Texting: a window into representing our learners' social worlds

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Abstract

Appealing to texting and wider sociological literature, this paper illuminates the hitherto unexamined social theory implicit in current New Zealand social studies curricula. A restrictive view of the social world is revealed; society is represented as static, ordered and predictable. This social theory contrasts starkly with the society of our learners' experience, one that is rapidly changing, and marked by flux, fluidity and indeterminacy. I urge that the social theory of New Zealand social studies curricula becomes the subject of rigorous, sustained and open debate, in order that our rising generations are permitted to think critically about, and respond creatively to, society as it is and might be.

Texting as a context for learning in social studies

For many teachers, texting may seem the scourge of classroom management and a conduit for anti-social behaviour – hardly the stuff of meaningful social studies learning. I suggest that texting may, in fact, be a highly appropriate learning context because of the insights it may provide into the nature and operation of contemporary society. I emphasise that this paper is not an argument for the prescription of texting as a learning context. The case study is, however, intended as both a window into 'society', and as a metaphor for the necessity of examining taken-for-granted assumptions.

Social studies is a subject within the social sciences learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum: draft for consultation* (MOE, 2006). The current learning area statement encapsulates two perennial and broad goals of social studies, and arguably education, which are to enable learners to (a) understand more about the social world and (b) consider their effective participation as citizens (Barr et al., 1997; Barr, 1998):

> The social sciences learning area is about how people participate in society and how society operates. It has significance for people in their everyday interactions as citizens and members of communities in New Zealand and the world. Through the social sciences, students engage critically with societal issues. They gain knowledge, skills and experience that help them to understand, participate in, and contribute to communities in which they live and work (MOE, 2006, p.22)

Though this statement may appear settled, social studies is a highly contentious subject. This is largely because it seeks to represent a social world imbued with disagreement. Social studies tackles vexing questions of contemporary social issues, demands critical thinking about the nature and operation of communities, and encourages considered engagement in society. Each of these purposes is enmeshed in controversy and requires the negotiation of myriad perceptions of, and aspirations for, society. The enormous, yet important, challenges of this are apparent when one considers the choices teachers might make in representing, for instance, the deaths of two teenage girls this year, who were killed when a car sped through an out-of-control party in Christchurch[1]. Numbers at the party had swelled to the hundreds, largely due to mass-texting. Subsequently, police and principals were urging teenagers to avoid vigils and memorials being organised through the very same mechanism. How, then, might teachers represent effective citizenry in relation to the communicative practice and socio-cultural phenomenon of texting?

In a de-contextualised, objectives-led curriculum such as social studies in the draft New Zealand curriculum[2] (*SSiNZC*), one could hardly expect texting to be specifically mentioned. But, at face value, *SSiNZC* may be read so as to permit a study of texting. First, texting meets the educational principle of

connecting learning contexts to the lives of students (MOE, 2006, p.9) – texting is clearly engaging learners and is part of their experienced social world. Texting is also a marker of the "constantly changing world", noted in the foreword (ibid, p.3), for which social studies is expected to prepare learners. In a very short space of time, the portability and affordability of cell phones have become stimuli for the phenomenal growth of texting in New Zealand, especially among youth. This mirrors an international trend, where young people are the "first major social group that are constantly networked through wireless communications" (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey, 2004, p.193). Second, the phenomena of texting appears concordant with social studies achievement objectives such as: students understand that "formal and informal groups make decisions that impact on communities", "events have causes and effects", or "[youth] cultures adapt and change, and this has consequences for society". Third, "through the social sciences, students [are to] engage critically with social issues" (MOE, 2006, p.22). A number of sociologists have highlighted dilemmas texting poses for the individual and society, expressing the type of scepticism one might have, for example, about the 'citizenry' of text voting in *New Zealand Idol*. McGuigan (2005) in particular, cautions that "from a sociological point of view, actual and potential social uses across the generations and in different circumstances of life are more important topics for discussion than sheer technological capability and over-hyped marketing gimmicks" (p.56). Far from dismissing the mobile phone and texting as trivial, McGuigan argues that critical analysis at both the micro and macro levels of social change is urgent.

However, in a vast and rapidly changing social world, what possible justification could there be for *foregrounding* learning about such a commonplace, and arguably peripheral, societal phenomenon as a context for social studies learning? In this paper, I argue that texting is the very stuff of social studies – enabling learners to understand more about their social world. As my argument unfolds, the reader will note that, ultimately, this knowledge "challenge[s] the basis of assumptions and perceptions" (MOE, 2006, p.11) about society proffered by *SSiNZC*. Although much research is market-led, texting is prompting interest in the academic world, especially among sociologists. A number of very recent publications have looked to a sociology of the mobile phone and texting (for example: Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Geser, 2003; Castells et al., 2004; McGuigan, 2005) because, though seemingly ordinary, texting may provide considerable insight into the nature of society and social change. Furthermore, Castells et al. take the view that texting should not simply be viewed as a technological determinant of social change, but that its most active participants may be seen as forming communities and societies *in and of themselves*: "this technology does not determine society: it is society" (Castells et al., 2004, p.238). Texting communities, it is argued, possess a social structure in "the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture" (Castells, 2004, p.3). Thus, these sociologists would argue that this dimension of learners' "everyday interactions" (MOE, 2006, p.22) may be an important window into 'society' – a concept central to social studies.

