CHAPTER 11

Jeffersonian Directions in Curricular Renovation

The first sequence of our thought experiment begins by suggesting the kind of necessary constitutional and economic changes within the political economy of the United States that would be required to support financially our new proposals for curricular renovation. The second sequence outlines, via a one-page diagram, the broad contours of what I am calling the K-12 Curricular Redesign. The third and lengthier sequence articulates, from a Jeffersonian perspective, a set of arguments to establish a solid moral foundation for each of the new categories of curricular renovation.

The Political Economy of Reviving a Jeffersonian Civic-Purposed K-12 Education for All

Let us recall from Chapter 8 that in Jefferson’s 1806 State of the Union address, the president called for a new amendment to the US Constitution in order to validate and protect a public establishment of education. His rationale for constitutionalizing education stemmed, in large part, from the belief that such an amendment, as he imagined it, would ensure that the institution’s financial footing would operate as independently as possible from expenditures on the military establishment. Jefferson’s discussion of this aspect of the amendment is critical. Among other things, it reminds us that the formula for funding public education that Jefferson envisioned is a vital component of the amendment proposal. Jefferson
shrewdly anticipated that resources earmarked for education would tend always to be diverted to the military, in his words, “whenever a speck of war was on the horizon.”\(^1\) Similarly, we observed in previous chapters that President Eisenhower identified the same morally problematic relation between educational and military expenditures in the twentieth century. For when Ike declared that the nation’s military expenditures prevented needed school buildings from being built, he provides a vivid illustration of how inordinate levels of military spending, always *subtracts* resources from domestic institutions that could contribute so much to expanding the quality of American democracy.

Therefore, as we look to apply Jefferson’s revolutionary theory to the contemporary educational scene for the purpose of reconstructing its moral purposes, it is reasonable to assert the following. (1) A right to a civic-purposed public education should be protected under the US Constitution and, (2) a substantial source of funding for the public schools could be derived from redirecting 10% of the $800 billion dollars annual war budget for use in the Department of Education. In 2020 terms, this would add $80 billion to the proposed FY 2020 federal education budget of $59.9 billion which would more than double current spending, a financial boon that could be utilized to implement the full potential of the new constitutional decree.\(^2\)

Also contained in Jefferson’s (1806) State of the Union address was the idea that federal lands should be relied upon to establish an enduring basis for funding a public establishment of education. Perhaps today the moral spirit behind this Jeffersonian formula for funding public education can be recovered and employed as a heuristic to inspire novel remedies for solving the problem of public school inequality. To clarify, for example, most Americans would be shocked to learn of the magnitude of the military’s domestic and global landholdings.\(^3\) Thus, a contemporary

\(^1\) For more on this discussion, see Chapter 8.

\(^2\) See Impact of the President’s FY 2020 Budget on K-12 Education. firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FACT-SHEET-Presidents-FY20-Budget-K-12-Education.pdf.

\(^3\) For this information, I have relied on three sources, as follows:

a. The Department of Defense Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2018 Baseline: A Summary of the Real Property Inventory Data. Acq.osd.mil/eic/downloads/BSI/Base%20Structure%20Report%FY18.pdf.

b. How Much Land Military Bases Take Up in Each State. http://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-land-military-bases-take-up-in-each-state.
Jeffersonian approach would examine the tremendous dollar value of the assets embodied in the military’s vast landholdings. Notably, these assets would include the military’s many ocean-side bases and spectacular, luxury golf courses—located in Hawai’i and around the globe. As part of the educational reform agenda going forward, at least from a Jeffersonian standpoint, we increasingly need to ask policymakers: Why shouldn’t these untapped resources be explored as a viable means for providing public education with an enduring economic foundation?

In thinking through the problem of funding a civic-purposed public education—one that would also work to ameliorate the system’s structural inequalities—we would do well to remind ourselves that Jefferson was adamant that the national security of the United States was directly linked to its ability to develop the intelligence of its people. Jefferson considered the intelligence and virtue of the American people the best available “weapon,” as it were, for protecting against threats to its republican existence. Now more than ever, it seems clear we need to recover this Jeffersonian precept.

One additional advantage of constitutionalizing a right to a civic-purposed education would be that the value of both civic education and the humanities would certainly rebound from their present moribund state. As Stephen Lurie’s article in the *Atlantic Monthly* aptly describes, every nation that has adopted a legal and national right to education has also developed a demonstrably more robust “educational culture” as a result. Americans need constant reminding that while the United States is the wealthiest nation in the world, our global educational ranking of 17th can only be regarded as mediocre. Revealingly, Lurie writes, “every country that outperforms the U.S. has a constitutional or statutory commitment to this right.” Lurie sums up what would likely result from such a legal and moral renovation:

> If a true right is established, soft forces and hard law can begin to fundamentally alter the immense flaws of the education system nationwide. This is the exact phenomenon that plays out time and again in other countries—and particularly the ones besting American education. The constitutional guarantee develops a national culture of education, a baseline for rights,

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c. David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015.
and allows—if necessary—the legal protection of that standard. Such an amendment won’t be a panacea for American education, but without it the U.S. will stay average in the rankings and yet remain that one country left behind.⁴

Skeptics of this proposal may understandably argue that Jefferson would be the last person to embrace such an expansion of federal power. More pointedly, they may ask:

Would Jefferson—who was committed to local determination and control of the schools—want the federal government to impose a particular form of public education on states and communities?

