

# “Make Your Voice Heard”: Communism in the High School Curriculum, 1958–1968

*Campbell F. Scribner*

The launch of *Sputnik* in 1957 sparked a crisis in American education. Suddenly threatened by superior Soviet technology, progressive educators' concern for children's preferences, health, and adjustment in school yielded to public demands for more basic learning and academic skills. Congress soon passed the National Defense Education Act, providing millions of dollars for math, science, and foreign language instruction. By the early 1960s, educators and academics began to reexamine other aspects of the curriculum as well. Their efforts prompted two changes in the social studies: one was a shift from worksheets and memorization to the investigative approach of the “new social studies,” the other a requirement that schools teach about the specter of international Communism.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about the first of these reforms, surprisingly little about the second. Yet, insofar as the new social studies grew out of Cold War imperatives, instruction about Communism provides an interesting perspective on its tenure in American schools. In fact, a closer examination of the relationship between the two might force us to reconsider current assumptions about the nature of curriculum reform during the period.

Historians have characterized the new social studies as the product of an era obsessed with expertise, a top-down reform successfully implemented in the early 1960s but overtaken—and thrown in sharp relief—by later grassroots activism from both the Left and the Right. Most assume that the reform foundered “because [it] too frequently failed to address the pressing concerns of the 1960s: civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and campus unrest,” or because right-wing criticism “brought a new mood to the American educational scene” in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

---

Campbell F. Scribner is a doctoral student in History and Educational Policy at the University of Wisconsin. He would like to thank Bill Reese, Jonathan Zimmerman, and three anonymous reviewers for their guidance on this article.

<sup>1</sup>Edwin Fenton, *The New Social Studies* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1967), 1–3; George Barr Carson Jr., “The Study of Russia in Secondary Education,” in *American Teaching About Russia*, eds. Cyril Black and John M. Thompson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959): 158–89.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 134; Hazel Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform*,

Yet, two recent books argue that the era cannot be so neatly parsed. In *Education and the Cold War* (2008), Andrew Hartman points out that while post-*Sputnik* reforms “facilitated the construction of ‘cold warriors’ conditioned to fear and loathe Communism [and] the Soviet Union,” anti-communist consensus offered educators only temporary reprieve from ideological attacks. Critiques from neoconservative Max Rafferty and radical Paul Goodman were already straining the educational center by 1962.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in *The Hope for American School Reform* (2011), Ronald Evans argues that the very Cold War imperatives that created the new social studies also limited its implementation. Academic elites designed sophisticated lesson plans, he notes, but too often ignored the local contexts in which they were administered, bypassing professional educators and thus consigning most students to the same old material.<sup>4</sup>

The following essay reaches similar conclusions regarding anti-Communist instruction in the decade after *Sputnik*. It also finds that experts’ hopes of establishing an enlightened, anti-Communist consensus through the new social studies proved untenable from the outset. By 1961, conservative scrutiny had already forced states like Florida to adopt separate “Americanism versus Communism” (AVC) classes with a simplistic, binary approach, and little pretense of objectivity. Scholars and journalists have portrayed these classes as kitschy Cold War propaganda, impervious to the curricular reforms of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Less well documented is that even liberal states, those that incorporated balanced Communism units into existing social studies classes, often did so under the threat of right-wing action, rather than from reformist impulses. Here, too, threats of community protest ensured that discussion of the Communist system, if more even-handed, was restricted to

---

1880–1980 (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1981), 118; Peter Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons From the Sputnik Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 178–228; David Jenness, *Making Sense of Social Studies* (New York: McMillan, 1990), 135, 143.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6, 188–96; “Roundtable on Hartman’s *Education and the Cold War* (Part IV),” U.S. Intellectual History (blog), 5 August 2008, accessed 15 January 2011, [http://us-intellectual-history.blogspot.com/2008/08/roundtable-on-hartmans-education-and\\_8592.html](http://us-intellectual-history.blogspot.com/2008/08/roundtable-on-hartmans-education-and_8592.html).

<sup>4</sup>Ronald Evans, *The Hope for American School Reform: The Cold War Pursuit of Inquiry Learning in Social Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

<sup>5</sup>In addition to Evans’s *The Hope for American School Reform*, brief but evenhanded scholarly treatment can be found in Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a more critical appraisal see, Karen L. Riley and Marcella L. Kysilka, “Florida’s ‘Americanism versus Communism’: Social Studies Curricula and the Politics of Fear,” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 25 (2003): 27–40. An Internet search yields numerous references to Florida’s AVC curriculum by journalists and memoirists.

unobjectionable teaching styles, undermining the intended innovations of the new social studies.

Dynamic discussions of Communism did appear in American classrooms, but they were rarely the result of top-down reform. Unlike existing scholarship, which reconstructs educational debates almost entirely from the records of curriculum planners and college professors, this article explores the ways in which teachers and students influenced social studies instruction. Many of them recognized the importance of AVC classes but felt that arbitrary strictures betrayed their promise.<sup>6</sup> As early as 1960, they shunned indoctrinatory courses and used class discussions and newspaper editorials to demand the right of free inquiry. Ironically, as these actions succeeded they also hastened the program's obsolescence. As AVC forced social studies classes to decouple the ideas of nationalism and objectivity, it called the very notion of "Americanism" into question and provided one of the first opportunities to critically examine government, economics, and foreign policy in school. Thus, rather than the embodiment of Cold War consensus, anti-Communist education became a harbinger of its collapse. Conservative parents protested novel methods of teaching when applied to controversial subjects like Communism, while left-leaning teachers and students supported curricular reform but questioned the Cold War ideology at its heart.