Through an LCD screen: windows into our learners' social world

If learners were to study texting communities, what might they notice? In this section I make two central, inter-connected observations about their nature and evolution (although, understandably, there is more to say about texting than can be canvassed here). Firstly, texting communities may be characterised as boundary-less environments. The emancipation from temporal and geographic location afforded by the a-synchronistic and nomadic nature of texting means, for example, that our learners might be 'here' in our social studies classes, but also 'everywhere'.[3] Further, the ability to connect to others in multiple ways through texting's interface with other wireless communications characterises texting communities as hybrid, overlapping, highly dynamic, and open structures, capable of limitless expansion (Castells, 2000, 2004; Castells et al., 2004). Castells argues that micro-electronic and communications technologies have, in part, enabled societies to be networked in a non-vertical, non-hierarchical and centre-less manner. For example, where once communication in a 'telephone tree' followed a pre-organised top-down pattern, texting enables

capillary-like and un-coordinated communication. However, this is not to say that texting communities are devoid of dimensions. Geser (2004) argues, for instance, that the predominant communication flow of texting is still two-way. What sociologists are pointing to, however, are the complexities of texting social systems, marked by increased "intersystemic permeabilities, blendings and interpenetrations" (ibid, p.41). Thus, it is exceedingly difficult to discern where one texting community ends and another begins, underscoring the significant difficulties of taxonomising societies. It turns out, therefore, that texting communities may simply not be able to be understood as a single entity, or even as a series of bounded entities. Further, any notion that identity has categories is confounded by a texting environment; parties organised by mass-texting, for example, challenge an 'invited/gatecrasher' binary. The ability to be anonymous or to adopt persona in 'masked messaging',[4] as another example, highlights the instability of identity categories such as gender and culture. Even the notion of 'youth culture', oft used in relation to texting, is called into question. Castells et al. (2004) argue that "it is an open question, probably varying in each society, whether there is a shared youth culture, or series of youth cultures" (p.158).

My second observation about texting communities is the unpredictable, highly changeable, and contingent nature of their evolution. Far from being orchestrated, texting practices are not entirely controllable, nor are the exact outcomes certain. As a result, it is exceedingly difficult to reduce these practices to predictive rules. Geser (2004) observes that mobile phones are able to "facilitate swiftly constituted ad hoc gatherings with highly variable composition, so that social system structures can be flexibly adapted to rapidly changing situational conditions" (p.40). Texting leads us to contemplate ephemeral communities, the existence of which spans less than decades, weeks or even days. As evidenced in the 2005 Cronulla race riots,[5] texting enables rapid, convergent social co-operation:

> One of the most important communicative practices we have observed is the emergence of unplanned, largely spontaneous communities of practice in instant time, by transforming an initiative to do something together in a message that is responded to from multiple sources by convergent wills to share the practice. (Castells, 2004, p.240)

Thus, texting creates an instant community of practice from what previously had been merely individuals of a like mind. Rheingold's (2002) book, *Smart Mobs*, cites a number of international instances where "swarming behaviour" or "massive outbreaks of co-operation" have occurred seemingly out of nowhere.[6] Though McGuigan (2005) argues that mass demonstrations, for instance, are hardly new phenomena, Rheingold draws attention to the emergent nature of texting communities,[7] the speed of their feedback loops contributing to the difficulty of predicting such phenomena. Social change, therefore, in the context of texting communities, does not proceed in linear, 'cause and effect' terms. Castells (2000, 2004) argues that social change in dissipative, networked societies is characterised by 'self-reconfiguration', that is, a capacity for self-generation, rather than following some pre-determined pattern of social change. Their flexibility, scalability and survivability are enhanced because, he posits, network societies consist of both flows of information and nodes that process this information. Importantly, in his view, nodes may be added or deleted, depending on their utility to the network, without the network collapsing. Castells provides some notable parallel examples of texting networks, suggesting that this conception of social change may account for the growth of contemporary societal movements: Al-Qaeda and its affiliated organisations, the 'anti-globalisation' movement's global/local networks, and the interconnection of both these networks with media networks (2004, p.35).

Sociological insights into the fluidity of contemporary society

The reader may have one of two responses to these observations about texting: either to suggest that texting communities are not examples of societies (in which case, so much the worse for the realities of experience), or to dismiss the example as trite (in which case, so much the worse for our learners). In countering particularly the latter view, I argue in this section that texting communities typify a crucial sociological

intuition about contemporary society – that it is *fluid*. I draw attention to a coalescence of social theories, including those related to texting, around this conception of societal fluidity. The authors I refer to come from widely differing sociological perspectives, yet a unity lies in their attempt to account for the fact that our social world is vast and rapidly changing. The concept of fluidity is intended to capture, for the purposes of this paper, three aspects of contemporary society: (a) its boundary-less nature, (b) the floating and suffused nature of identity, and (c) a heightened sense of uncertainty in social change. This is by no means an original conception; Urry (2000, p.27) notes that many writers have developed fluid metaphors for society, such as "sea, river, flux, waves and liquidity (Bachelard, 1983) while others have elaborated notions of the vagabond, the nomad, the pilgrim, the motel (Braidotti, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)", himself adding a metaphor of 'mobilities'.[8] Though these authors have reached for various metaphors to illuminate distinctive traits of our changing, interdependent and globalised social world, I do not venture to reconcile their social theories or to manufacture an all-embracing metaphor – the very existence of multiple metaphors underscores the impossibility of this task. Furthermore, it is notable that 'fluidity' is mirrored in the conceptual elasticity of these sociologists' work; previously confident meta-narratives of society's dimensions having been reformed as more buoyant, contingent social theories. None, however, have suggested that society is utterly formless or completely unknowable in the way that it changes – there are, in the view of each, at least provisional ways of making sense of society's organisation and operation.