Let us address the apparent contradiction the question highlights. At first glance, Jefferson’s reputation as a “strict” constitutional constructionist would seem to preclude his support for constitutionalizing a federal right to education. As a strict constructionist, Jefferson did not want to grant any powers to the federal government unless there was some urgent need to do so. However, a review of the historical record suggests that Jefferson’s strict constructionist view of federal power should be taken almost with a grain of salt, or at least, with several profound caveats. We find below several important instances that flatly contradict Jefferson’s limited/strict construction of federal power:

- The Louisiana Purchase (1803), where Jefferson offers up a stunning repudiation of his strict constructionism.
- The constitutional proposal (1787) for the federal government to intervene in the private economy to restrict corporate monopolies.
- The constitutional proposal (1787) for the federal government to intervene to suppress the development of a war-industry, i.e., to prohibit standing armies.
- The constitutional proposal (1806) for the federal government to establish and protect some form of public education.
- The Embargo Acts (1807–1808), an assertion of federal power over states and localities to shut down their trans-Atlantic commerce (in order to avoid a war).

⁴Steven Lurie, “Why Doesn’t the Constitution Guarantee a Right to Education.” *The Atlantic*, October 16, 2013.
The larger point suggested here is that if circumstances demanded it—as Jefferson interpreted those circumstances—he was quite capable of taking positions that would extend federal power, particularly when he thought that the nation’s survival was at stake. I believe it is warranted to assert, once again, that Jefferson would be revolted at the erosion of public education today, especially given its “neo-colonial” character. If current trajectories are not strongly resisted, we shall soon witness the death of public education as we know it. For this reason, it seems warranted to assert that Jefferson would recognize the need to bring a civic-purposed K-12 public education under the protection of the federal constitution. Finally, I refer readers to what Peter Onuf, the noted Jefferson specialist, wrote about Jefferson’s attitude toward the use of federal power: “Spending on education constituted the grand and significant exception to Jefferson’s minimal state.”

5 Onuf, as cited in Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., “Jefferson’s Educational Legacy.” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Monticello Monograph Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 129–130.
Civic Philosophy (the Need for Democratic Selfhood)

As previous chapters have suggested, Jefferson would no doubt be appalled today at those nationwide curricular policies that have radically diminished the value of the civics and humanities. He understood that these traditions form the basis of a democratic society. He would no doubt regard today’s neoliberal “reforms” as symbols of a resurgent anti-enlightenment tendency within American political culture. As Jefferson rolls in his grave, we can almost hear him pleading with us today... where’s the emphasis on critical thinking, on reason, on exercising the moral sense, and on learning about the ideological mechanisms that pose threats to our fragile experiment in self-government?

As a creative response to these fictive, yet well-grounded Jeffersonian queries, let the following proposal be submitted to the teachers of the nation, to policymakers, and to concerned citizens. Henceforth, all existing social studies, government, history, literature, writing, and language courses shall be placed under the organizing rubric of Civic Philosophy. The change in terminology is intended to highlight a revalued and reconceived humanities education, one that would, among other things, work to recover what Ramin Jahanbegloo calls the “public task” of philosophy. This means that “doing” philosophy cannot occur in ivory tower isolation, but rather must be brought down to the streets, as it were, in Socratic fashion. The moral foundation of this education would be anchored in the spirit of questioning, and would represent a creative update to the enlightenment impulse within the Western intellectual tradition. First the imaginative, and then the institutional refounding of this philosophical value, would mark a radical recovery of the human capacity for questioning.

Within this alternative paradigm of education, a new philosophical emphasis on the spirit of questioning is to be coupled with a new civic emphasis on developing a sense of participatory readiness within the young. The highest aim of a Civic Philosophy curriculum would thus be to synthesize the development of individual human flourishing alongside the development of one’s active civic engagement. In this manner, the pursuit of happiness is reconfigured to mean something much different from what it means today. Namely, that happiness and its pursuit, as an

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6 A concisely formulated moral justification for integrating the “public task” of philosophy into educational spheres can be found in, Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Preface.” In Gadflies in the Public Space: A Socratic Legacy of Philosophical Dissent. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, xiii–xxvi.
unalienable right, should include the right of all Americans to have their civic capacities developed on an equal, non-discriminatory basis. Because unequal forms of civic education create not merely unequal citizens but also citizens that have become non-citizens in a moral sense, it would be warranted to begin reinterpreting the pursuit of happiness in light of current school equity litigation (such as we see implicit in the Cook v. Raimondo case).

In contrast to the prevailing conception of education rooted in depositing facts and information into the minds of students, aided and abetted by a culture of high-stakes testing, a Civic Philosophy curriculum would aim instead to shift our teacher’s chief focus to what Neil Postman has called “the art and science of asking questions”:

But let us suppose, as Jefferson did and, much later, John Dewey, that a democratic society must take the risk, that such a society will be improved by citizens of a critical mind, and that the best way for citizens to protect their liberty is for them to be encouraged to be skeptical, to be suspicious of authority, and to be prepared (and unafraid) to resist propaganda. 7

Postman’s primary recommendation deserves extended quotation:

The first suggestion is not controversial but is nonetheless the least likely to be taken seriously. I refer to the possibility that we would actually teach children something about the art and science of asking questions. No one, I assume, would deny that all knowledge we have is a result of our asking questions; indeed, that question-asking is the most significant intellectual tool that human beings have. Is it not curious, then, that the most significant intellectual skill available to human beings is not taught in school? …Such learning is at the heart of reasoning and its product, skepticism. Do we dare do such a thing? Have you heard anyone talk about this? The president, the secretary of education, a school superintendent? They want our students to be answer-givers, not question-askers. 8

Postman wrote these words twenty years ago, at about the same time the neoliberal educational reform movement was launching its answer-driven regime of high-stakes testing. His philosophically friendly proposal stands as a scathing and cogent indictment of today’s impoverished

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7 Neil Postman, “Education.” In Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999, 160.

8 Ibid., 162.
conception of educational purpose. More constructively, Postman’s proposal stands as a moral and conceptual foundation for imagining a new, Jeffersonian-inspired reconstruction of educational purpose.