As many scholars have discovered, the decentralization of American school districts—compounded by the atomized nature of classroom instruction—can make it difficult to generalize about actual teaching practices.<sup>7</sup> That difficulty holds true for anti-Communist education, which encompassed a nationwide debate but was implemented differently from place to place. I first happened upon AVC classes while studying schools in rural Wisconsin. Further research led to files and newspaper clippings at the University of Florida, as well as to a wealth of manuals, pamphlets, and unpublished dissertations on the subject. These, in turn, referenced episodes in Southern statehouses and New England boarding schools, at California political rallies, and in scores

---

<sup>6</sup>Although units on Communism went by several names and were incorporated into different programs, their stated purposes, curriculum guides, and reading lists were almost identical. Thus, this paper will use the acronym AVC to reference any course or unit that contrasted Communism with American democracy and capitalism during the period studied.

<sup>7</sup>Discussion of the difficulties of generalization can be found, for example, in Kate Rousmaniere, "Losing Patience and Staying Professional: Women Teachers and the Problem of Classroom Discipline in New York City Schools in the 1920s," *History of Education Quarterly*, 34, no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 49–68; and Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980* (New York: Longman Press, 1984).

of other settings. The essay below cannot provide an exhaustive catalogue of these incidents, much less the thousands of others that went unrecorded. Nonetheless, by drawing from a diverse range of locations and incorporating state and regional data where available, it should offer some insight into the process of curricular change during the Cold War.

Social studies had trained children for national and world citizenship since the turn of the twentieth century, but the discipline took on renewed importance after the horrors of World War II. In the 1950s, effective citizenship seemed to require compromise and moderation, commitment to a broad democratic consensus, and most importantly, an aversion to the ideological enthusiasms that fueled Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. Thus, textbooks presented the American way of life as fixed and stable and democracy as the wise rule of patriotic men rather than a vibrant, sometimes chaotic, competition of interests.<sup>8</sup> The era's nonideological, nondisciplinary ethos often found form in "Problems of Democracy," a bland civics class that one teacher described as "a dumping ground course in which life adjustment, driver education, and what-not were too often included" with the study of government. These subjects merged in "inexact and confusing ways" and left teachers "too frequently [dependent] on textbooks, leading to unimaginative, unenthusiastic, pedantic teaching" and a general malaise in the field.<sup>9</sup>

*Sputnik* provided a mandate for drastic change. Its most immediate effects were on math and science instruction, whose strategic importance merited federal funding through NDEA, as well as curricular experimentation by the National Science Foundation and its subsidiaries.<sup>10</sup> Within a year, however, other groups—including the High School Geography Project and the National Council for the Social Studies—had turned to the cause of social studies reform. Their goal was to rejuvenate American education by introducing rigor and vigor to the classroom. Policymakers argued that democracy could be—indeed *had* to be—taught as a dynamic, experiential process rather than a dull recitation of facts. In this regard, they relied heavily on the 1959

---

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 56–58; or, for greater depth, Wendy Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Evans, *Social Studies Wars*, 134, 125.

<sup>10</sup> For more on *Sputnik* and the NDEA, see Barbara Barksdale Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and the National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); and Wayne J. Urban, *More Than Science and Sputnik: The National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010). On the reform of science education and the role of the National Science Foundation, see John Rudolph, *Scientists in the Classroom: The Cold War Reconstruction of American Science Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

conference at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which had pursued similar goals in science education, and on the writings of two prominent intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> James Conant, the former president of Harvard University and the era's recognized authority on school quality, insisted that a vital citizenry must learn to bridge the "two cultures" of science and the humanities, while Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner emphasized the importance of the learning process in constructing knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The culmination of these ideas was an inquiry-based pedagogy that historian Edwin Fenton described as the "new social studies."<sup>13</sup> In his book of the same title, Fenton revived the call of progressive educators for student-centered activities such as role-playing, debate, creative writing, and small-group discussion. He urged teachers to engage students with questions rather than lectures, and projects rather than "quizzes to check their mastery of facts and generalizations." Teachers should frame discussions around contemporary political issues, he believed, and demand that students either justify or reconsider their positions; they should always ask, "What do you think? . . . Why? . . . Why?"<sup>14</sup> Unlike the progressives, however, Fenton applied these techniques to disciplinary study, with special attention to source documents and the deductive logic of the hard sciences. This was, after all, education for national security, with the ultimate goal of producing rigorous Cold War thinkers by "[transforming] students into junior historians and social scientists." Although few schools adopted his reform wholesale, by the mid-1960s Fenton's writing reflected a nationwide push for a better trained, rather than better adjusted, citizenry.<sup>15</sup>

Teaching about Communism followed a similar trajectory during this period. Since the McCarthy era, teachers had assiduously avoided class discussions of Communism for fear of losing their jobs. Those who did broach the subject found many of their students interested but ignorant, imbued with a simplistic, belligerent mindset. One history class, learning about the suspension of civil liberties after World War I, was amazed not at that era's anti-Communist hysteria but at "how prevalent the communists were in this country." Their teacher despaired that they "thought that Attorney General Palmer's solution

<sup>11</sup>The "new social studies" itself began at a similar conference in the Endicott House at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1962. Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics*, 41–54.

<sup>12</sup>The notion of "two cultures" comes from Conant's contemporary, C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959); Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics*, 34–40.

<sup>13</sup>David Jenness, *Making Sense of Social Studies* (New York: McMillan, 1990), 129–33.

<sup>14</sup>Fenton, *The New Social Studies*, 41–42, 60, 63.