What does this fluidity look like to our learners? Likely, in their day-to-day lives, the following is unconsciously familiar. Firstly, they are presented with myriad choices of those with whom they might interact, society having expanded to the extent that relationships may now, instantly, span global terrains. When one considers our learners visiting Internet chat rooms or holding real-time conversations in ICQ, it is clear that previously held notions of time and space have undergone radical transformation.[9] Whilst locally conceived time still exists, Castells (2000) contends that a different type of temporality has been produced in our networked society – a "forever universe [where] linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered" (pp.463-464). In using their EFTPOS cards, for instance, our learners might be conceived as playing in a

> global casino [where] for the first time in history, a unified global capital market, *working in real time*, has emerged…favored by deregulation, disintermediation, the opening of domestic financial markets, powerful computer programs [in which] skilful financial analysts/computer wizards, sitting at global nodes of a selective telecommunications network, play games, literally, with billions of dollars (ibid, p.465).

Furthermore, the disconnection of social relations from their local context has resulted in innumerable communities that learners might not only learn about, but also participate in. No longer in social studies classes need we be confined to such traditional, territorial examples of society as the kibbutz, village life in Samoa, or the Bedouin. As Lash (1995) observes, today's communities may be widely stretched over time and imagined, abstract space, and be open to constant re-invention. Borrowing from Bourdieu's notion of 'field', he argues that communities of social actors, "as much producers of a cultural product as consumers" (ibid, p.161) may be drawn together through aesthetics. Perhaps to our surprise as social studies teachers, this view positions All Black fans, hip-hop devotees, and the ephemeral inhabitants social-networking sites such as Bebo and MySpace (to which groups, and many learners already belong) as legitimate communities for study.[10] Yet the identification of these may be problematic. Bauman (1992) has argued that contemporary communities are so boundary-less that "all order that can be found is a local, emergent and transitory phenomenon" (p.189). In his view, societies are so complex that they appear as a "space of chaos and chronic *indeterminacy*, a territory subject to rival and contradictory meaning-bestowing claims and hence perpetually *ambivalent*" (ibid, p.193).

Notions of identity are also being re-thought by sociologists. High modernity, argues Giddens (1991), "confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same

time offers little help as to which options should be selected" (p.80). In a culture of individualism and consumption, 'life-style choices' and 'life-politics' connote communities that our learners might 'attend'[11] and identities they might select. Our learners, in their everyday routines and choices, are making decisions "not only how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which the individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of identity, its making and remaking" (ibid, p.81). This selection process may not, of course, be conscious; Giddens argues that one of the characteristics of modern society is the way in which its institutions have become suffused into our identity. "Abstract systems [such as marketing, or Giddens' example of educational psychology] become centrally involved not only in the institutional order of modernity but also in the formation and continuity of self" (ibid, p.33). In understanding this unconscious nature of identity, Lash (1995) suggests Bourdieu's schema of 'habitus' might be instructive because notions of taste, orientations, and habits of un-thought are more supple and less fixed than cognitive categories of identity. Conceptions of identity as floating are by no means viewed in universally positive terms. Bauman (2000) argues that the constant fluidity of identity is generating unprecedented anxiety and insecurity, fuelled by a culture in which instant gratification is dressed up as rational choice. As a result, he argues that we are increasingly drawn to "empty" societies, such as "cloakroom communities" – mercurial, ephemeral and precarious communal unities centred on events and spectacles that break the monotony of life – or "sanitised" spaces, devoid of meaning and concealed from the complexities of life, such as the shopping mall, the created fortresses of "gated" communities, and theme parks.

An escape from such a bleak outlook may be offered through what Beck, Giddens and Lash (1995) argue is the "heightened reflexivity"[12] of society, characterised by the increased tendency of society to remove sources of insecurity by acting on itself; rather than being rule following, society is conceived as rule altering. It is argued that our ability to understand and concomitantly critique societal mechanisms creates "the possibility of a creative (self-)destruction for an entire epoch: that of industrial society. The 'subject' of this creative destruction is not the revolution, but the victory of Western modernization" (Beck, 1995, p.2): that is; the victories of capitalism. Societal change is not, argues Beck, always born of crisis, pain or collapse, nor do traditional forums of political activity always mediate societal change. Thus societal evolution is re-conceptualised; the notion of a planned and predictable society rejected. The new community, argues Lash (1995), is characterised by "groundless ground" marked not just by "heightened reflexivity but at the same time its opposite in the substantial intensification of contingency" (p.168).[13] Not all would accept the notion of reflexivity; Bauman (2000) argues that human capacity to learn from experience is not at all guaranteed. In part, he argues, this is due to the complexity of society – "these days patterns and configurations [of human behaviour] are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments" (p.7). And, in part, because he questions the degree of agency we possess in a 'liquid modernity' – "all already painted visions of a made-to-measure world feel unpalatable, and those not yet painted are *a priori* suspect. We now travel without an idea of destination to guide us, neither looking for a good society nor quite sure what in the society we inhabit makes us listless and eager to run" (ibid, p.134). In understanding social change we may be, Bauman would suggest, floating on a sea of uncertainty; echoed by Giddens:

> We live in a world today which the leading figures of the Enlightenment, whose work was at the origins of social science today, did not anticipate. Such thinkers believed, quite reasonably, that the more we get to know about the world, as collective humanity, the more we can control and direct it to our own purposes…The connections between the development of human knowledge and human self-understanding have proved more complex than such a view suggests…On the one side, we can easily discern many new opportunities that potentially free us from the limitations of the past. On the other, almost everywhere, we see the possibility of catastrophe. And in many instances it is difficult to say with any degree of surety in which direction things will move (Giddens, 1995, p.184).