On this foundation, then, one of the practical classroom applications of such an approach shall include, but not be limited to, a renewed emphasis on asking questions about the idea and meaning of America itself. Asking questions about the meaning of the idea of America represents something of a national tradition. Cornel West makes a persuasive case that American pragmatism, at its best, captures this tradition’s questioning spirit. For West, American pragmatism reflects

A conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.  

By undertaking the pedagogical enterprise of “explaining America to itself at this historical moment,” we mean that teachers would be encouraged in their classrooms, with students, to form inquiries into the defining moral controversies of American society. In other words, rather than systematically ignoring that which divides and unites the country, as civically bereft curriculums generally do today, a Civic Philosophy curriculum would encourage students in their attempts, as Dewey had hoped, for American citizens “to know conditions as they are.” Such an approach will immediately give rise to messy conflicts over competing truth claims, and this is largely the point. For these conflicts represent educationally fertile moral spaces—as such, they would seem to represent the experiential nucleus of civic education. Under the rubric of a Civic Philosophy curricular approach, such moral predicaments can be framed and welcomed as constituting so many sites of debate and negotiation, hopefully giving

9 Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 5.

10 John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us.” In The Essential Dewey: Volume I: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998, 343.
rise to the formation of new inquiries, new desires to know, and eventually new opinions. Unlike today’s curriculum that has largely banished treatment of controversial issues, a Civic Philosophy curriculum is designed to create spaces for students to at least have the possibility of learning the skill and value of dialoguing across difference, a key democratic personality trait. Thus, critical inquiry into the idea of America should not be seen simply as a problem to be avoided, but rather, it must come to be seen as a magnificent problem that holds vast educational potential.

Although Jefferson is seldom mentioned as a prominent figure within the tradition of American pragmatism, there’s good reason to frame his revolutionary theory as one of its philosophical precursors. In order to briefly unpack this crucial affinity, let us recall an axiom of Jefferson’s revolutionary theory. That is, the idea that the capacity to revise at both the individual and cultural level is paramount. Without this revisionary capacity being properly cultivated and drawn out, as outlined in Chapter 3, transitions toward democracy and transitions toward better conceptions of truth, simply couldn’t occur. Similarly, when American pragmatists frame “truth” as a provisional or revisable quality, they do so because of a prior assumption that historical conditions inevitably change; thus, as conditions change, as human needs change, and as the march of generations proceed, it follows that conceptions of truth ought to change. If this assertion signifies a core foundational principle of American pragmatism—as I contend that it does in a general sense—we are positioned to acknowledge that Jefferson’s processual interpretation of both democratic transition and Nature herself, qualifies his revolutionary thought as an intellectual source of this defining element of American pragmatism. In any case, the larger point is for teachers to imagine the myriad ways in which this crucial democratic tradition could be usefully applied within an emerging Civic Philosophy curriculum.

One way to meet this challenge, as earlier chapters have suggested, is to begin treating—virtually for the first time—the Declaration of Independence as a foundational text of the Civic Philosophy curriculum. To begin with, rather than requiring American middle school students to take a high-stakes “Constitution Test” in order to graduate to the next

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11 Ibid., 216. It is worth noting that West in no way ignores Jefferson’s background contribution to the questing, reform minded strands of American pragmatism. He deftly links Jefferson and Rousseau to a romantic strain that reflects a “conception of imagination as a human power that conceives of social reality from a vantage point of change and for the purposes of transformation.” This is a useful way to conceive of how Jefferson’s revolutionary thought is so intimately tied to the formation of his broader educational purposes.
grade, the new mandate for all American students—at the elementary, middle, and high school levels—will be for them to write essays about the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Specifically, by examining the interactive dynamic that connects the nation’s two birth certificates, students will gain an appreciation for how the moral values of American political culture, as expressed in the Declaration (notably the equality, pursuit of happiness, and alter and abolish clauses), have interacted historically with the legal framework which is the Constitution.

Once again, as was said in previous chapters, we can safely conjecture that Jefferson would applaud Lincoln’s effort to elevate the importance of the Declaration’s moral values (the “apple of gold”) above the legal structures of the Constitution (the “picture of silver”). Indeed, both the occasional clashes and occasional harmonies that have existed between the Declaration and the Constitution could be tracked by students and adopted as theoretical-scaffoldings for better understanding the frequently baffling trajectories of US political history. At the very least, such a nationally mandated essay test—in addition to the novel inquiries that it would spark—would prove infinitely more conducive, for example, to the creation of individuals who know and feel what participatory readiness means within the American political tradition. Such an exercise would undoubtedly serve higher democratic civic ends than our present policy of requiring students to memorize the structure of the Constitution, particularly when that structure is all too often “learned” as something drained of moral substance. The two approaches I am contrasting here illustrate the momentous distinction between learning about democratic procedures, on the one hand, and learning to be democratic on the other. It makes no sense to encourage students to memorize the Constitution’s silver legal structure while encouraging them to ignore the Declaration’s gold moral values. What makes “the Constitution test” a particularly misguided curricular policy, then, is that its institutionalization can easily have the effect of “de-moralizing” our student’s experience of civic education within the schools.

The emerging paradigm shift in education that the K-12 Curricular Redesign envisions must also take seriously the goal of implementing an interdisciplinary reintegration. That is why, within the domain of Civic Philosophy, the conventionally separate disciplines of History/Government/Social Studies and that of English/Literature/Writing are placed under the same organizing banner. While the two branches of
learning have different thematic foci, both areas of study are inseparable from a broader normative standpoint. Their normative inseparability lies in the fact that each is concerned with cultivating the capacities of students to read, to write, to think, and to speak, all for the purpose of acting in their lives both individually and collaboratively with a more wholesome discretion. In this way, combining the two disciplinary traditions not just rhetorically but in actuality promises to magnify the powers of each tradition.

