Standardizing Imperialism

Fall 2004

illustration: Michael Duffy

By Christine E. Sleeter

In March 2003, while watching TV coverage of the lead-up to the war on Iraq and the invasion itself, I happened to be examining the 2001 edition of the *California History-Social Science Framework and Standards*, the state-adopted content standards for teaching social studies and history in California's K-12 schools.

I was struck by the parallels between basic assumptions in the standards and those I saw in the mainstream media. I found the connection between standards and imperialism to be compelling because the standards bandwagon has shifted attention from what knowledge schools should teach to how well students absorb what the state prescribes.

I wanted to examine whether state-mandated curriculum standards not only discouraged students from thinking critically about the U.S. role in world affairs, but also implicitly taught imperialism. In my opinion, California's standards, which are held up as a model for other states, obscure the history of U.S. imperial power and promote an "us/them" view of the world that can help justify further U.S. interventions, such as the war in Iraq.

Obscuring Colonial History

The United States was born of British imperialism and acquired its territory through imperialist expansion. As the dominant capitalist country, the United States uses its military and economic muscle to secure markets, natural resources, strategic sites, and energy to fuel its military, industries, and lifestyle. Imperialist nations sell their own version of the colonization process, while at the same time actively obscuring alternative versions. I wanted to look at how *California's History-Social Science Framework and Standards* do this.

The standards document folds indigenous people into a triumphal story of U.S. "growth," while ignoring indigenous analyses of the same history. In third and fourth grades, students are to study local and state history according to a sequence of events: "the explorers who visited here; the newcomers who settled here; the economy they established; their impact on the American Indians of this region; and their lasting marks on the landscape." Landscape provides the context, and sequence provides the structure in which people "visit" and "settle."

In fifth grade, students study U.S. history starting with a unit devoted to the cultures of pre-Columbian indigenous people, which is the main place indigenous people appear — relegated to a distant past. In fifth and eighth grades, students are to trace the westward movement of whites and the policy of Manifest Destiny using maps, spiced with exciting stories of personal accounts of adventure. Periodically, students are asked to "consider the viewpoint of the American Indians who occupied these same lands," particularly by studying the Trail of Tears, but then the same narrative of triumphal westward movement continues.

By high school, indigenous people have largely disappeared from the social studies curriculum, with the exception of insertion of the word "tribal" into a 12th grade standard regarding levels of government. The concept of Indian sovereignty appears only in a third grade standard that directs students to "describe the ways in which California, the other states, and sovereign American Indian tribes contribute to the making of our nation and

participate in the federal system of government," implying that tribes have parallel power with states.

In contrast, historical analyses by indigenous peoples focus on treaty making among sovereign states, and on how the United States increasingly ignored, then pulverized treaties and exterminated the people in order to take land. There is no mention in the standards of the 1887 Allotment Act, which negated Indian control of land and shifted definitions of who is Indian from citizenship in a sovereign Indian nation to how much indigenous blood an individual has. Native-American Historian Ward Churchill called the Allotment Act, along with the Indian Citizenship Act, passed in 1924, sovereignty's "Great Disappearing Act." Neither appears in the California standards document, nor does a study of maps indicating land cessions and contemporary reservations.

The standards use the term "colonist," but do little with the concept of "colonialism." Fifth and eighth graders are supposed to learn that early U.S. history had a colonial period; the term "colonist" refers simply to a category of people who lived in the northeastern United States between the 1600s and 1700s, particularly those who fought in the War for Independence. In high school, students use maps to survey colonial possessions of such nations as France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States. They study the Spanish-American War in relationship to the United States becoming a world power, rather than in relationship to the United States colonizing the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Nowhere is there serious study of colonialism from perspectives of peoples who were colonized.

The standards frame today's global economy mainly in terms of how countries "interrelate," "specialize for trade," and achieve "global stability." For example, 10th graders are to "analyze the integration of countries into the world economy." Eleventh graders are to study "global interrelatedness" of national economies and "the establishment of the United Nations and International Declaration of Human Rights, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and their importance in shaping modern Europe and maintaining peace and international order." This point of view suggests supporting rather than questioning capitalist globalization.

As an alternative, students could study the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs or transnational corporations on ordinary people in impoverished countries, such as how industrialized nations pressure Third World nations to shift economic production from goods for local consumption to export goods. Students could study strings attached to borrowing from the World Bank, and the massive debt that Third World nations incur as a result.

Students could juxtapose and debate perspectives that support and critique capitalist globalization. Instead, the *History-Social Science Framework and Standards for California Public Schools* do little to help students develop ways of thinking that could question U.S. imperialism.