In sum, notions of a stable society, of fixed identities, of determinant rules of society, and of enacting social change for the betterment of humankind are not givens of our social world. Nor, argues Giddens is uncertainty a new phenomenon; rather, sociologists are becoming aware of new and emerging sources of indeterminacy. Though this endeavour is problematic, because "the more we try to colonise the future, the more it is likely to spring surprises on us" (p.59), contemporary sociologists are engaging with doubt and uncertainty as conditions critical to an understanding of the nature and evolution of society. Thus, a conception of society as fluid seems apt for our times. Granted, such a representation raises questions, dilemmas and the need for debate. Granted, this ought not to be the last word on the nature and operation of society. 'Fluidity' is, however, a potent metaphor for possibility. It does not suggest complete indeterminacy or randomness in our society, rather that there *are* things to be understood, however fleeting or provisional.

Engaging with fluidity: *SSiNZC* as a guide to our social world?

The extent to which our learners and sociologists are absorbing a conception of society as fluid compels social studies educators to engage with this notion. But if social studies educators are to do so, what signals within *SSiNZC* might prompt teachers to conceive society in these terms? Or in any frame of thinking, for that matter? Disappointingly, though the curriculum notes that we "in a world where continual change is the norm" (MOE, 2006, p.3), dimensions of society and social change are not elucidated. Though 'society' marches confidently through the curriculum, it is not defined, nor is its contested nature revealed, and neither is the curriculum's social theory explicated.

'Society' has been used ubiquitously in every New Zealand social studies syllabus, curriculum and support material since the subject was first recommended for the post-primary school curriculum (DOE, 1943)[14]. However, in each and every curriculum statement 'society' has remained inert and undefined, its taken-for-granted meaning remarkable given the ambiguities of our social world. Notably, though the precursor to *SSiNZC* (MOE, 1997) offered an extensive glossary of terms, it did not define 'society'. In sixty years of attempting to delimit the social realm, Sinnema (2004) has been the only New Zealand social studies academic who has explored the meaning of society, appending a list of definitions to a report considering naming options for the learning area. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of her report to identify predominant or prevailing definitions of society in New Zealand social studies documents. 'Society', therefore, has been presented in conclusory terms – as if debate about its meaning has been resolved. Yet, respectable arguments have been made that society is an inescapably contestable concept. From a sociological standpoint, Urry (2000) writes that:

> …it is actually unclear just what is meant by the term 'society'. Although there is something 'more' in social life than 'individual men and women and their families', exactly what this surplus amounts to is not obvious. Most sociologists would not agree on the nature of this surplus. (p.5)

… to the extent that "one cannot possibly speak of a central, common and external scientific object, around which a social theory can constitute itself as a unified concept" (Urry, cited in Albertsen & Diken, 2003, p.1). This view is reminiscent of several philosophic arguments. Wittgenstein (1953), for example, argued that some concepts such as 'games' have no necessary and/or sufficient conditions; similarly, we all think we know society when we see it and we all seem to exist in one, but attempts at definition are futile. Resonating with this, Gallie (1956) has argued that there are some "concepts which are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper use on the part of their users" (p.169). The contested nature of 'society' can also be argued as having to do with the fluidity of language. For instance, in Derrida's view there can be no ultimate meaning within language; words, terms, and concepts are constantly shifting (Sarup, 1993). Another, psychological, line of argument (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000) posits that concepts such as society are contested because of the nature of human perception; that we are compelled to focus on, pay attention to, foreground or background, particular aspects

of society. In sum, one cannot assume that when New Zealand social studies teachers and learners alike speak of 'society', they are referring to the same conception.

Compounding this issue, and despite the social studies curriculum documents of the 1990s having been held up to considerable scrutiny, the social theory of each has remained largely unexamined. One could hardly expect social studies curricula to be an all-you-need-to-know guide to the nature and operation of our social world. However, even in the wider New Zealand social studies literature, the nature and operation of society appear quietly taken for granted. By comparison, 'citizenship' has received considerable attention, reflecting significant international debate over the representation of this concept in societal education (see, for example: Gilbert, 1995; Arthur, Davison & Stow, 2000; Beals, 2002: Scott & Lawson, 2002; Mutch, 2005; White & Openshaw, 2005). It seems that New Zealand social studies curriculum development has a sociological 'blind spot'. Though a number of authors have commented on social studies' philosophic underpinnings (for example, Beals, 2002; Clark, 2004; Openshaw 2004), not since the publication of *Social Studies in Perspective: a sociological view* (Willmott, 1978) have New Zealand social studies curricula been subjected to sociological analyses. In addition, extensive political and ideological controversies that surrounded the 1990s development of social studies curricula obfuscated what, at heart, are polarised conceptions of society because the *assumptions* about our social world implicit in each of the divergent ideologies was not a matter of discussion. Amongst social studies authors, attention was instead predominantly focussed on the political milieu and broader ideological landscape (for example, Mutch, 1998; Hunter & Keown, 2001; Sullivan, 2002). Furthermore, it appears that examining social studies' social theory has not been a priority for the Ministry of Education. The recent evaluation of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 1993), culminating in the *Curriculum Stocktake Report to the Minister of Education* (MOE, September 2002), was not intended to specifically address the curriculum's social theory, though inferences might be made as to the authors' views in the reports that pertained to social studies.

