematic approaches to topics such as holidays, slavery, and focusing on historical “heroes.” This middle section also finds faults with irresponsible ways in which teachers sometimes utilize dramatization and gamification. When exposing readers to topics and methods the authors consider to be “toxic garbage” (p. 45), the book follows a steady rhythm by consistently identifying “common pitfalls” and proposing “creative solutions.” The final chapters outline a plan for operationalizing these ideas without getting fired—a challenge that will require further mediation by social studies methods instructors to ensure this book does not jeopardize nascent careers.

Nevertheless, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2022) work answers the call for critical theorists to transition from rhetoric to praxis (Apple, 2018; Priestley, 2011; Skelton, 1997). In so doing, *Social Studies for a Better World* provides educators with countless shovel-ready resources and ideas for making curricula more inclusive. It also outlines ways in which the inquiry-based College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework can be made more approachable. Educators who successfully pair the book’s resources and methodology will ensure that their classrooms are steppingstones for liberating and high-level scholarship. As the authors point out, this diverges from the tendency of many elementary educators to be overly reliant on cutesy arts-and-crafts projects that reinforce dominant norms.

Of equal importance, Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) build on earlier attempts to use schools as laboratories for constructing a more pluralistic democracy (Carr, 1998; Dewey, 1916). One way *Social Studies for a Better World* does this is by reminding educators to pay greater attention to the *null curriculum*, wherein students absorb implicit and hidden messages through the likes of holiday rituals and classroom management practices (Ellis, 2003; Skelton, 1997). This null curriculum, as Rodríguez and Swalwell convincingly argue, may affect students more profoundly than any formal lesson. In questioning typical ways in which schools normalize traditions surrounding things such as family life and Christmas celebrations, the tone of *Social Studies for a Better World* is likely too progressive to resonate with educators who are unwilling to rethink the familiar.

Even more liberal readers who may be willing to reevaluate the collective values of a workforce long dominated by Protestant, White, middle-class women need to be prepared for self-interrogation if they aspire to meet the authors’ woke standards (Heath & Segal, 2021; Matias, 2016; Wiles & Bondi, 2015). In raising the bar for socially just classrooms, Rodríguez and Swalwell make a strong case against using many games, role-plays, and resources that are commonly found when well-intentioned teachers attempt to diversify their curricula. To support readers who are willing to scrutinize such practices, the authors provide a “Gamification and Dramatization Flow Chart” (p. 127). This algorithmic visual is an effective tool for determining whether an activity would pass the authors’ stringent anti-oppressive litmus test. The flow chart is also consistent with the rest of the text in showing that these forward-thinking authors repeat a familiar refrain from earlier curricular theorists: fun activities should not supersede learning outcomes (Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1949; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

In addition to showing potential harms associated with many activities that were popularized a generation ago by resources such as Bower and colleagues’ (1999) *History Alive!*, Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) outfit readers with plenty of fresh ideas for making the discipline more enjoyable and inclusive. The rich litany of print and online resources the authors list for amplifying marginalized voices can be distracting in a good way for readers hoping to finish a particular chapter in one sitting. Rather than merely rendering judgment, Rodríguez and Swalwell consistently provide rationales to explain why they deem specific resources and practices to be either *oppressive* or *anti-oppressive.* Their reasoning instills readers with a growing sense of how to transfer this thinking to novel situations. To further scaffold this ability, the appendix is filled with guides such as an “Anti-Oppressive Filter for Online Resources” (p. 217). These tools help readers parse resources that authentically represent marginalized groups from the “disjointed, random, vacuous crap” (p. 152) that the authors find to be pervasive on Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers.

In a webinar, the authors explained to an audience of teacher educators that they recognized a need to make social studies more approachable for preservice teachers who, based upon Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2021) experiences, often have disdain for the discipline and are short on content knowledge. One way *Social Studies for a Better World* counteracts the latter is to provide readers with a theological flyover that succinctly illustrates the limitations of trying to equate dominant norms with direct equivalents among non-Christian faiths and traditions. Though conversational in tone, the authors often wade into these kinds of complex waters and many of the social justice concepts Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) explore may overwhelm novices. The authors also readily admit they have “seen the eye rolls and felt the cold shoulders” (p. 159) of social justice skeptics.