<sup>15</sup>Jenness, *Making Sense of Social Studies*, 131; Evans, *Social Studies Wars*, 123; Fenton, *The New Social Studies*, 99–103.

[i.e. deportation] was a good one!" Another noted that among his students the common "solution to the Communism-democracy problem [was] to drop a hydrogen bomb on Moscow," which was especially worrisome because the same students could not define Communism, identify Khrushchev, or name another Russian city.<sup>16</sup> In 1955, Nebraska required its teachers to address Communism in middle school classes but provided very little guidance for how to do so and did not enforce compliance. In one survey, less than half of the state's teachers spent even one class period on it, citing poor instructional materials and teacher training.<sup>17</sup>

Some high schools discussed the subject in World History or "Problems in Democracy" classes. One issue of the Foreign Policy Association's "Choices" newsletter, a current events curriculum in use in four hundred seventy-five high schools in 1957, invited students to debate questions such as "Are the Communists becoming liberal?" and "Are we competing successfully with Russia?"<sup>18</sup> However, even as sophisticated, supplementary material for upper-level courses, this type of newsletter was a notable exception for the period.<sup>19</sup> When it came up at all, the most common treatment of Communism was a single-period lecture given by the American Legion or the state bar association, which left little room for discussion or student questions but assuaged anxieties about subversive teaching. For most of the 1950s, these lectures successfully reinforced the Legion's promise to keep Communism out of the classroom.<sup>20</sup>

However, the threat of Soviet expansionism and a burgeoning space race rendered such ignorance unacceptable. After *Sputnik*, a growing number of civic and professional organizations began to lobby for

<sup>16</sup>David Mallery, *Teaching About Communism: A Definition of the Problem and a Description of Some Practices* (Boston: National Assn. of Independent Schools, 1962), 14; Annette Zelman, *Teaching About Communism in American Public Schools* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 31.

<sup>17</sup>Walter Sistrunk, "The Teaching of Americanism versus Communism in Florida Secondary Schools," (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1966), 6; Calvin H. Reed and Evelyn Caha, "Teaching About Communism in Nebraska's Junior High Schools," *Social Education*, XXII (April, 1958): 178–80.

<sup>18</sup>Mansurp, n.d.; Rex Putnam, "School Guide: Great Decisions, 1957," Oregon Department of Public Instruction, Foreign Policy Association Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Hereafter cited as FPA Records.

<sup>19</sup>In 1960, a school board in Cincinnati, under pressure from the John Birch Society, voted to remove the Foreign Policy Association's "Great Decisions" program at one Cincinnati school because "the program 'subtly and insidiously' promoted a 'subversive line of compromise, coexistence and surrender ... to world communism.'" Robert Welch, *John Birch Society Bulletin* (September, 1962): 10.

<sup>20</sup>The Legion had conducted "Americanism" classes both in and outside of schools since World War I, when the same, binary structure contrasted democracy with "autocracy" or "kaiserism." Carol S. Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of Higher Learning in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 131.

Communism's formal inclusion in the curriculum. By 1958, even the American Legion had revised its position and encouraged comprehensive anti-Communist instruction. In 1961 it partnered with the National Education Association and the American Bar Association to endorse courses contrasting the Soviet and American systems. With their support, the topic that had been anathema a year earlier became a "fetish" in state legislatures and departments of education. Publishers, eager to capitalize on "the hottest thing around," rushed to exploit the new "anti-communism textbook market." One even (unsuccessfully) recruited New York intellectuals Sidney Hook and James Rorty as authors.<sup>21</sup> A number of districts introduced the special *Democracy versus Communism* (1957) textbook for use in high-school history classes, while standard social studies texts expanded their sections on the Communist world. Treatment described as "superficial and overgeneralized" in 1960 had so substantially improved by 1968 that it gave the impression of "essentially different books."<sup>22</sup>

In 1961, Florida's state legislature mandated that all high school seniors take a six-week AVC course to bolster their knowledge of American government and learn "objective" facts about the Soviet Union, particularly "the dangers of Communism, the ways to fight Communism, the evils of Communism, the fallacies of Communism, and the false doctrines of Communism."<sup>23</sup> Within a year five other states had passed similar laws and thirty-four more made the subject mandatory within existing social studies classes. Numerous writers described these classes in the idiom of the new social studies: presenting Communism as "an intellectual, political, and moral challenge" so that students might "lose their complacency" and get "intellectually aroused, [so that] the answers they reach [will] become and remain meaningful to them." Many advised teachers to "seek materials which will stimulate searching

<sup>21</sup> Sister Rose Colley et al., *Teaching About Communism in Kentucky Schools* (Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Department of Education, 1967), 1; Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 7; James Rorty, "Is Teaching Communism Necessary?" and Richard Rorty, "Second Thoughts on Teaching Communism," *Teachers College Record* 63, no. 7 (April 1962): 559–63; Sidney Hook, "Challenging Study: Challenge of Communism," *New York Times*, 13 October 1963.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to John Colgrove, *Democracy versus Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Institute of Fiscal and Political Education, 1957), the most frequently used books were William J. Miller et al., *The Meaning of Communism* (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett Co., 1963); Rodger Swearingen, *The World of Communism: Answers to the 100 Questions Most Often Asked by American High School Students* (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1961); and J. Edgar Hoover's *Masters of Deceit* (New York: Holt, 1958). Although these remained somewhat one-sided, in all they were much more accurate than previous texts had been. Marvin Herschel Berman, "The Treatment of the Soviet Union and Communism in Selected World History Textbooks, 1920–1970" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1976), 208–209, 215–218.