In her trenchant analyses, Martha Nussbaum spotlights the destructive consequences of gutting the arts and humanities from the nation’s curriculum. Nussbaum outlines the ways in which these curricular trends harm America’s fragile democratic culture. Nussbaum demonstrates the various ways in which the arts and humanities can be recruited to radically unsettle both the vertical model of the Self/Other difference as well as culturally learned forms of ignorance. The future of American democracy rests in no small measure on the manner in which Americans learn to “see” Otherness as well as our own forms of ignorance—and clearly the two are connected.

Nussbaum repeatedly emphasizes that the economic imperatives sequestered within what we have called the neoliberal paradigm of education has resulted in a regrettable “forgetting about the soul.” Quite aware of the religious and delicate connotations of the term soul, Nussbaum posits an alternative secular definition whose discursive recovery, she believes, would tend to create healthier emotional climates within the schools.

We seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one’s own plans; about what it is to talk to someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex.

The corollary to Nussbaum’s proposition, of course, is that when schools and teachers operate without a soul-oriented discourse, it tends to produce emotionally barren, anti-erotic educational climates, climates that

12 Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
13 Ibid., 6.
nicely compliment a culture of high-stakes testing. By advocating for a recovery of the term soul as an educational heuristic, Nussbaum wants educators, whether or not they accept this terminology in a formal sense, to appreciate at least the rich meanings that lie beneath its linguistic surface. She defines soul awareness as

The faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation. When we meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.\(^\text{14}\)

In Nussbaum’s elegant formulations, literature, art, music, and dance emerge as the necessary curricular corollaries of a soul-oriented education. It is the curricular tradition of the humanities, in other words, that can best cultivate the human capacity for imagination and for self-revision, qualities that enable us to empathize and dignify the souls of others.

Another educational antidote to current antidemocratic trends would be for the schools to revalue the importance of literature. Nussbaum acknowledges that not all literature is democratic friendly and capable of promoting the moral ends that she has in mind. To return to the Civic Philosophy project of unsettling the vertical model of the self/other difference, Nussbaum argues that certain forms of literature encourage readers to both identify a particular culture’s “blind-spots” while also “cultivating their inner-eyes.”\(^\text{15}\) These two ontological conditions—recognizing one’s cultural blind-spots and cultivating of one’s inner eyes—represent potential experiential outcomes of an education willing to promote the democratic value of relating to one another as equals, as dignified, as having inner depth and worth.

To summarize, the Civic Philosophy curricular reorganization responds to the urgent need to reintroduce civic education into the schools in a robust, interdisciplinary manner. The emphasis on questioning throughout the curriculum is significant, for the capacity to question must first

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 108.
be exercised and cultivated if we are to activate our students’ capacities for revision and hopefulness. Indeed, the act of questioning precedes and enables the human capacity to revise and to hope, which, as Chapter 3 argues, symbolizes the experiential guts of Jefferson’s revolutionary theory. Only with a new emphasis on a culture of questioning can the public schools respond to the civic needs of our youth—and only then can the schools play their necessary role in transforming American identity into a more democratic version of itself.

**Ecological Studies (The Need for Ecological Awareness)**

A glance at the historical record demonstrates that the American people have slowly but surely shown a capacity to revise their political, cultural, and educational forms when the growing need to do so proved impossible to ignore. Yet, the challenge now, as always, is different: Can the nation enact this same capacity for revision in relation to the need to respond intelligently to the climate catastrophes we are witnessing, catastrophes that will surely intensify in the coming decades? And will the schools, for their part, respond forthrightly to the climate crisis through bold curricular renovation, or will they continue to impose upon students forms of structural ignorance in relation to global warming?

In order to respond intelligently to the problem of global warming, it seems evident that America’s capacity to revise will need to be, once again, fully mobilized. Among other things, the challenge of global warming appears to call forth this very human capacity: a calling forth which could be called “revision for the sake of survival.” For without the mobilization of our capacities to revise now, especially given the COVID-19 challenges, prospects for a decent future, or for any future, dim considerably. What is stake, then, isn’t only the nation’s ability or inability to change its course peacefully through the deliberation of complicated policy issues, although this process is clearly important. What is at stake, ultimately, is our identity as a democratic republic. Because this fragile symbol system (our imagined national identity), relies on revision to renew itself and change things for the better, if the American republic fails to summon up this power of revision as a means of survival, it will die. A democratic republic therefore must learn to rethink how to respond to the environmental crisis that we humans have, in profound ways, created for ourselves. For this reason, in the decades ahead, in line with creatively
extending America’s best political traditions, our public school curriculums must evidence, as part of their new mandate, a bold new receptivity to the revision of educational purpose.

Of course, there are excellent environmental education programs in place today across the country. However, generally speaking, such programs are all too rare and thus not in a position to shape the attitudes of a critical mass of young people. What we need is an updated and radically expanded version of environmental education, a curricular renovation that could be effectuated under the rubric of Ecological Studies. To situate this proposal in a national context, an Ecological Studies curriculum could be regarded as the progressive educational component of a Green New Deal. Under such legislation, for example, federal resources would be deployed for the purpose of promoting ecological literacy in every public school in the nation. While some may balk at the prospect of recruiting Jefferson as an ally in this project of curricular repurposing, there’s ample evidence to suggest that, were he around today, Jefferson would strongly endorse the scientific, ethical, and educational aims of an Ecological Studies curriculum. In the pages ahead, I make the case that Jefferson’s brilliant yet largely overlooked writings on climate furnish a solid moral foundation for justifying an invigorated Ecological Studies curriculum.