Mindful of these challenges, teacher educators who opt to use *Social Studies for a Better World* as a textbook should handle its contents with kid gloves. On one hand, infusing diversity throughout the teacher preparatory curriculum addresses standards prescribed by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2020) and is consistent with the extant literature (Bennett et al., 2019; Chang-Bacon, 2021; Matias, 2016). On the other, critical pedagogy has become a cultural lightning rod that is likely to attract fierce opposition in many states and localities (DeSantis, 2021; Nierenberg, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

Therefore, it would be educational malpractice to introduce preservice teachers to this anti-oppressive approach without clearly acknowledging that questioning dominant norms “is contentious” (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 6). Disagreements over ways in which social studies education should be approached is evident in policies of the previous and current presidential administrations and fuels emotions for their respective political constituencies (*The 1776 Report*, 2021; Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Whereas Donald Trump hoped to promote patriotism by celebrating America’s “Founding Fathers,” Joe Biden favors a more progressive approach and began his tenure with an executive order that revoked the work of his predecessor’s 1776 Commission. Collegiate instructors who opt to use *Social Studies for a Better World* as a text thus owe novices at least a cursory debriefing on these competing perspectives.

When broaching topics that are steeped in controversy, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2022) cautions against *indoctrination* may be viewed as hypocritical by conservatives. Although the authors emphasize that discussing things that are “*political* is different than being *partisan*” (p.17), their vision for *a better world* could not be a starker contrast with *The* *1776* *Report* (2021) and the more fringe perspectives of the alt-right. Rodríguez and Swalwell’s eclectic combination of pantheistic, feminist, and indigenist influences is highly inclusive, but the authors do not advocate for giving equal time to dehumanizing or widely discredited nonsense. They wisely assert that “people’s humanity is *never* up for debate” (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 32) and discourage educators from lending credence to the likes of flat-earthers.

Amidst America’s divisive political climate, the challenge to using Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2022) critically dogmatic approach mirrors the broader conundrum of America’s 21st Century culture wars (Packer, 2021; Wraga & Hlebowitsh, 2003). Rather than providing educators with suggestions for building a broad consensus around socially just ideals, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s tone embodies a strain of liberalism that reflects two decades of college campuses becoming increasingly reliant on critical theory to explain inequity (Packer, 2021; “The Illiberal Left,” 2021). The resultant thinking that now drives the New Left is distinguishable from the ideology of its liberal predecessors because it sheds a Rousseauian faith in the basic virtue of humankind (Carr, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Packer, 2021). Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022), like many critical theorists (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), instead place a fire-and-brimstone emphasis on the fallibility of man—particularly White men. For example, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s reminder that “we can’t desecrate the ‘Founding Fathers’ as some critics may contend, because *they weren’t ever sacred to begin with*” (p. 93) is sure to provoke outrage from defenders of tradition (Skelton, 1997). Although it is hard to disagree with the authors’ point that the time has come to upend stale, Dead White Male versions of history, readers should question whether *Social Studies for a Better World* will help future generations build a betterconsensus*.*

For a more complex example of the book’s potential to bifurcate, consider the authors’ avoidance of a full-throated embrace of the C3 Framework. The authors caution that this inquiry-based approach, which is endorsed by the apolitical National Council for the Social Studies (n.d.), can be used to “reinforce dominant narratives” (p. 139). In this and similar instances, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s zealotry risks reducing *anti-oppresssion* to a slogan that silences dialgoues via a “praxis of domination” (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 126). In addition to straying from the once liberal quest to represent diverse ideologicial perspectives, the authors’ advocacy for conducting inquiries using *only* resources that are annointed by the New Left misses an opportunity to fold in America’s political center.

To Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2022) credit, they demistify the C3 Framework by offering pragmatic tips for developing *compelling questions* that capture the authentic language and interests of elementary school students. The authors also devote attention to various ways in which the social studies should extend beyond history to include age-appropriate inquiries into the other social sciences. This emphasis on the subdisciplines makes *disciplinary thinking* within the C3 Framework more readily accessible for novice and veteran practitioners alike. More broadly, by deconstructing each aspect of the C3 Framework and providing ways in which each of its four dimensions can be put into practice, *Social Studies for a Better World* helps disrupt the stubborn tradition of relying upon *explanation* as a primary mode of content delivery within the discipline (Wiens et al., 2021). Like Freire (1970/2018), Rodríguez and Swalwell recognize that inquiry democratizes the learning process.