<sup>23</sup> Public Law (PL) 233.064, *Florida State Statutes*, 1961.

inquiry by the students.” In contrast to earlier, irrational constraints on the subject, they envisioned dynamic teachers “objectively” contrasting Communism with American “virtue” to create strong citizens.<sup>24</sup>

The press dismissed any lingering opposition to AVC instruction as “an unrealistic world view,” signaling a paradigm shift from silence to speech and revitalizing anti-Communist sentiment across the country. However, renewed fervor should not be mistaken for consensus. As one newspaper noted: “planners agree on anti-red view in courses—differ widely on emphasis.” The article explained that while many of the programs’ proponents were “anxious for school students to meet some historical realities of past and present,” others consisted of “fringe people using anti-communism as a means to work in . . . anti-democratic points of view.”<sup>25</sup> Beneath the consensual support for objective anti-Communist instruction smoldered disagreement between moderate, often professional, organizations and ultraconservative patriotic groups. The latter held particular sway in the South.

In Florida, for example, the department of education found itself “caught on a spike” during the 1961 legislative session. Before it could present the legislature with a moderate school bill, with optional methods of implementing AVC and an equal emphasis on American and Soviet governments, a conservative assemblyman introduced a more militant, mandatory version. The measure passed with heavy lobbying by the National Education Program, a right-wing propaganda mill based at Arkansas’s Harding College; and Young Americans for Freedom, the newly formed conservative youth organization.<sup>26</sup> Worried that students would get “the wrong ideas about communism” if it were compared with American democracy—“[especially] Negro pupils”—these groups proposed a strictly anti-Communist propaganda course. It was only through parliamentary procedure that the education lobby secured a comparative class with some degree of professional control.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, if administrators hoped to further moderate the course, they were checked by pressure from ultraconservative groups. In Sarasota,

---

<sup>24</sup>Evans, *Social Studies Wars*, 123, 125; Sidney Hook, “Challenging Study: Challenge of Communism,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1963; American Bar Association, *Democracy Confronts Communism in World Affairs: Suggested Syllabus, Bibliography, and Guides for Teacher Training* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Institute of International Studies, 1965).

<sup>25</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 5–6.

<sup>26</sup>Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 17; Howard Jay Friedman to James O. Powell, 21 August 1961, Education in Florida Subject Files (MS Group 149), University of Florida Archives. For more on both Harding College and the Young Americans for Freedom, see Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

<sup>27</sup>“Teaching Americanism Program Was Dropped,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 February 1962; Fred Cook, “The Ultras,” *The Nation*, 23 June 1962.



Florida, the John Birch Society protested the AVC textbook chosen for the regional high school because it was too “soft on communism.” Rebuffed by the principal, its members started staking out high school bathrooms to collect “information” against him and threatened the editor of the student newspaper.<sup>28</sup> Groups in other Southern states followed suit. Conservative lawmakers in Tennessee ordered all schools to screen the film “Communism on the Map” in conjunction with their classes. Louisiana invited Fred Schwarz’s Anti-Communist Crusade to conduct the six-week training session for its AVC teachers, reasoning that Communism “should be taught as a medical school teaches cancer or tuberculosis—as an aid to its elimination.”<sup>29</sup> Although teachers throughout the South contested the establishment and content of stand-alone AVC courses, persistent pressure from far-right organizations, segregationists, conservative Christians, and rural legislators ensured that the laws stayed in place and the material remained one-sided.

Negative effects on educational capacity and quality were obvious almost immediately. For example, Florida’s legislature required that all students enroll in AVC during their senior year but overlooked the fact that only a fraction of seniors usually took any social studies, and therefore that schools had too few instructors for them. In 1962, Duval County, Florida faced “5000 incoming seniors eligible for the course, but no course [was] developed, nobody [was] trained to teach it and no teacher-training courses [were] available at the state colleges.” Although they spent six weeks studying Marxist-Leninist theory over the summer, a state official lamented, “some of our teachers still don’t know anything about communism.” Few teachers volunteered for the class, and those assigned to it generally “stuck with the book” rather than experiment with potentially controversial methods. As with sex education and other

---

<sup>28</sup>Bruce LeRoy Sandberg, “Content Analysis of State Education Department Guidebooks on Teaching about Communism in Terms of a Theory of Teaching,” (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 1966), 7; Daniel R. Campbell, “Right-Wing Extremists and the Sarasota Schools, 1960–1966,” *Tampa Bay History* 6, no. 1 (1984): 16–26.

<sup>29</sup>Many school boards nationwide showed propaganda films like *Communism on the Map* and *Operation Abolition* of their own volition. Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 64; Richard I. Miller, *Teaching About Communism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 36; Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 25; Le Roi E. Eversull, “The Americanism versus Communism Unit,” unpublished dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1964, 40; Richard James O’Leary, “A Comparison of the Opinions of Lay and Professional Groups Concerning Generalizations and Understandings About Communism That Should Be Examined in High School Classes,” unpublished dissertation, Boston University, 1968, 100.

public safety classes, the shortage of qualified instruction often required large group lectures in the auditorium.<sup>30</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these lectures failed to hold student interest, and learning outcomes were poor. One state assessment in Florida asked students which of the following statements was false:

1. The Communist credo is incompatible with the fundamentals of our American heritage.
2. The Communist Party cannot be regarded as a political party in the usual sense.
3. The Communists stand for the overthrow of the United States Government and for the destruction of the American way of life.
4. It is possible to be at the same time a loyal citizen of this country and a Communist.