JEFFERSON AS THE FIRST GREEN PRESIDENT

Probably few Americans today are aware of the fact that Jefferson was an avid meteorologist and climate scientist, having compiled copious daily notes on various weather patterns in Virginia over a period of five decades. Indeed, few of us are aware that Jefferson was one of the first Americans to obtain a thermometer, having purchased it from an importer in Philadelphia just days before the Declaration was publicly released. This

16 For a sympathetic interpretation of the Green New Deal, see Naomi Klein, On Fire: The (Burning) Case For a Green New Deal. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

17 This section of the chapter is grounded largely but not exclusively in the following four texts. Thomas Jefferson, “Query VII on Climate.” In Notes on the State of Virginia. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984, 200–208; Edwin T. Martin, “Meteorology.” In Thomas Jefferson: Scientist. New York: Harry Schuman, 1952, 131–147; Silvio A. Bedini, Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science. New York: Macmillan, 1990; Keith Thomson, “Climate and Geography.” In Jefferson’s Shadow: The Story of His Science. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, 179–194.
purchase allowed Jefferson to report that, on July 4, 1776, the temperature was a pleasant 76 degrees Fahrenheit in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{18} While these curious facts might seem inconsequential, they are nevertheless worth noting because they underscore one very consequential fact: That Jefferson loved to study the weather. Jefferson turned his inquisitive mind toward developing the science of meteorology not only because it was pleasurable for him to do so. More importantly, he was convinced that its study would reap practical benefits for the new nation. As Silvio A. Bedini writes:

Jefferson continued to be concerned about weather observations on a national scale. For him it was not merely a hobby nor just a matter of scientific curiosity. He was aware that climatic conditions and the manner in which they varied from one part of the country to another were of considerable importance and affected the progress of the American population and the cultivation of a variety of plants and crops...Early in his career, even before the American Revolution, he had visualized the institution of a weather service on a national scale. The slow advancement of the science of meteorology distressed him, and he continued to hope that some means of recording observations with exactitude could be developed in each of the states.\textsuperscript{19}

From this passage, we can infer that Jefferson strongly believed in the science of meteorology and thought that it had an important role to play in producing new knowledge about the earth’s atmospheric conditions and climate. Bedini notes that Jefferson was “distressed” about the slow advancement of meteorology. No doubt, this distress signaled that Jefferson understood that further delay in promoting meteorology would mean that Americans could not avail themselves of the new discoveries and truths that the nascent discipline would have surely produced.

From our contemporary perch, we can only wonder what Jefferson would say today in reply to President Trump’s oft-repeated opinion that global warming is a “hoax.” We can only wonder how Jefferson would regard the climate change “debates” occurring today, to say nothing of the strange discourses swirling about the COVID-19 pandemic. Debates in which media pundits seem to share the same moral authority

\textsuperscript{18} Thomson, 179–180.

\textsuperscript{19} Bedini, 457.
as members of the international scientific community. From an educational policy standpoint, let us conjecture what positions Jefferson might adapt in relation to the moral and political predicament of global warming. Would Jefferson’s twenty-first-century curriculum, for example, seek to promote the aims of climate science and ecological awareness? Needless to say, when we ask questions about what Jefferson might think or do in any given situation today, we engage in a form of thought experiment. We construct a set of Jeffersonian standards in our imagination, and use them as criterion of judgment for interpreting important features of today’s political, cultural, and educational landscape. It must be noted, however, that no one has to wonder today what Jefferson’s thoughts were about whether human activity can have an impact on the climate. Jefferson wrote that human culture and activity had already shaped climate patterns in his day—a stance that has important contemporary implications. This is the case because those who deny the scientific basis of global warming, tend also to deny that human activity is even capable of effecting something as vast as the earth’s atmosphere and weather. Jefferson begs to differ.

In both his Notes on the State of Virginia and in a long letter to French physicist Jean Baptiste Le Roy (1786), Jefferson speculated that practices of deforestation in Virginia (called “clearing” at the time) exercised a noticeable effect on that region’s climate. In addition, toward the end of his life, in an 1824 letter to a meteorologist colleague, Jefferson reaffirms his strong belief in the science of meteorology as well as his belief that human activity creates climate change.

I thank you, sir, for your pamphlet on the climate of the West, and have read it with great satisfaction. Although it does not yet establish a satisfactory theory, it is an additional step towards it. Mine was perhaps the first attempt, not to form a theory, but to bring together the few facts then known and suggest them to public attention. They were written between 40 & 50 years ago, before the close of the revolutionary war, when the Western country was a wilderness untrodden but by the foot of the savage or the hunter. It is now flourishing in population and science, and after a few years more of observation and collection of facts will doubtless furnish a theory of solid foundation. Years are requisite for this, steady attention

20 For anyone who doubts the brilliance of Jefferson’s interpretations of climate, I would suggest they read his long dissertation-like letter to Jean Baptiste Le Roy. November 13, 1786. Founders Online, National Archives. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01/10-02-0381.
to the thermometer, to the plants growing there, the times of their leafing & flowering, its animal inhabitants, beasts, birds, reptiles & insects, its prevalent winds, quantities of rain and snow, temperature of fountains and other indexes of climate. We want this indeed for all the states, and the work should be repeated once or twice in a century to show the effect of clearing and culture towards changes of climate.21 (my emphasis)

Jefferson thus took to his grave the conviction that “the effects of clearing and culture” were key variables in producing climate change. For Jefferson, then, and notably for Benjamin Franklin, the prevailing common sense among meteorologists at that time was that human activity was in fact changing weather conditions in North America in the 1780s.22

In considering debates about whether or not human activity is responsible for global warming, young Americans, in particular, would benefit by recognizing that Jefferson and Franklin (along with many of their contemporaries) believed that human activity and civilizational development itself, was fully capable of producing changes in climate. And to their credit, both founders arrived at this conclusion before the Industrial Revolution accelerated and began wreaking its havoc on the global climate system.