In sum, what we have perennially been presented with in New Zealand social studies curriculum statements is simply an assertion that would be vastly improved by supporting argument, that is, a social theory or theories. The net result has been that *SSiNZC* offers little indication of its ontological and epistemological foundations – what there is to know about society, what is important to know, and how we come to understand this.

Another world: the implicit social theory of *SSiNZC*

Though *SSiNZC* does not make its assumptions about society explicit, to say that it does not represent any conception of society would be erroneous. At least an inkling of the way it frames society can be gleaned from the learning area statement and achievement objectives, along with the philosophic tenets the framing is drawn from. In this section I analyse the discourses at work in the curriculum and, in the absence of an explicitly stated social theory, examine *SSiNZC*'s proto-theory. The curriculum presents what I have coined, a highly compositional and umpirical sense of the social world. Though I address them separately, I stress their inter-relatedness, particularly in terms of the certainty that this proto-theory exudes – eschewing messiness, doubt, or contingency in describing our social world and accounting for social change. Critically, when one compares the insights about our social world arrived at through examining texting communities with those proffered by *SSiNZC*'s proto-theory, two quite different conceptions of society emerge.

If the reader imagines, for a moment, a still-life painting hanging in a gallery, a sense of what I mean by the *compositional* nature of *SSiNZC*'s implicit social theory may be conveyed. This proto-theory is, firstly, concerned with a society that is objectively knowable, as if the gallery attendee can find the painter's true intent. The language of *SSiNZC* implies that there can be ultimate, transcendent knowledge of societal phenomena, relationships between them, and even interpretations and perceptions of society. In part, this commitment to universals is reinforced by the confident use of the verb stem 'students understand that' throughout the curriculum which gives the impression of an ultimate end to learning; for instance, that

learners may attain the keys to understanding that "people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons, and this has consequences for people" (MOE, 2006, fold out charts). In addition, the use of the present tense conveys a sense of conclusion in our social world; the gaze of the learning area statement is fixed upon a complete 'package(s)' of understanding to be gained within learners' social studies education. In a curriculum devoid of question marks (Milligan & Beals, 2004) the destination of social studies learning appears *assured*, including learners' "place in the economic world", "everyday participation", and "understandings of people's roles and identities" (MOE, 2006, p.22). Critically, the notion that one's understanding might be provisional, fallible, context specific, or even that some societal phenomena may be *in*explicable, is absent from the curriculum. Moreover, subjective accounts of the social world are subordinated to a preponderance of de-contextualised achievement objectives, focussed on grand tales such as "important societal ideas and events" (ibid, fold out charts). The overall effect is that, even though *SSiNZC* clearly advocates a learner-centred approach, the pursuit of objective accounts of our social world 'decentres' learners from the curriculum (Cherryholmes, 1988), overwhelmingly positioning them on the outside of society, looking in.

The reader might next imagine an artist carefully arranging elements of a still-life composition: the vessels, the fruit, the flowers and so on. This is a curriculum predicated on categories; curriculum levels, strands, achievement objectives and the language within these delineates our social world. It is stated, for example, that learners will learn about 'society and communities', 'cultures and heritages', 'identity and culture' and 'place and environment' (MOE, 2006, fold out charts) as if these are separate, numbered and their boundaries identifiable. *SSiNZC*'s content is considerably less itemised and taxonomised than that of its predecessor (MOE, 1997) – 80 achievement objectives dedicated to particular strands have been reduced to 40, presented as integrating level 1 to 5 strands. Nevertheless, *SSiNZC* indicates that the teacher's role is in selecting appropriate elements of the curriculum and composing them in some manner of interest and meaning to learners, the various combinations and permutations 'adding up to' an understanding of society; "by integrating achievement objectives with the social inquiry process, students…learn how societies work" (MOE, 2006, p.22). When read together with the notion that this understanding might be mastered over eight progressive curriculum levels, the categorised nature of *SSiNZC* is analogous to the view of society it represents – conveying the idea that society itself can be broken down into constituent phenomena and ordered in some progressive manner.

SSiNZC envisages society in profoundly organised, centred and stable terms – the 'still' in the still life. Though constant societal change is noted in the curriculum's foreword and overview, this notion is not carried through in any substantive way to the learning area statement or the achievement objectives, let alone explicated. *SSiNZC* eschews notions of messiness or confusion in our social world; for example, learners' attention is drawn to 'identity, culture and *organisation*' (ibid, fold out charts, my emphasis), as opposed to noticing instances of disorganisation or disaggregation. That which represents flux, dissonance or uncertainty is marginalised in the language of this curriculum, to the extent that the reader might wonder whether there are, in fact, "societal issues" that learners might critically engage with. Even the way in which learners might explore their social world is presented in ordered terms; the entirely rational social inquiry methodology precludes any use or investigation of, for example, ad-hoc or non-rational decision-making in society. Of course, some societal phenomena are clearly orchestrated, such as the acquisition of leadership or the making of laws and rules. The point here is the degree of collective agency in the meeting of societal goals (the response to crises or gaining of social justice, for example) communicated by the curriculum. People are cast in the achievement objectives as either organising themselves in response to change, or organising themselves to effect change – no mention is made of spontaneous, dissipative or ad hoc societal phenomena. Moreover, noticing stabilising forces is given precedence over those that de-stabilise; the achievement objectives do not ask, for instance, why people do not adhere to group decisions, fail to meet responsibilities or may be sceptical of economic enterprise. This is not to suggest that destabilising forces are

an alternative object of study; rather, the understanding of stabilising forces only makes sense in the context of those that destabilise.