Only two-thirds of the respondents chose (4), the “correct” answer, and less than half scored even 70 percent on the test. Further confusion resulted when a reporter discussed Communism with the senior class at Jacksonville’s Robert E. Lee High School. Asked to define the word “Communism,” one boy explained, “Whenever you have a thesis and antithesis you always have a synthesis which is communism.” Another added, “Capitalists, aren’t they the haves, and the proletariat the have-nots?” Several heads nodded until a third boy warned, “That’s how the Communists think.”<sup>31</sup> Students writing about their experiences in Florida’s AVC classes overwhelmingly dismissed them as propagandistic. One only remembers imagining “the citizens of the Soviet Union . . . trudging around Red Square in bedraggled fur hats, mumbling about how there was nothing on supermarket shelves,” while another remarks that AVC “celebrated things like our ability to order items from the Sears catalog.”<sup>32</sup> Their focus on consumerism is somewhat ironic, given administrators’ expressed goal to teach students more than the fact that “we have bathtubs and cars because of our system.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Arveson, “What Is Taught Today on Russia in American Secondary Schools,” *National Association of Secondary Schools Principals Bulletin*, March 1959, XLIII, Part II, 121–136; Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 19. Teacher training workshops continued around the country well into the 1970s meeting with mixed reviews. See Margaret Donovan et al., *Teaching About Communism and the Communist World* (Whitewater, WI: Whitewater Forum, 1963); Donnell B. Portzline, *Teaching About Communism: A Resource Book* (Wheeling, WV: Boyd Press, 1976); Miller, *Teaching About Communism*, 30.

<sup>31</sup>Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 19.

<sup>32</sup>Christine Rosen, *My Fundamental Education: A Memoir of a Divine Girlhood* (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2005), 119; Annabelle Gurwitch, “Worst News of the Year,” *The Nation*, 31 March 2008.

<sup>33</sup>“Teachers Held Red Course Hitch,” *Florida Times-Union*, 25 October 1961.

Communities outside the South were generally more moderate, echoing the language of the new social studies with the claim that “an objective approach to communism would best prepare students for detecting and resisting it.”<sup>34</sup> University High School in Madison, Wisconsin offered the first public school seminar on Russian history in 1958. Michael Petrovich, the University of Wisconsin’s Russian historian, coordinated the class with the high-school principal, and its eleven-week curriculum combined textbook lessons with college-level lectures in history and economics. Students read Russian literature and chose Russian subjects for their term papers.<sup>35</sup> Delaware’s Department of Education encouraged teachers to take trips to the Soviet Embassy and the United Nations, arrange skits about the Berlin Airlift, and debate whether “the American economic system provides greater incentives and higher production than [systems] in which the government allocates almost all economic resources.”<sup>36</sup> A principal in New Hampshire argued that any class had to transcend a simplistic, two-sided approach, noting, “The trouble with even the best of the newly-developed texts for ‘anti-communism courses’ is that they trump every communist ace before it is played . . . the communists are just the bad guys, and we are the good guys.” Another principal declared his staff “unalterably opposed to a separate course in the subject and to making a crusade of anti-communism in the pattern of certain rightist groups.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly, these sentiments, backed by strong teacher unions and professional organizations, were much closer to what the designers of the new social studies had in mind.

However, one should not draw too stark a contrast between these and earlier comments: teaching about Communism soon became a political wedge in Northern states as well. In 1961, the little town of Twin Lakes, Wisconsin instituted an Americanism program to reject state and professional authority in its school. Angry that state-mandated textbooks were insufficiently academic and patriotic, the conservative school board replaced them with nineteenth-century *McGuffey’s Readers* and ordered that all school materials “be scrutinized in order to avoid indoctrination of our children in socialistic or Communistic theories.”<sup>38</sup> At the launch of the Twin Lakes Americanism program, right-wing author Sidney DeLove received a burst of applause when he exhorted,

<sup>34</sup>Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 105–106.

<sup>35</sup>Beth Arveson, “What Is Taught Today,” 121–136.

<sup>36</sup>Delaware Department of Public Instruction, *The Challenge of Our Times: Democracy Faces Communism* (Dover: State of Delaware, 1963), 19–24.

<sup>37</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 7–9; Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 24.

<sup>38</sup>Donald Janson, “Eye ‘Americanism’ Plan After McGuffey Victory,” *Des Moines Sunday Register*, 5 November 1961.

“Let us not have another Pearl Harbor, or talk of the fact that we may be recipients of the first nuclear bomb. Let us deliver the first blow!”<sup>39</sup> Taking Florida as a model, two state legislators used the event to propose similar courses in all schools. Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction dismissed these remarks as “extremist,” but only six months later it required all of the state’s schools to institute a social studies unit to “reinforce instruction in the American heritage [and] teach the basic facts of communism.”<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to gauge how much influence the rally had on the department’s decision, but administrators were clearly attuned to grassroots protest and the threat of a legislative mandate when they issued it. Right-wing pamphleteer Verne Kaub, a prominent voice in the Twin Lakes incident, had already marshaled protests against the state’s *Democracy Versus Communism* textbook and was in contact with the superintendents of both Wisconsin and Michigan during their deliberations.<sup>41</sup>

Grassroots organizations orchestrated similar initiatives elsewhere. In California in 1961, teachers urged the state superintendent to institute a class on Communism as an alternative to Fred Schwarz’s traveling anti-Communist “schools,” which they described as “poorly planned and conducted, [appealing] to the emotions rather than to reason,” and promoting “unjustified attacks on the [public] schools.”<sup>42</sup> When Schwarz stopped in St. Louis the following year, he generated “waves of hysterical women who descended on [a local] school before the first day’s ‘anti-communism sessions’ were even over,” demanding that the principal conduct “anti-communism classes” for the students. In 1963, the Indianapolis school superintendent sponsored Schwarz’s visit and sent copies of his address to every high school in the state.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while there was broad support for moderate classes, one must also recognize the threat of grassroots agitation as one of their sources. Across the country, administrators who had previously avoided Communism for fear of right-wing protest now hurriedly installed classes to preempt it, worried that public interest in the subject would shift curricular decisions to conservative legislators rather than professional educators.