The more we learn about Jefferson’s passionate study of the earth’s climate, the more we are persuaded that he would absolutely be receptive to the formation of a robust Ecological Studies curriculum. Such a curricula would include, as one of its core aims, the acquisition of climate-oriented knowledge and how this interacts with other fields of inquiry. As Thomson’s work shows, Jefferson’s writings on climate highlight his scientific interest in the intersections of climate, geography, nature, and agriculture.23 The Ecological Studies curriculum is envisioned to engage these intersections as well.

To help actualize these curricular renovations, monies extracted from the federal government’s war budget, augmented by assets appropriated from its military landholdings, could be redirected to the schools to aid in the study of climate change, an issue which can now be framed as a

21 Thomas Jefferson to Lewis E. Beck, July 16, 1824. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-4410.
22 Thomson, 188.
23 Ibid., 193.
national security concern.\textsuperscript{24} The goal will be to encourage all American children to become ecologically literate. The definition of “ecologically literate” will include the development of a familiarity with the facts and knowledge pertaining to climate science. However, just as importantly, the definition of ecological literacy must also include the development of certain ethical capacities, in such a manner that would encourage the young to be willing and able to act on behalf of their raised ecological awareness. To borrow from Allen’s civic moral ideal once again, this ethical dimension of the curriculum would be designed to enhance a sense of “participatory readiness” within the young, which would enable them to act on behalf of the social, cultural, and political problem of climate change. Within the Ecological Studies curriculum, it shall be deemed insufficient for students to merely accumulate knowledge about the pertinent facts of climate change and the science that underlies it, if that crucial knowledge is not accompanied by an equally crucial willingness to act on its behalf.\textsuperscript{25} In addition, the essential ethical component of this curricular repurposing finds moral anchorage in all three of the moral propositions discussed in previous chapters: the earth belongs to the living, the pursuit of happiness and the alter and abolish clauses.

Finally, as another component of this curricular renovation, action must be taken so that a million well-resourced gardens will bloom and flourish in every K-12 public school in America. The size and nature of these gardens (indoor or outdoor) will vary according to geography, but also according to demographic need, similar to how the size of gymnasiums vary from elementary schools to high schools. The gardens could provide healthy, vegetable, and fruit-based sources of food for every child in the country, a practical benefit that’s needed now more than ever.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} For a stunning account of the Pentagon’s treatment of global warming as a national security issue, see Michael T. Klare, \textit{All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon’s Perspective on Climate Change}. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019.

\textsuperscript{25} The “ethical action” dimension of an Ecological Studies curriculum that I discuss, is also prominently featured in the “competencies, knowledge and dispositions” section of the Executive Summary of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE).

\textsuperscript{26} Compare this vision to the “vision” of the Trump administration, which recently announced substantial federal cuts to school lunch funding: “Nearly 1 million low-income students would lose automatic access to free school lunches under a proposal from President Donald Trump’s administration that aims to limit the number of people receiving
Just as there are already some superb environmental education programs operating today, but not nearly enough, so, too, are there already superb school garden programs today, but not nearly enough. It used to be different: the USDA has estimated that, in 1906, there were 75,000 school gardens in the United States.27 Here, then, is yet another American tradition that should undergo a renaissance.28 For example, Ventura Unified School District in California has developed a nationally recognized model that links school gardening, nutrition education, and a farm-to-school lunch program featuring locally grown fruits and vegetables for 17,000 public school students.29 In addition to providing healthy food and serving as models of good nutrition, the gardens would also serve as primary classroom sites for the newly organized science curriculum. This reform would bring the farm to the scientific table, as it were, whereby a range of traditional scientific inquiries, such as agriculture, botany, biology, horticulture, etc., could take place at the gardens with renewed practicality. In short, school garden programs would no longer operate episodically in an ad hoc fashion as they do now, but would be nationalized in scope, thus giving new meaning to the phrase “the greening of America.”

**Critical Media Literacy (the Need to Distinguish Between Truth and Falsity)**

Throughout these pages, we have seen that Jefferson believed deeply in the values of the Enlightenment. Residing at the core of Jefferson’s enlightenment ethos was an article of faith, a faith in the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves on the basis of reason and truth. Significantly, this faith included a faith in their capacity to revise their understandings of reality. It was this faith that caused Jefferson to make education and the transformation of the multitude the moral foundation of his

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27 UCfoodobserver.com/2015/05/06/a-history-of-school-gardens-and-how-the-model-is-getting-a-boost-today-from-food-corps.

28 For a scholarly work on the origins of the school garden movement that Dewey greatly encouraged, see Sally Kohlstedt, “A Better Crop of Boys and Girls: The School Garden Movement, 1890–1920.” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2008, 58–93.

29 https://healthyventuracounty.org/healthy-schools/farm-to-school-gardens.
growth-oriented revolutionary theory. Jefferson understood that reason and truth were not only developmental and educable human capacities, they were also “contestable” and thus foundational to democratic citizenship. Considering his enlightenment outlook, Jefferson could be expected to lament the fact that Americans now seem to inhabit what many keen observers have dubbed a post-truth and post-fact cultural environment. As Jefferson once again rolls in his grave, we might imagine him posing some tough questions for us: What happened to the values of reason and truth as the moral basis of American identity? Are these ideals salvageable today? How might the schools respond to these trends?

