

Alan Singer: Now Is the Time to Teach Democracy (2002)

At nine o'clock in the morning on September 11, I was visiting student teachers at a junior high school in Queens, New York. We first learned of events at the World Trade Center when one of the teachers received a cell phone call from his sister. She was sobbing because her husband worked on a top floor in one of the towers and she feared he was dead. I have spent the last few months meeting with teachers, teacher education students, secondary school students, and community groups in the New York metropolitan area trying to make sense of the events of that day and the United States response. In the numerous discussions that have resulted from these meetings, there has been much disagreement and sometimes heated arguments. But there has always been a basic respect for participants underlying our discourse. That is why I was deeply distressed to read the commentary in *Education Week* by Diane Ravitch (17 October 2001). It was later reprinted in *History Matters!* (November 2001), the newsletter of the National Council for History Education, and distributed by the Organization of American Historians to its membership. I believe Ravitch's claims are unfounded, her tone is dismissive, and her positions frightening. The title of her essay is a misnomer. I do not believe she understands the meaning of democracy.

In the essay, Diane Ravitch declares that "we must not teach children to tolerate those who hijack commercial jetliners and kill innocent victims. We must not teach children to tolerate fanaticism, be it political or religious." But she never identifies anyone who is doing this. Why not? Because no one is. This is an ad hominem attack in an effort to silence people who are protesting against the bombing of Afghanistan under the banner "Our Grief is not a Call for War."

Ravitch describes the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon as "mass murders" which equates them with the Holocaust and other acts of genocide. Yes, the attack was horrific. Any attack on a civilian target is horrific, whether it is in New York City or Kabul. But the events of September 11 do not compare in magnitude with a num-

ber of actions taken by the United States since the end of World War II including the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the systematic destruction of Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan. Under Ravitch's criteria, does America commit mass murders? Or does it only count when it is done by someone else?

I was especially disturbed by Ravitch's use of the events of September 11 in her ongoing campaign against multicultural education. She claims that "multiculturalism, as it is taught in the United States, is dangerous for a democratic, multiethnic society because it encourages people 'to think of themselves not as individuals, but primarily in terms of their membership in groups.'" In addition, she believes that "multicultural education teaches cultural relativism because it implies that no group may make a judgment on any other." Once again, Ravitch makes no citations.

First, multicultural education does not encourage people to define themselves as members of ethnic groups, but affirms that they do, in fact, identify that way and that race, language, religion, and ethnicity play significant roles in American society. Unlike Diane Ravitch, the motto "E pluribus unum" does not deny the existence or value of the pluribus. Second, I know of no self-defined multiculturalist who rejects making judgments about deeds such as the attacks on September 11. What we reject is making judgments about groups of people. That is why we challenge racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and gender-bias and support respect for diversity. Unlike Diane Ravitch, George W. Bush, and Osama bin Laden, we do not believe there is a universal truth that has been granted only to us. So we try to be more tentative and thoughtful before we condemn those who disagree with us.

Ravitch, who identifies herself as a historian, professes to "hear expressions of cultural relativism when avant-garde thinkers tell us that we must try to understand why the terrorists chose to kill thousands of innocent people, and that we must try to understand why others in the world hate America." But her problem is not with avant-garde thinkers; it is with citizens, both liberals and conservatives, committed to the value of democratic dialogue and with historians who see their task as one of explanation. Explaining and justifying an event are not the same thing! For example, according to a 1995 Rand Institute publication, "(t)he Islamic world feels itself under siege from the West in

numerous vital political, military, cultural, social, and economic realms. This feeling of siege has several sources: the perception of victimization and Western onslaught based on historical and psychological grounds . . . ‘objective’ internal pressures generated by the process of modernization and related social and economic tensions . . . and conscious, direct pressure from the West in the policy arena.”¹ Is this policy analysis an example of cultural relativism?

As a historian and teacher, I encourage students to question, to develop criteria for evaluation, and to demand to see evidence before they reach a conclusion about events in the past and present. Working with public school teachers and teacher educators, I distributed a simple lesson that a number of the teachers used in their classes to evaluate the events of September 11 and the United States response. We divided the front board into four columns: what we know, what we need to know, how we feel about what happened, and what we think should happen next. Working individually, in groups, or as a full class, students filled in the columns and then discussed what they had written. Our goals were to help students distinguish between fact and opinion, substantiated information and rumor, and emotion and reason. We challenged stereotypes and stressed the difference between Islam—a religion of over a billion believers, many of whom live in the United States—and the actions of one organized group or a few individuals. We also laid the basis for a long term investigation of why the attack took place, so students could analyze underlying and immediate causes, understand why many people in other countries believe they have been injured by the United States and its allies, and participate in a debate over United States policy decisions. Many of the teachers are also having students use the Internet to collect newspaper articles from around the world about the attack and the United States response. Comparing reports helps students see multiple perspectives that may be overlooked by local media.

As a United States citizen I am proud to stand with Abraham Lincoln, who in 1847 risked his political career by defying a President who misled the American people in order to launch an imperialist

venture against a neighboring country. I stand with Congressional Representative Jeannette Rankin and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan who resisted pressure to support World War I and U.S. involvement in a “commercial war.” I stand with Senator Wayne Morse who denounced the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and warned “that within the next century, future generations will look with dismay and great disappointment upon a Congress which is now about to make such a historic mistake.” I stand with Congressional Representative Barbara Lee, who cast the only dissenting vote on 14 September 2001. Lee begged her colleagues not to rush to judgment, arguing “Far too many innocent people have already died. Our country is in mourning. If we rush to launch a counter-attack, we run too great a risk that women, children, and other non-combatants will be caught in the crossfire. Nor can we let our justified anger over these outrageous acts by vicious murderers inflame prejudice against all Arab Americans, Muslims, Southeast Asians, or any other people because of their race, religion, or ethnicity.”

I believe the United States government and the American people must concern themselves with a global economic system that has produced gross international inequalities. It is a system, maintained by United States military power, that permits one nation, with a mere five percent of the world’s people, to consume thirty five percent of its resources. It is the same system that consigns millions of people to the refugee camps, battered cities and desiccated villages and fields of the Middle East, and produces waves of young people with little hope of advancement and very little to lose. I call for the teaching of democracy, social justice, and a world where people can live in peace. If this be moral relativism, I plead guilty.

Alan Singer, a former New York City high school teacher, is a historian and teacher educator at Hofstra University. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

¹ Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser, *A Sense of Siege, The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 81.