<sup>39</sup>“Patriotism New Issue at Twin Lakes,” *Kenosha News*, 2 November 1961; “Real Issue Comes to Light,” *Racine Journal*, 30 October 1961; Richard C. Kienitz, “US History Stressed at Twin Lakes Rally,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 November 1961.

<sup>40</sup>“What Should We Teach About Communism?” *Newsletter* (Wisconsin: Department of Public Instruction, April 1962).

<sup>41</sup>Verne Kaub to R.K. Scott, 8 September 1958, American Council of Christian Laymen Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

<sup>42</sup>One participant, for example, encouraged his son to gather “evidence” on his history teacher by sneaking a tape recorder into the classroom in a hollow book. Donald W. Robinson, “The Teachers Take a Birching,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 43, no. 5 (February 1962). Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 33.

<sup>43</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 43; Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 25.

Moreover, although Northern states incorporated AVC into existing social studies classes rather than as a stand-alone curriculum, that did not necessarily improve their handling of the subject. Many schools continued to avoid Communism in practice or, as in Levittown, New York, merely brought it up to “instill [children] with a fear of what lurked behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, public pressure ensured that Northern and Southern states implemented almost identical guidelines, textbooks, and reference materials, all of which were very dense and—with the exception of occasional anti-Communist invective—very dry. A typical chart simply contrasted aspects of democracy and Communism: “Respect for the individual/ the individual exists to serve the state; Freedom to worship/atheistic society,” and so on.<sup>45</sup>

Most forays into new teaching methods were the result of individual initiative. For example, more than half the faculty in Pleasantville, Iowa, resigned when members of the school board forbade them to say anything about Communism that was not in the textbook.<sup>46</sup> A Wisconsin teacher, finding that his school had no textbooks on Communism, defied “the wrath of the community” and decided he would simply “dig it out of magazine articles and talk to kids about . . . the implications.”<sup>47</sup> A world history teacher in Pennsylvania first incorporated new social studies techniques into his class when a student repeated his “father’s *ex cathedra* pronouncements [that] socialism is the opposite of democracy or Americanism.” The teacher responded with a thorough discussion of the different types of socialism, and had the students conduct research projects about Marxism, Fabianism, and Utopianism. He was pleased that they left “with a clear conception of what this much-abused term has meant to different men at different times,” but warned the class “that if [one] tries this technique on Dad at dinner he may run into trouble.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>A survey of three hundred sixty-eight Midwestern schools in 1962 found that 57 percent of them listed “Communism” as the primary topic of their “Problems” course. Richard James O’Leary, “A Comparison of the Opinions of Lay and Professional Groups Concerning Generalizations and Understandings About Communism That Should Be Examined in High School Classes,” unpublished dissertation, Boston University, 1968, 87; Geoffrey Mohan, “Growing Pains,” in “Long Island: Our Story, Levittown at Fifty,” *Newsday*, 28 September 1997.

<sup>45</sup>Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 7; “This We Teach: Democracy, The American Heritage, and where appropriate about Communism,” Milwaukee Public Schools, 1963, Elisabeth Holmes Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

<sup>46</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 9.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Ed Gollnick, Tape 3, Side 1, Wisconsin Education Association Council Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

<sup>48</sup>Sherrill Aberg, “Teaching About Socialism in an Introductory History Course,” in *Teaching the New Social Studies in Secondary Schools: An Inductive Approach*, ed. Edwin Fenton (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 201–203.

Teenagers applauded these changes and routinely indicated that they “preferred teachers who built their courses around controversial situations.”<sup>49</sup> In interviews and surveys they expressed curiosity about the Soviet Union and made earnest references to the obligations of citizenship and national security, which required that they learn about the subject in full. By the mid-1960s, those schools that persisted in propaganda-style courses were likely to hear about it. One high school senior in Michigan complained, “In American history, we get an oversimplified point of view. It’s all black and white—America is good and Russia is bad. It just isn’t that way.” “The people who want us to be better teenagers should tell us what Communism is,” another advised.<sup>50</sup> A survey at a high school in Sun Valley, California, found that 90 percent of students considered themselves mature enough to learn about the Soviet Union, and one girl argued that schools must “start teaching the dynamics of Communism . . . not as a haphazard one-semester [course] on the ‘menace’ of its economic theory, but as an integrated program for junior and senior high school students,” continuing from seventh to twelfth grade. A classmate opposed the idea, but only because “[training] a teacher to be objective in the presentation of this subject would be impossible.”<sup>51</sup> Much like their parents, high school students were eager to engage with Cold War debates and controversial material, and they made their interests known. As historian Ronald Evans observes, as early as 1962 “Problems of Democracy” classes—“with [their] focus on . . . totalitarian communism”—suffered from “a tarnished, old-fogey image, met declining enrollments, and never recovered.”<sup>52</sup>

Some communities made criticism of AVC classes an aspect of the curriculum itself. The Lincoln-Sudbury school district in Massachusetts taught “an anti-communism, single-text, indoctrination-type course” until the teacher, Paul Mitchell, grew upset with requests from his students “to explain the difference between their indoctrination and the indoctrination employed by the Soviets.” Determined to improve the course, Mitchell took a leave of absence and enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Chicago. He then traveled to Russia, where he drove over 17,000 miles and took thousands of photographs before returning to the classroom.<sup>53</sup> His revised version of the class pointedly

---

<sup>49</sup>Richard James O’Leary, “A Comparison of the Opinions of Lay and Professional Groups Concerning Generalizations and Understandings About Communism That Should Be Examined in High School Classes,” unpublished dissertation, Boston University, 1968, 80. See also, H. H. Remmers and D. H. Radler, *The American Teenager* (New York: Charter, 1957), 125, 133.