Rather than avoiding inquiries surrounding topics that might be considered taboo in polite company, such as those involving finance, religion, and racialization, Rodríguez and Swalwell train readers to frame questions for their students as either *empirical* or *normative.* Axiomatically, one would hope that empirical questions would produce objective answers, but the authors recommend using these pursuits as an opportunity to help students hone their media literacy skills. This recommendation befits the *zeitgeist* and is necessary in an age of “alternative facts.” These empirical truths are also requisite for building evidence-based arguments to normative questions, which are more values-based by design. The authors prudently maintain that synthesizing the empirical and the normative helps learners develop and enact their own visions for *a better world.*

This kind of higher-order thinking extends beyond the cognitive realm of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). In prompting students to craft their own visions for *a better world*, Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) revive the idea that teachers should have both cognitive and *affective* objectives*.* Over a half-century ago, Krathwohl and colleagues (1967) lamented that although it was relatively easy to encourage educators to coalesce around evaluations of cognitive growth, explicit intentions to help students evolve in their “beliefs, attitudes, values, and personality” (p. 18) had become nearly extinct in academic settings. Like the authors of taxonomies for the cognitive and affective domains, Rodríguez and Swalwell point to the *lack of clear objectives* as being at the root of many poorly orchestrated attempts at diversifying curricula.

Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) also effectively shred the student-centered façade from popular positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs. In making their case against PBIS and SEL, the authors cite a range of sources that show how these programs reward students who best conform to middle class norms with extrinsic rewards in “token economies” (p. 73). Though the authors criticize these common approaches to maintaining order within schools, they stop far short of advocating for anarchy. Instead, the authors provide several viable examples of ways teachers can engage students in the rule making process to ultimately prepare them for participatory roles in civic life.

Although co-constructing classroom rules harkens upbeat constructivist traditions of the *open-classroom* 1970s *ethos* (Ellis, 2003; Walker & Soltis, 1997), several aspects of *Social Studies for a Better World* reflect what can be perceived as a pessimistic worldview of the New Left (Packer, 2021, 2022; “The Illiberal Left,” 2021). Notably, the authors’ decision to use the term *anti-oppressive* combines two negatives in a way that may not resonate as particularly uplifting for mainstream audiences. The book also explains how words that sound like euphemisms, such as *heroificiation* and *idealization*,can be problematic. *Social Studies for a Better World* would be an easier sell if it packaged social justice ideals with a more positive spin. Even Freire’s (1970/2018) seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* wields words like *humanization* and *liberation* to describe what Rodríguez and Swalwell call *anti-oppressive.*

Particularly grim is Rodríguez and Swalwell’s (2022) choice to encourage elementary educators to make students aware that community workers can be unhappy, troubled, and lack agency. This counters the way Fred Rogers essentialized “community helpers” in his bygone 20th Century television neighborhood. The authors reason that *realization*, as opposed to *idealization*, alerts children to the possibility that people in positions of influence, may “harm them emotionally or physically” (p. 84). Though such cautions are followed by “Creative Solutions” caveats, this brief “Community Helpers” section could be improved. Readers may have difficulty squaring what feels like fearmongering with the authors’ reminder that educators should not squash a child’s “imagination to dream up ideals” (p. 85). A more nuanced approach would avoid making social studies unnecessarily traumatic—especially in the early grades.

Unfortunately, there are also numerous instances in which the authors make bold assertions without clearly citing sources. Skeptics and readers hoping to use *Social Studies for a Better World* to evangelize would be interested in knowing how the authors determined:

* “…most people aren’t in poverty because of ‘bad’ financial decisions but rather because of longstanding structural inequalities and exploitation” (p. 12).
* Elementary schools often use clip art to reinforce dominant norms in ways that are “damaging” (p. 52).
* PBIS behavior monitoring “often becomes so time intensive that it ends up distracting from…meaningful curriculum” (p. 73).
* Most Blacks who escaped slavery did so “without help from white people” (p. 125).
* Prize-winning books for children and young adults “can *fiercely* uphold dominant narratives” (p. 151).

Though the authors’ lived experiences and scholarship entitle them to write with authority, anchoring each claim would add weight to their arguments.

Not without controversy, *Social Studies for a Better World* has the potential to live up to its title in classrooms led by teachers who are committed to social justice ideals. Rodríguez and Swalwell’s differing backgrounds, and what is clearly a sustained scholarly approach to improving social studies instruction in the primary grades, generates a conversation that will inspire open-minded readers to experiment with new frameworks and curricular tools. Their edgy book drops the pretensions of stuffy academia and reads instead like a series of blog entries from well-researched and woke friends. Unfortunately, the authors’ anti-oppressive pedagogical approach also has the potential to provoke outrage in more conservative contexts and is occasionally short on evidence to anchor bold assertions. Given these vulnerabilities, instructors of social studies methods courses should include this text on their syllabi only if they are prepared to accompany it with additional resources to help preservice teachers better understand and navigate America’s current political and cultural maelstrom. More experienced practitioners should also read *Social Studies for a Better World* if they hope to become more awoken, refine inquiry-driven instruction, or discover new resources for representing historically marginalized groups.

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