We shift scenes, to what I term the *umpirical* nature of the social studies curriculum. Here the reader might imagine a game of cricket presided over by an umpire. Like the game, I argue that the curriculum asserts that there are rules to societal organisation; mostly clearly expressed in the strand descriptions. Students learn about, for example: *how* societies function, *the ways* people participate in economic activities and *how* people interpret places and environments. The overwhelming thrust of *SSiNZC*'s umpiricism is, firstly, that society may be understood in particular ways, for example that "cultural practices vary but reflect similar purposes" (ibid). This rule-bound approach presents societies as having universal and innate 'inner workings', where knowledge of the functions and interactions of one society is transferable to another. Yet the transferability of understandings related to ideas such as "cultures adapt and change, and this has consequences for society" (ibid) is questionable – the decline of the Roman Empire, for example, is unlikely to provide insight into the changing role of women in Tokelau or how learners' societies might adapt and change in the future. Secondly, *SSiNZC*'s umpiricism asserts that societal change is reducible to rules, understandable in linear terms. Geyer (2003) captures this in what he terms the "paradigm of order", a worldview that rests on notions of regularity – the processes of history, for example, presented as flowing along orderly, deterministic and predictable paths. In this paradigm, Geyer argues, greater historical understanding leads to greater predictive powers that in turn lead us to attaining greater order in society. These notions, I contend, are imprinted in the language of the achievement objectives, such as: "time and change affect people's lives" and "events have causes and effects" (MOE, 2006, fold out charts).

What is notable, from the discussion thus far, is the disjunction between *SSiNZC*'s proto-theory and contemporary sociological insights, to the extent that the curriculum's implicit social theory is unable to conceive society in fluid terms. Texting communities, for example, are anything but the static and foundational entities that *SSiNZC*'s compositional and umpirical social theory propounds, and their boundary-less nature highlights the limitations of a proto-theory predicated on circumscribed categories. In addition, *SSiNZC*'s umpiricism cannot capture the uncertainty and rapidity of social change – the very markers of evolution in texting communities. The theory cannot extend to the circumstances under which texting communities form, nor account for the self-reconfiguring nature of change. Though I suggested earlier that *SSiNZC* could be read so as to permit a study of texting communities, it turns out that this is only possible at a technical and superficial level; at its deepest theoretical levels *SSiNZC* cannot cognise the nature and operation of texting communities. Lacking in instructiveness about the flux and indeterminacy of them as it is, texting communities are unimagined by *SSiNZC*. Might one be able to re-read *SSiNZC* so as to access a conception of society as fluid? One can detect some acceptance that society is not wholly ordered, static or certain. The inclusion of perspectives in social inquiry, for example, indicates that not everyone shares the same worldview. There is also an acknowledgement that identity may not be fixed, in that learners are expected to learn about "diverse cultures and identities" (MOE, 2006, p.22). But the trouble is that these notions are ossified by the unrelenting emphasis on certainty in *SSiNZC*. Perhaps a re-reading is possible, but it would take considerable creativity to read alternative conceptions of society (as, perhaps, disordered or un-structured) into the curriculum because re-reading or subverting the curriculum presupposes that conceptions of society have been made clear to the reader from the outset.

Critical and creative thinking in, and about, our social world

Is it problematic that the fluidity of society, as cognised by contemporary sociologists, sharply contrasts with the certainties of *SSiNZC*'s compositional and umpirical implicit social theory? That there exists differing conceptions of our social world is hardly surprising – this is a fact of our social world. However, I contend that *SSiNZC*'s unquestioned framing of society, in *solely* compositional and umpirical terms, does not enable learners to think critically about, or work creatively in, society. Furthermore, I argue that if, as *SSiNZC*

encourages, learners are to think critically and creatively about their social world, they must be permitted access to as wide a range of social theories as possible.

The vision, principles, values and key competencies, of the draft New Zealand curriculum (MOE, 2006) positions critical and creative thought as central to educative processes and outcomes, including those of social studies. Creative and critical thought processes are expected to achieve a range of purposes:

> …developing understanding, making decisions, shaping actions, or constructing knowledge. Intellectual curiosity is at the heart of [this] competency…[students] challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions (ibid, p.11).

Two axes of contestability in relation to critical and creative thought may be identified. Firstly, what it might look like in social studies learning is debatable given, especially, that 'creativity' is an unsettled term (Craft, 2001). *SSiNZC* intimates that critical and creative thought might have something to do with addressing 'real-life issues', in 'real-life' contexts (MOE, 2006, p.26), but does not explicate the nature of critical or creative thought. Some existing approaches to social studies education may, however, provide tangible examples of critical and creative thought in action, such as: De Bono's 'six thinking hats', Philosophy for Children's 'community of inquiry' or the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry methodology.[15] Secondly, however, the ultimate *ends* of such creative and critical enterprise are contestable, particularly because, in an educational context, they are tied to perceived national priorities. As will no doubt be discussed elsewhere, an economic agenda is evident; creativity's products are seen to be part of the key "to sustaining our nation's development and to its successful transformation into a knowledge-based economy" (MOE, 2006, p.11). In addition, though *SSiNZC*'s social inquiry methodology is predicated on critical thinking, the approach it derives from nonetheless possesses normative guidelines in its expectation of learners' critical loyalty to democratic society (Hill, 1994).

