# The Impossible Subject: Social Studies (cont’d)

Let us look for a moment at the system used in some other countries. In all my childhood travels, I found the best pedagogical method for Social Studies to be the French one. In France, in the entire elementary grades, the history curriculum covers nothing but French history. This may seem slightly chauvinistic but all 5th graders (French elementary school has only five grade levels) knows their French history  inside out, dates, names, dynasties, events, the whole lot.

Geography is a separate subject. I clearly remember a particular lesson: the teacher had distributed a number of "documents" to the students. Mine consisted of a photograph of a hilltop covered with scrubby vegetation, whitish limestone showing here and there. The questions under the photo asked, "What type of soil do you think this is?" Easy as pie. I answered, "Most probably limestone." Next question,"What type of agriculture is most suitable here?" We had gone over this ad nauseam in class, so I responded, "Sheep farming. -- Why? -- Because the soil is not rich enough in humus to support cattle farming or cultivation of crops." Final question, "Where in France do you think this image is from?" Now there are two main mountain ranges dating from the Quarternary Period in France, the Alps and the Pyrenees. These are very tall peaks with snow caps. This photo showed a rather low altitude eroded range, meaning they were mountains from the Secondary Period. That left just two possibilities, either the Massif Central or the Jura. I picked the Massif Central out of instinct but added that it could be the Jura too.

   I wonder what results I would get were I to give this same lesson plan to a class of 5th graders in Arizona. Would the students know how to tell the Rockies from the Appalachians from a photograph? I doubt it. One of my students once claimed that the tallest mountain in North America was Camelback Mountain!

This exercise might seem to concentrate only on France. But in fact it applies to any region in any country. As an adult, whenever I see scrubland on limestone in the Middle East, on pictures of China, or in Central Asia, or Africa, I apply the lessons learned and deduce that they are probably raising sheep there.

By Grade 11, a typical exercise would consist of a map of a coast, a port city, smaller towns and surrounding lands, and an accompanying text. You have such a crop produced at such a place. Please mark on the map where you would locate a processing plant for this product, and give your reasons. Support your answers. Of course, here, you are thinking of transportation (trucking, shipping), cost, labor, export, pollution, proximity to resources, etc. And you need to produce numbers and facts to support your assertions.

Another typical activity in geography class was map drawing, sketching, coloring, labeling, and so on. By Grade 5, all students could sketch the pentagon (map of France), with the little mouths of rivers in the right places, the little horn on top of Normandy, and so on. Then draw and label the main cities, the mountain ranges, and the rivers. In Arizona, the students are blessed. We only need to draw a tall rectangle with straight borders, then slash the bottom into a slope, and squiggle the left border for the Colorado River. So I asked my 6th graders to sketch the map of Arizona. I got a student uprising in return, “What? DRAW the map of Arizona? By hand? And how are we supposed to do that?”

In history, in Grade 11, I studied the French Revolution for an entire semester in preparation for the GCE “O” level exam (British university entrance exam). The lessons drawn from the economic, social, historical and cultural factors stayed with me, helping me later to analyze, understand, and compare and contrast the Chinese Revolution of 1911, the Great Arab Revolution and the American Revolution.

After years of comparative education, my conclusion is that the best way to teach Social Studies is not to run around the world in 80 days, but to pick one specific historical event or one specific region, and delve in great depth into it. The lessons learned from this one event or region can be applied to other times and places. Then repeat the process.