Remarkably enough, in the frenzied political atmosphere preceding his election to the presidency in 1800, Jefferson identified strikingly similar discordant cultural trends (albeit in embryonic form). To appreciate Jefferson’s insights into what we might call, for want of a better term, the politics of truth, we turn to an 1804 letter he wrote to jurist and political supporter, John Tyler, regarding the 1800 campaign season:

…Amidst the direct falsehoods, the misrepresentations of truth, the calumnies & insults resorted to by a faction to mislead the public mind, & to overwhelm those intrusted with its interests, our support is to be found in the approving voice of our conscience and country, in the testimony of our fellow citizens that their confidence is not to be shaken by these artifices.31

Despite the vexed circumstances of his day, Jefferson still maintains his enlightenment faith in the capacity of the American people to resist the seductive lure of political propaganda—to avoid having their confidence “shaken by these artifices.” Crucially in view of the book’s civic aims, Jefferson proceeds in the Tyler letter to establish a foundational moral correlation between the fate of the nation’s experiment in self-government and the American people’s ability to act, as citizens, on the basis of reason and truth. Jefferson opines,

No experiment can be more interesting than what we are now trying, & which we trust will end in establishing the fact that man may be governed

30 Perhaps one of the finest accounts of this phenomenon is Michiko Kakutani’s, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

31 Thomas Jefferson to John Tyler, June 28, 1804. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-43-02-0557.
by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be to leave open to him all avenues of truth, the most effectual hitherto found is the freedom of the press. It is therefore the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions. The firmness with which the people have withstood the late abuses of the press, the discernment they have manifested between truth and falsehood, show that they may be safely trusted to hear everything true and false, & to form a correct judgment between them… I hold it therefore certain that to open the doors of truth, & to fortify the habit of testing everything by reason, are the most effectual manacles we can rivet on the hands of our successors to prevent their manacle the people with their own consent.\textsuperscript{32}

Jefferson next moves to evaluate the “republican” character of the American people at the very moment their allegiance to republican principles was being severely tested. Jefferson soberly observes that they seemed to have abandoned their identification with republican principles:

…and their apparent readiness to abandon all the principles established for their protection seemed for a while to countenance the opinions of those who say they cannot be trusted with their own government. But I never doubted their rallying: & they did rally much sooner than I had expected, on the whole that experiment on their credulity has confirmed my confidence in their ultimate good sense and virtue.\textsuperscript{33}

For Jefferson, then, a democratic republic must guard against those subtle and no so subtle authoritarian narratives that abandon fact in favor of fiction, reason in favor of emotion, and truth in favor of ignorance. Not to directly confront such trends, particularly within the schools, can only further erode the moral and institutional foundations that permit power relations and other political issues in a democratic society to be debated and contested in the first place. Because respect for the values of reason and truth are foundational to the formation of democratic citizenship, it would seem to follow from a Jeffersonian standpoint that the public schools should today refashion their curricular purposes in order to protect and actively develop these values, habits and capacities.

The 1804 letter to Tyler also tells us that Jefferson recognized the very real possibility that America’s democratic experiment could unspool

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
itself, so to speak. Jefferson points out that, during the campaign of 1800, the American people were, in his words, “artfully thrown” into moral confusion by political factions bent on manipulating public opinion. As earlier chapters demonstrate, Jefferson regularly expressed concern that ambitious tyrants and their cunning machineries of disinformation might succeed in shaking the American people’s confidence in the republican values and habits of mind.

Clearly, Jefferson was acutely aware of the moral and political zones of danger posed by the print media and the demagogues of his day. We have good reason to believe, moreover, that were Jefferson around today, he would be quick to recognize the totalizing and thus more ominous zones of danger posed by the digitally saturated world we inhabit today. Given what we know about Jefferson, it’s no huge leap to suggest that he would recognize the need to transform the nation’s curriculum so as to address these technological developments and novel historical circumstances. In short, Jefferson would want the young to be initiated into understanding the moral and political complexities of their ubiquitous media environment.

Instructively for our purposes, one critical media literacy scholar has recently framed Jefferson as a natural ally to this increasingly relevant academic discipline. According to Rob Williams:

I imagine that Jefferson himself, were he alive today, would support this volume’s focus on critical medial literacy, defined in these pages as an educational response that expands the notion of media literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies, focusing on the ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. 34

Because the world of social media has become a central medium through which concepts of fact, truth, and reason are formed (and so much more), it is perfectly fitting for Williams to turn to the Jeffersonian tradition to underwrite the moral legitimacy of critical media studies. Amazingly in this regard, notice how Williams links Jefferson to the work of Umberto Eco, one of the world’s foremost media critics.

34 Rob Williams, “Fighting ‘Fake News’ in An Age of Digital Disinformation.” In Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in a Post-Truth America, eds. Z. Christian Goering and Paul Thomas. Boston: Brill/Sense Books, 2018, 54.
As a U.S. media historian, I understand that the framers of the republic (Thomas Jefferson chief among them) believed that the only way the United States might survive as a democracy was if “virtuous” (meaning public spirited and civic minded) citizens developed capacities to critically read, write and think for themselves and in civic communities. As Italian semiotician Umberto Eco explained, channeling Jefferson on the eve of the digital age, “a democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection—not an invitation to hypnosis.”

For Williams, then, Eco was “channeling Jefferson” in the sense that he identifies Jefferson with the axiom that democracy can only survive if its citizens learn to regard the “language of the image as a stimulus for critical reflection and not as an invitation to hypnosis.” As we’ve seen, Jefferson’s philosophy of education was designed to produce persons capable of making discriminating judgments between competing truth claims. This is precisely the kind of epistemological acumen that Jefferson believed was the ultimate moral guarantor of the republic’s fragile existence. For these reasons and more, we affirm, with Williams, that Jefferson would recognize the need today to integrate a robust program of critical media literacy into a newly redesigned American curriculum.

It is, of course, obvious that our public schools are the primary institutions through which a curriculum for critical media literacy could be most effectively implemented. As suggested in the introductory section of the chapter, monies extracted from the federal government’s war budget could be redirected to fund curricular programs that would initiate the young into thinking more deliberately about their media environment. The historical emergence and present ubiquity of social media has created a new need to understand not only its many perils, but also to understand its positive potential for democratic empowerment. The overarching purpose of a Critical Media Literacy approach, then, consistent with the growing literature on the subject, is to encourage the young to study their media environment not necessarily by removing them from inhabiting these spaces, but rather by promoting a sense of critical distance from, and study of, the overt and covert operations of these realms.