These debates notwithstanding, this is a curriculum that works against itself. On the one hand *SSiNZC* promotes critical and creative thought about, and in, society. Yet on the other, *SSiNZC* precludes such an endeavour through its weddedness to a compositional and umpirical implicit social theory; one conception of society, 'served up' in an unquestioned manner. Learners are prevented avenues for critique, in part, because of the inaccessibility of *SSiNZC*'s implicit social theory. Exacerbating this, neither the learning area statement nor achievement objectives are positioned as the subject of inquiry. Instead, each sentence and objective is presented as the destination of learning; outcomes, though broad, that are to be reached. Attention is thus diverted from the notion that the assumptions contained within might themselves be the subjects of critique. Because learners must progress towards these goals, they must accept, for example, "that cultural interaction *impacts* on cultures and societies" without questioning the inherent determinism. Only one (History) achievement objective, at Level 8, offers space for critical inquiry; "the causes, consequences and explanations of historical events that are of significance to New Zealanders are complex and contested"; the remainder confine critical inquiry to those social facts, contexts and issues that *support* the initial premise. Though the curriculum desires learners to "challenge the basis of assumptions and perceptions" (MOE, 2006, p.11), students are prevented from questioning the assumptions about our social world that *SSiNZC* rests on.

If social studies is to truly achieve its professed aims of greater societal understanding and engaged citizenry, future curricula must, at the very least, permit access to, and questioning of, its social theory. Better still, if social studies education is to avoid being reproductive, then the curriculum should allow access to as wide a range of perspectives on society as possible. Barr, Barth and Shermis (1978) argue that purely "transmitting accumulated wisdom (values and academic knowledge) to each new generation" (p.102) is unable to support learners to make decisions in a rapidly changing world. Contemporary social studies therefore places considerable emphasis on critical thinking (Barr et al., 1997) in order to ensure that "the quest for understanding maintains a continually growing edge" (Bereiter, 2002, p.340). Critical thinking is predicated on learners understanding diverse perspectives, framings, positionings and worldviews,

underscored by Davis et al. (2000) who argue, "there is no singular way of seeing the world. In fact, the most privileged ways of seeing seem to underpin the greatest range of contemporary problems" (p.26). Critical thinking, I contend, ought not to be viewed as an end itself. Rather it is a means to new possibilities; the 'creativity' of the thinking key competency. Creativity, in the sense that I use the term, not only flourishes in the context of a mindful openness to our myriad social world but is necessary for navigating the complexities of it. In other words, it is by enabling learners to critique their social world and the culture that is coming, that we support greater generativity in societal engagement.

Towards a questioned and questioning social studies curriculum

In this paper, I have argued that *SSiNZC*, likely unintentionally, discourages learners from thinking critically and creatively about society. This is because, firstly, 'society' is not represented as a contested concept. Secondly, though conceptions of society have been intimated through New Zealand curricular aims, objectives, suggested content and approaches, the underpinning assumptions about the nature and operation of societies invariably have been obscured. Lastly, an examination of *SSiNZC*'s implicit social theory reveals that opportunities for critical and creative thought are constrained by a myopic and unquestioned framing of our social world. How might *SSiNZC* promote greater critical and creative thought in relation to its' central concept, 'society'? In this concluding section I argue that this can only be achieved through asking questions about, and placing questions within, the curriculum's social theory.

Some may be untroubled by a social studies curriculum that proffers a compositional and umpirical view of society. Of course, many aspects of society are deliberately structured in these ways, schools being one notable example. Further, it is a human tendency to want to see patterns, to have some sense of what the social rules are and to know some aspects of society in an objective manner. And in some cases it may well be a useful fiction to see society and social change in these terms, for ourselves as well as our learners. There will be those, of course, who might argue that a compositional and umpirical social world is one we should aspire to, or that commitment to a future social world that is ordered, structured and predictable is what education ought to instil in learners. And, with each new social studies curriculum, decisions *do* need to be made about conceptions of society that are represented to learners. Indeed, Kemmis argues that the "very possibility of education depends on arriving at some view about how people and societies can and should be represented" (1995, p.136).

However, I argue that greater critical and creative societal thought among learners properly begins with greater critical and creative thought about how social studies curricula represent our social world. To date, though numerous reports and articles have cumulatively intimated that New Zealand social studies is 'at risk' (Flockton and Crooks, 1997, 2001; ERO, 2001, 2006; Le Metais, 2002; Ferguson, 2002; Cubitt, 2005; Flockton, Crooks & Meaney, 2005), none have suggested that social theory of social studies curricula might warrant attention. Yet, as Massialis and Allen (1996) urge, in negotiating the nature and content of social studies, "any reasonable discussion must first seek to make the social outlooks (and assumptions) more explicit" (p.5). If we are to make assumptions about the nature and operation of society, we must ensure they are declared to the social studies teaching community because it is teachers that are charged with interpreting curricula. For them, clarity matters, even as to where the potential for clarity ends.

Beyond explication of *SSiNZC*'s foundational conceptions of society, what might reasonable discussion about the social theories of future social studies curricula involve? Firstly, as Davis et al. (2000) implore, "those who participate so deliberately in structuring the experiences of others should be aware of what it is they're doing… be attentive to blind spots, to transparent assumptions, [and] to unintended consequences" (pp.38-39). The rigour of this process is predicated on attending to the language of the social studies curriculum and to the logical consequences of the statements made. That is, asking questions such as: does the social theory of this curriculum offer avenues for critical and creative thought? What conceptions of society are learners precluded access to? Could we open the windows wider? Furthermore, consideration

must be given to the evaluative criteria with which we might assess social studies curricula. That is, asking such questions as: how encompassing of social theories do we wish this curriculum to be? How agile and durable should it be? Are these things important even? Secondly, those involved in the process of negotiating the shape of future social studies curricula must be willing and permitted to engage in sustained and rigorous debate about social theory. I argue that it is imperative that these debates engage teachers, in order to offset the risk that learners' critical and creative thinking about their social world remains the product of osmosis, accident or chance. Furthermore, and following Bruner (1960), such debates must also extend, in some intellectually honest form, to our learners. Failure to do so, and particularly to include their aspirations for society in the debate, is rightly to be criticised for dispossessing the very generation we seek to engage. Thirdly, in my view, if we are to support learners' societal critique and innovation, then as a social studies community we need a commitment to an 'open community of scholarship' (Popper, 1963), intellectually mobile enough to work with the insights of philosophy and contemporary sociologists:

> Dogan and Pahre show the importance of 'intellectual mobility' for innovation in the social sciences (1990). On the basis of extensive research on twentieth century social science, they demonstrate that innovation does not principally result from those scholars who are firmly entrenched within disciplines, nor from practising rather general 'interdisciplinary studies'. Rather innovation results from academic mobility across disciplinary borders, a mobility that generates what they call 'creative marginality'. It is this marginality, resulting from scholars moving from the centre to the periphery of the discipline and then crossing its borders, which helps to produce new productive hybridities in the social sciences' (Urry, 2000, p210).

Lastly, and following Popper, we need a more overt commitment to fallibilism, the idea that all knowledge, including our social studies learners' knowledge, grows though conjecture and refutation. Allied to this, we must accept, I argue, that the idea of a settled and universal social theory is illusory because even though contemporary social theorists attempt to understand the nature of our social world, they do so in times of rapid social change. The impossibility of reaching the 'perfect' social theory is captured by Bauman's reflections on writing sociology:

> To *work* in the world (as distinct from being 'worked out and about' by it) one needs to know how the world works…society is truly autonomous once it 'knows, must know, that there are no "assured" meanings, that it lives on the surface of chaos, that itself is a chaos seeking a form, but a form that is never fixed once and for all' (Castoriadis, cited in Bauman, 2000, p212).

If these intuitions are right, then social studies curricula need to be open to doubt and the uncertainty that is its consequence. In the words of Popper: "we must go into the unknown, the uncertain and the insecure, using what reason we may have to plan as well as we can for both, security *and* freedom" (1963, p201). As a social studies community we must, therefore, develop comfort with question-marks. We must be willing to interrogate the social theories of present and future curricula. And, if we really desire critical and creative thinking in our rising generations, then let us not persist in representing their social world in a taken-for-granted manner. As a bare minimum, it seems to me, the language, style and tone of future social studies curricula must be enquiring – indicating to teachers and learners alike that 'society' and social theories are contestable. Only then will we truly invite learners to engage with their social world.

Notes

1. See for example:

    http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news_national_story_skin/1106265

http://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/newsdetail1.asp?storyID=116950

2. In this paper the term *SSiNZC* includes all generic curriculum material in the front (grey pages) of the document (pp. 3-12, 24-34), the learning area statement (p.22) and the social studies achievement objectives (fold out pages). This material is retrievable from: http://www.tki.org.nz/r/nzcurriculum/

3. Echoing Kasesniemi (Finland), cited in Castells et al. (2004, p.165).

4. Introduced by the TheSMSzone: http://www.thesmszone.com/

5. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Cronulla_race_riots#SMS_Messages.2C_Emails

6. One notable example is the use of text messages to topple President Joseph Estrada. Recounts Rheingold: "Tens of thousands of Filipinos converged on Epifanio de los Santas Avenue, known as "Edsa", within an hour of the first text message volleys: "Go 2EDSA, Wear blck." Over four days, more than a million citizens showed up, mostly dressed in black. Estrada fell. The legend of "Generation Txt" was born" (2002, pp.157-158).

7. Including SMS messaging itself. "Text messaging was an accident. No one expected it. When the first text message was sent, in 1993 by Nokia engineering student Riku Pihkonoen, the telecommunication companies thought it was not important. SMS – Short Message Service – was not considered a major part of GSM. Like many technologies, the power of text – indeed the power of the phone – was discovered by users" (Agar, cited in Castells et al., 2004, p.155).

8. In his book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000) extends this metaphor – "Fluids travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', 'flood', 'spray', 'drip', 'seep', 'ooze'; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still" (p.2).

9. For further discussion see, for example: Giddens, 1991; Castells, 2000; Urry, 2000; Bauman, 2000.

10. Furthermore, social studies curriculum developers might use the insights of Latour, who argues that "if 'the social' is a performative process, what social theory should do is to follow 'the actors' (Latour, cited in Albertsen and Diken, 2003, p.24).

11. Lash (1995) suggests limitations to this notion (a) that it is unable to account for societies one does not attend by choice, such as diasporic communities and, (b) that it assumes *a priori* societal practices and meanings.

12. Although none of these authors view reflexivity in the same way. For example, "for Giddens reflexivity in modernity involves a shift in trust relations, so that trust is not longer a matter of face-to-face involvement but it is instead a matter of trust in expert systems. For Beck, in strong contrast, reflexivity in modernity entails a growing freedom from and critique of expert-systems" (Lash, 1994, p.116).

13. The notion of contingency is by no means a novel view. Goffman (1959), for example, noted the ways in which we are compelled to act in response to context. In his view, the context we have to judge is not society at large, but the specific context.

14. See, for example: DOE, 1961, 1977, 1986; MOE, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2004

15. See, respectively:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Thinking_Hats , http://www.p4c.org.nz/ , http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk/

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