<sup>50</sup>Zelman, *Teaching About Communism*, 35; O’Leary, “Comparison,” 4.

<sup>51</sup>“Campus Section,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 4 November 1961.

<sup>52</sup>Evans, *Social Studies Wars*, 134.

<sup>53</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 22.

incorporated “primary sources *and* secondary sources so [the students] could make up their own minds,” Mitchell remembers, and presented several different slants on Russian history. Lincoln-Sudbury also offered a course on Russian literature and built a Russian section in its high school library. Although Mitchell claims that the class “radicalized *me* more than anything,” his enthusiasm rubbed off on his students, and several self-proclaimed “disciples” became involved in social activism during the 1960s. One senior, Dan Styron, joined Mitchell in Russia the next summer and went on to lead the Young Socialist Alliance of America; later students would become professors of Slavic history and culture.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, in 1961 the John Burroughs School in St. Louis sponsored a weekly Communist discussion group for interested students. The course took as its texts the first three volumes of the *Communism in American Life* series, which the Fund for the Republic, a civil liberties foundation, had just released as the first popular history of American Communism.<sup>55</sup> As an observer recounts, the students reveled in this dense reading, and augmented it with more of their own:

One boy had a good many extreme-right-wing pamphlets before him and he quoted enthusiastically from these or others he had read at home. One girl was very defensive about labor unions, [while] another kept quoting from F.B.I. reports and articles. Two boys were vehemently redefining ‘liberal’ in defense against another girl’s sneering use of the word. . . . They managed to keep reasonably coolheaded as they discussed views of the House Un-American Activities Committee, labor unions, [and] the role of schools in teaching about communism.<sup>56</sup>

If the Burroughs class was exceptional in its level of sophistication, it does illustrate two broader changes in classrooms at the time: first, that students’ passion for controversial subjects and self-consciousness about their learning provided a foundation for more politically engaged lessons in the future; and also, that their class debates increasingly surrendered “consensus” politics to the impending political fissures of the 1960s.

These trends held true for AVC instruction outside of social studies classrooms as well. After launching pilot programs in current

---

<sup>54</sup>Paul Mitchell, interview with author, 20 September 2008. Mitchell’s course produced future Russianists Kevin Platt, now a professor of Slavic studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jehanne Gheith, a professor of Slavic and Eurasian studies at Duke University.

<sup>55</sup>The Communism in American Life Series began with Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957); Robert Iversen, *The Communists and the Schools* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959); and David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

<sup>56</sup>Mallery, *Teaching About Communism*, 37.

affairs during the late 1950s, groups like the Foreign Policy Association encouraged students to establish their own community discussion circles “outside of the formal classroom situation.” Current events clubs quickly sprang up from New Hampshire to Oregon.<sup>57</sup> St. Louis University ran a six-week workshop on Communism for teachers and students in the summer of 1962.<sup>58</sup> The same year, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s World Affairs Association sponsored a high school conference on the Cold War. Using the standard rhetoric of the period, the following discussion topics emphasized “containment” and modernization theory:

- How should the United States attempt to deal with political unrest and social revolutions in the neutralist nations of the underdeveloped world?
- The political and economic stability and independence of the less developed nations depend . . . on their ability to achieve a satisfactory rate of economic growth. To what extent can and should the United States help them?
- What can a teenager do to contribute to the strengthening of democracy?<sup>59</sup>

The next year, the World Affairs Council of Milwaukee, another city-wide club with high school programming, entitled its inaugural conference “Alternatives to Soviet Communism: A Better Understanding.” The keynote speaker was Michael Petrovich, the professor who had helped organize the experimental class in Madison five years earlier. The event drew about two hundred teenage participants and wide media attention. Its organizers declared it a smashing success, and the next year’s conference attracted four hundred and fifty students for a critical discussion of American foreign policy in Africa.<sup>60</sup>

The tenor and topics of these conferences suggest an increasingly activist mindset among high school students, underscored by the failure of the World Affairs Council’s 1965 conference, “Canada: A Time of Decision.” In a critical report that year, an advisor from the Milwaukee Public Schools noted that, “in contrast to school response to the 1963 program, ‘Alternatives to Communism’ . . . the topic of the Institute

<sup>57</sup>Memorandum, 8 May 1957; Manuscript, n.d.; Rex Putnam, Oregon Supt. Of Public Instruction, “School Guide: Great Decisions, 1957,” FPA Records.

<sup>58</sup>Miller, *Teaching About Communism*, 158.

<sup>59</sup>Conference program, 5 April 1962, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institute of World Affairs Records, 1952–1994, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archival Collection.