Appropriately enough, the University of Virginia (UVA), has recently undertaken a number of curricular initiatives—called Engagements—that

35 Ibid., 54.
seek to address the lack of civic engagement among American youth. Although the Engagements program focuses on higher education, the curricular renovations that UVA has put into practice have profound implications for K-12 education nationwide. In fact, the purposes of the Engagements initiative largely mirror the purposes of our K-12 Curricular Redesign. There are roughly ten courses in each of the four Engagement areas: Engaging Aesthetics, Empirical and Scientific Engagement, Engaging Differences, and Ethical Engagements. One course outline within the Ethical Engagements strand captures the spirit of what critical media literacy would look like in practice:

Much research connects the use of digital media to problems with mental health and other forms of suffering. Acting on the premise that it is worth knowing whether this is true of ourselves, will explore the ethical implications of various dimensions of our digital media use. We will engage in a digital detox, or a break from all digital media, which students will process in writing and in dialogue with a small group of classmates. For our final project, students will work with their groups to co-author their best practices for using digital media and their ethical justifications of their best practices.

If given the opportunity, it will not be difficult for creative teachers to experiment with how to assist the young as they learn how to judge, to choose, and to make distinctions in relation to their respective media environments. For example, in the spirit of Postman’s question-based approach to education, a critical media pedagogy would ask, among other things, how to distinguish between genuine and fake news? What constitutes a legitimate source of news as opposed to an illegitimate source? What is an “algorithm” and how do they work?

For civic educators interested in fleshing-out the pedagogical implications of an invigorated critical media studies, Jaron Lanier’s recent book, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018) should be regarded as foundational. As a technological pioneer

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36 A further description of the Engagements initiative can be found @ as.virginia.edu/engagements.

37 Ibid.

38 Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Quitting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.
in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, Lanier occupies a unique position both as a computer scientist and as a philosopher of the digital age. Lanier is intimately familiar with the ways in which algorithms have been constructed not to serve the ends of democracy or human flourishing, but rather to serve the cause of profit for the benefit of “anonymous oligarchs.” Lanier argues that the current business model of social media represents a distortion of its original vision, and argues that there is no inherent reason why social media platforms have to operate in this manner. Notably for our purposes, Lanier shows how today’s social media undermines truth, destroys capacities for empathy, and tends inexorably to make those who participate within its realms, unhappy. In short, Lanier’s manifesto urges young Americans in particular to become cognizant of the political, psychological, and ethical intricacies of the new social media, for nothing less than their autonomy and freedom as persons is at stake.

Finally, to underscore the interdisciplinary character of Critical Media Education, students will be encouraged not only to analyze various media platforms and to explore various forms of media production, but also, allied art education courses will encourage students to focus on deciphering the signs, symbols, and aesthetics of our contemporary “visual culture.” According to its leading practitioners, such as Kerry Freedman, art education should focus much less attention, for example, on studying past artistic traditions and instead focus more attention on challenging students to interpret the vast field of educationally fertile symbols, signs, and aesthetics which constitute their contemporary visual environments. In this way, the newly constituted art curriculum would turn around from a traditional focus on the past, toward a new focus on the present—making the Spectacle itself an object of critical reflection rather than an invitation to hypnosis.

39 Ibid., 3–5.
40 Kerry Freedman, “Curriculum as Process: Visual Culture and Democratic Education.” In Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics and the Social Life of Art. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003, 106–127.
In almost every chapter of the book, we have seen various ways in which Jefferson’s revolutionary theory was the product of a unique eighteenth-century context. In Part I, the primary objective was to anchor Jefferson’s theory in its historical particularity. However, in Parts II and III, experimental efforts were undertaken to interpret Jefferson’s theory as that which also contains a recoverable republican moral spirit. This paradigmatic model was used not only as a tool of critical analysis to illuminate both present and future, but also as a moral compass to point us in new curricular directions. Owing to the fact that I theorized Jefferson’s revolutionary thought according to the three-part structure of a jeremiad, the present and future implications of Jefferson’s theory were accentuated to identify and condemn present-day anti-republican trends and practices. I adopted the jeremiad’s thematic sequence of promise, declension, and renewal in the first place, because this rhetorical tradition seemed to perfectly match the genesis and trajectory of Jefferson’s revolutionary theory.

As the book nears its completion, it bears repeating that Jefferson’s revolutionary theory can assist reformers today who wish to establish a moral foundation for reconstructing educational purpose beyond the narrow “econometrics” of the neoliberal paradigm.

I have further suggested that the three pillars of Jefferson’s revolutionary theory—*the earth belongs to the living*, the *pursuit of happiness*, and the *alter and abolish* clause—each in their own way, but also cumulatively, represent potentially powerful instruments of civic engagement and action. As I have tried to demonstrate, these three moral propositions can be recruited pedagogically to expose the anomalies and contradictions rapidly accumulating within the neoliberal paradigm of education. And, just as Danielle Allen urges us to read the text of the Declaration as a critical heuristic of the present, I am persuaded that they can and should be similarly framed as critical heuristics of Jefferson’s future-directed revolutionary theory. Taken together, they give Americans license to throw off all of those inherited institutional and psychological shackles that suppress our democratic potential. The symbolic recovery of these magnificent moral propositions may well turn out to be a vital tipping point in our struggle to reverse and transcend the increasingly oligarchic and authoritarian trends that continue to threaten democratic life in America.
In reclaiming the value of Jefferson’s revolutionary moral spirit for purposes of democratic transition—in both our education and politics—we should recognize that such a recovery would also be tantamount to reclaiming the best of the enlightenment tradition as a new cultural force in the enactment of America’s next democratic revolution. Let us honor and care for this tradition by criticizing it as a means for its progressive renewal—just as Jefferson hoped we would.