Us vs. Them

President George W. Bush has consistently framed U.S. policy as conflict between freedom-loving (generally non-Muslim) people versus terrorist regimes (generally Muslim). For example, in a June 2003 address, he said, "In Afghanistan, in Iraq, we gave ultimatums to terror regimes. Those regimes chose defiance and those regimes are no more. Fifty million people in those two countries once lived under tyranny, and now they live in freedom." Bush has repeatedly stated that countries are either "with us or against us."

A fundamental element of the ideology of imperialism is dividing the world into an "us" that is more civilized than "them." In California's curriculum, students gradually learn three overlapping binaries: Western versus non-Western, Judeo-Christian versus other religions, and democratic political systems/free market economies versus totalitarian systems.

In sixth and seventh grades, students are to learn that the United States grew from Western civilizations. When studying ancient Greece and Rome, they are to identify the "influence of both cultures on Western civilization and on our lives today," and when studying ancient Hebrew civilization, they are to connect Judaism with "moral and ethical traditions of Western civilization." The curriculum emphasizes repeatedly that these cultural traditions provided the roots of Western ethics and values, democracy, and "the dawn of rational thought." In 10th and 12th grades, U.S. political institutions and values

are again traced back to the ancient Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Enlightenment philosophy, and English parliamentary systems. The curriculum continually promotes the idea that the United States grew from the Western tradition. By doing so it negates cultural roots in any other parts of the world, or with indigenous peoples. The standards do not mention the Haudeno-saunee (Iroquois) Great Law of Peace or the Council of Confederacy legislative process, models that, along with the British Constitution and Magna Carta, were borrowed from to form the U.S. Constitution.

Students study world religions mainly in sixth and seventh grades. The history of Christianity receives the most attention, appearing in units about ancient Rome, medieval Europe, and the European Renaissance and Reformation. Students study the history, values, and beliefs of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism. In addition, they study Muslim civilizations in the Middle East and North Africa, and the spread of Islam, such as in Standard 7.2: "Discuss the expansion of Muslim rule through military conquests and treaties, emphasizing the cultural blending within Muslim civilization and the spread and acceptance of Islam and the Arabic language." For students who come from Judeo-Christian homes, these studies of religion reinforce the familiar and provide some terminology for "other" religions they might hear about, but not necessarily depth of understanding. But these studies ignore the role that conquest and military violence played in spreading not just Islam, but also Christianity.

The California standards develop a third dichotomy mainly at the high school level — democratic/free market versus totalitarian systems. For example, in 12th grade, students compare and contrast various forms of government, particularly dictatorships versus democracies. Standard 12.9 directs students to identify "the forms of illegitimate power that 20th-century African, Asian, and Latin-American dictators used to gain and hold office." But the standard neglects to point out the role the United States played in installing and propping up these dictators — Somoza in Nicaragua and Duvalier in Haiti come to mind — or in toppling democratic governments such as Mossadegh in Iran, Allende in Chile, or Arbenz in Guatemala.

California's curriculum folds students into a "we" that is Western, Judeo-Christian, and has a democratic government with a capitalist market economy. These are juxtaposed against "them": non-Western, not Judeo-Christian, and totalitarian (or not free). While case examples of non-European nations moving toward political democracy (such as South Korea) and European nations moving toward fascism (such as Germany) suggest that particular systems do not necessarily follow particular peoples, repeated emphasis of "our" roots in Western (particularly British) traditions attaches "us" to Europe.

But the United States is multiracial and religiously diverse. The framework and standards use the language of multiculturalism to fold diverse people into this "we" mainly by celebrating cultural contributions of non-whites. In fifth grade, for example, students should "learn about the significant contributions that black men and women made to the economic, political, and cultural development of the nation, including its music, literature, art, science, medicine, technology, and scholarship." But these significant contributions are not generally spelled out. Neither are exploitative conditions under which many such "contributions" were made, such as unpaid or poorly paid labor. The curriculum acknowledges struggles of immigrants and African Americans, but emphasizes that opportunities have outweighed struggles.

The standards have difficulty incorporating as "we" those whom the United States had previously colonized. Being written for California, they simply ignore colonized peoples outside of California, such as Puerto Ricans and Hawaiians. They treat Mexicans mainly as immigrants, ignoring that the United States took California from Mexico after waging war against Mexico. They locate Native Americans in the past. This is also the only American cultural group that is studied through separate units that survey culture, religious beliefs, economic activities, legends, and so forth, and only at the elementary level. (Imagine, by way of contrast, students studying the culture, religious beliefs, economy, and stories of English-Americans in fifth grade, and then not much after that.)

It is important to recognize that a "multicultural" curriculum can be constructed around an imperialist ideology. As the examples above show, students can study world civilizations but in the process also learn to divide the world into "us/them." Students can learn about racial, ethnic, and religious diversity within the United States, and at the same time bind that diversity to a Western, European-based, Judeo-Christian capitalist conception of who "we" are.