<sup>60</sup>Conference program, 27 April 1963, World Affairs Council of Milwaukee Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Hereafter cited as WACM Records.



did not appeal to the students.” The 1966 conference tried to re-attract those initially drawn to discussions of Communism with a panel of Peace Corps volunteers and a series of controversial prompts for participants to discuss:

- Rich nations can afford to talk about honesty and justice; poor nations cannot . . .
- It’s much worse for the rich to steal from the poor than for the poor to steal from the rich . . .
- First comes food, then comes right and wrong . . .
- No amount of political freedom will satisfy people who are hungry.<sup>61</sup>

Again, the tone and format of the third conference signal a sharp departure from the type of questions asked just two years earlier and suggest students’ ability to influence the program’s content. A number of other extracurricular activities followed the same pattern: model United Nations, pen pals, and the People-to-People exchange program were all implemented or expanded during this period to teach global citizenship and reinforce “free world” solidarity, but in the process each further eroded the binary, Cold War worldview from which they derived.<sup>62</sup>

Just as the new social studies started to gain currency, a second wave of reform called into question the Cold War rhetoric at its heart. By 1968, some outspoken teenagers were taking up campaigns previously confined to university campuses—student-led movements for peace, civil rights, and free speech that chafed against authority and social convention. They decried the high school as a mass-producer of petty conformists, the fabricator of a “manufactured consensus” that sanctified both consumerism and, in its support of military deterrence, the threat of nuclear holocaust. In the words of author Paul Goodman, many young people felt as if they were “growing up absurd.” In this atmosphere the expertly designed projects of the new social studies, so recently considered innovative, were dismissed as hypocritical or irrelevant, “stiffly academic and unresponsive to the personal and ‘cultural’

---

<sup>61</sup>Arthur Rumpf to Ralph Rosenbaum, 10 May 1965. “An Invitation to Teachers and Students of Social Studies,” December 1966, WACM Records. See also, Jonathan Zimmerman, *Innocents Abroad: American Teachers in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 198–205.

<sup>62</sup>Marjorie Rubin, “Old Activity, New Twist,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1962; David Mallery, *High School Students Speak Out* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 91–92; and Wall, *Inventing the American Way*, 258–70. See also, Glenn Wesley Leppert, “Dwight D. Eisenhower and People-to-People as an Experiment in Personal Diplomacy: A Missing Element for Understanding Eisenhower’s Second Term as President,” unpublished dissertation, Kansas State University, 2003.

needs of the students.”<sup>63</sup> The program’s methods remained popular, but its material simply did not reflect the realities that students wanted to learn. It failed because its proponents proved inflexible in the face of social change and only slowly realized that it was not a Cold but a culture war in which they were engaged.

By the 1970s, few states retained specific units or classes for AVC. The subject of Communism was apt to come up not only in discussions of current events but in any number of contexts, such as a discussion of the Peloponnesian War as a conflict between free and totalitarian societies. Freed from catechismal strictures, these discussions sometimes led to questions like, “How free are Americans, really?”<sup>64</sup> Even some of Florida’s teachers began to openly dispute the value of anti-Communist instruction. Eleanor Kenyon, a teacher in Orlando, complained that AVC “was the most ridiculous course I could ever imagine,” and so took a critical approach, exclaiming, “I taught them how to think!” Jessie Heasley, another social studies teacher, grumbled that the course was “a reaction to McCarthyism and all that garbage—the John Birch Society, etc.—[but] that was not why *I* taught.”<sup>65</sup> A teacher in a third Orlando high school went so far as to present the auditorium with slides on Russian history and culture, but was quickly censured. Mandatory courses lingered in Florida and Louisiana until the Cold War ended in 1991—sustained more by anti-Castro sentiment than hostility to Russia or fear of subversives—but by that time were painfully anachronistic. Elsewhere they had long since fallen victim to teacher and student criticism.

AVC was not the primary cause of political engagement in the 1960s. Even within high schools it was far less controversial than protests over civil rights, free speech, dress codes, or the war in Vietnam. However, as the apotheosis of Cold War consensus it was one of the earliest issues to snag and unravel the nation’s social fabric. AVC—and the new social studies in general—promised even portions of rationalism and nationalism, ideals that its designers considered mutually reinforcing in a robust democracy. However, when applied to controversial topics, these ideals often proved oppositional and led to contention and dissent at the local level. On one side parents and patriotic groups saw AVC as an opportunity to reinforce the evils of Communism, but by demanding strict surveillance and legislative control over complex, potentially subversive teaching methods, they weakened its claims to

---

<sup>63</sup>Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform*, 118; Evans, *Social Studies Wars*, 134; Jessens, *Making Sense of Social Studies*, 143.

<sup>64</sup>William K. Stevens, “The Social Studies: A Revolution Is On,” *New York Times*, 30 April 1972.

<sup>65</sup>Riley and Kysilka, “Florida’s ‘Americanism versus Communism,’” 27–40.

objectivity. On the other, teachers and students, invigorated by the intellectual rigor and freedom of the new social studies reform, overshot its staid assumptions about American superiority.

As historian Edward Purcell notes, the irony of consensus politics was that “the angry attacks of [student] dissenters” in the 1960s derived from “a real belief in and commitment to the very ideals they had been brought up as Americans to believe in.” In many classrooms, the dogmatic aspects of anti-Communist instruction were undermined by the goal that students simultaneously learn “habits of examining information critically and impartially, [and listening] with an open mind to opinions from all sides.” When the ideals of the new social studies were “juxtaposed to . . . reality, the existent [curriculum] appeared sadly lacking,” provoking students to question the methods, message, and very structure of AVC classes.<sup>66</sup> It is telling that as many of them went on to join radical groups of the New Left, they only slightly abridged the slogan of an old AVC textbook: “Do not permit Communists . . . to take over the groups to which you belong. Be an active member and citizen. Organize for America. Make your voice heard.”<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup>Conference program, 5–7 April 1962, UW-M Institute of World Affairs Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archival Collections; Edward A. Purcell Jr. *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973), 269–271.

<sup>67</sup>Swearingen, *The World of Communism*, 244.