Virtues of ‘Our' Way of Life

To justify the war on Iraq, President Bush often evokes presumed American virtues, stating, for example, that the "future of freedom and peace depend on the actions of America," and that America is "strong," "principled," "courageous," and "compassionate." Blanket association of the United States with virtues helps to justify imperialist actions.

In the standards document, these positive value-laden terms are applied to systems, particularly representative democracy and capitalism. The terms "free," "choice," "rational," and "liberty" are virtues linked with capitalism throughout the grades. From first through 12th grade, students are to learn how free-market economies take their direction from individual choices of consumers. In 7th grade, for example, they are to learn that capitalism grew out of the Enlightenment: As Europeans developed rational thinking, they also developed capitalist market economies based on private ownership and free choice. The standards don't point out that corporate boards of directors are not popularly elected, and boards routinely dismiss substantive shareholder participation.

Students also study, throughout the grades, democracy as embodied in the Constitution, learning that a representative democracy is the best political system because the government obtains its power from the consent of citizens. Terms associated with a representative democratic system are much the same as those associated with market economy: "individual liberty," "rights," "justice," and "freedom." In this way, the standards imply that they are two dimensions of the same system.

By conflating democracy with capitalism, the standards fail to suggest that economic life might be much more democratic. For example, Central and Latin America have an active, ongoing history of popular movements (for instance, in Brazil, Bolivia, Nicaragua) of establishing economic systems where wealth is much more popularly controlled and equitably distributed than under capitalism.

Students are encouraged to regard the U.S. political/economic system as the best possible. The following passage, from a description of the fifth grade curriculum, illustrates:

This course focuses on one of the most remarkable stories in history: the creation of a new nation, peopled by immigrants from all parts of the globe and governed by institutions founded on the Judeo-Christian heritage, the ideals of the Enlightenment, and English traditions of self-government. This experiment was inspired by the innovative dream of building a new society, a new order for the ages, in which the promises of the Declaration of Independence would be realized.

While the curriculum acknowledges that this is an imperfect system, it claims this to be the best system humankind has developed, based on bottom-up rather than top-down flow of power. (I find that ironic, since the whole idea of states telling teachers what to teach is top-down rather than bottom-up.)

Imperialist nations, attributing their own prosperity to their superior cultural and intellectual systems rather than to any history of exploitation, perceive a duty to name and solve the problems of the "other," even if force is required. When President Bush says, "We seek to lift whole nations by spreading freedom," he is calling on a belief that the United States is entitled to apply power to name and solve other people's problems.

For example, when studying "Unresolved Problems of the Modern World," 10th-grade students are to learn "that the history of the United States has had special significance for the rest of the world, both because of its free political system and its pluralistic nature," and that, "Although democratic ideals first emerged in the West, almost every nation pays them at least rhetorical homage." If the rest of the world wants to be more like the United States, then incorporating everyone else into a U.S. world must be progress. If taught as written, the standards encourage students to accept the imperial mandate without question.

State-mandated Curricula and Free Inquiry

Many of us believe the war on Iraq is the most recent installment in a long history of U.S. imperialism. The United States has been trying to control oil production in the Middle East since 1947 or earlier, and Vice President Cheney's former firm Halliburton did active business with Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. The war is part of a larger strategy of aggressively intimidating any potential challengers to U.S. global domination. And despite claims that its purpose was to serve the Iraqi people, Iraqi death tolls, rarely mentioned in U.S. media, were somewhere between 10,000 and 45,000 troops, according to Larry

Everest, author of *Oil, Power and Empire*, and between 5,000 and 10,000 civilians, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*.

I am troubled by the fact that such a curriculum exists, but I am much more troubled that it has been adopted by the state to structure how history and social studies are to be taught in California. There are alternatives to teaching students to divide the world into "us" and "them." Rather than telling stories about the past based on assumptions of the present, which is how the California curriculum is constructed, for example, education professor Sam Wineburg suggests that teachers can help students learn to "see through the eyes of the people who were there," and in the process, "teach us what we cannot see, to acquaint us with the congenital blurriness of our vision."

Alternative teaching guides provide readings and teaching strategies with alternative narratives about imperialism. *Rethinking Globalization* , for example, contextualizes the new global economy in an analysis of colonialism, features critical analyses from the standpoints of Third World people, and offers suggestions for teaching at the elementary and secondary level. [See page 60 to order.]

We need to offer our students multiple narratives and viewpoints about imperialism in history as well as today — from dominant as well as subordinate points of view. This is one way young people will learn to think critically about the ways the United States exercises its power in the world. It's also the beginning of allowing students to imagine the possibility of forging new relationships based on mutuality rather than control.

Christine Sleeter (christine_sleeter@csumb.edu) is Professor Emeritus at California State University Monterey Bay. She is currently completing a book examining multicultural curriculum in relationship to the standards movement.