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At the conclusion of this chapter, we hope you are more aware of the complexity in the process of constructing and presenting knowledge and the impact of those processes on how we define the reality of children. An important part of the social organization of knowledge is that knowledge is perceived to be legitimate and provides a shared understanding of a common world. Although this seems to be a simple and straightforward matter, the readings in this chapter point to many problems and difficulties in defining what knowledge is legitimate.

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READING 24

Monuments Between Covers

The Politics of Textbooks

David Tyack

A historian of education, David Tyack turns his attention to examining the factions that have shaped the content of history textbooks in the United States. Beginning with censorship of ideas from competing politicians in the colonial United States, he highlights the various historical

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struggles over the content of history textbooks. This reading gives more attention to the debate as to whether to view knowledge from an epistemological (philosophical study of the production of true or adequate knowledge) versus a historical, political, or sociological examination of knowledge.

Questions to consider for this reading:

1. Is there a "truth" that should be contained in history textbooks? If so, why is it so difficult to publish the "truth" and make it interesting?
2. What social forces influenced the criticism of the content of history textbooks during different historical periods?
3. Do you agree with Tyack when he states that there need not be "one state-approved set of truths"?

Why are history textbooks so controversial when they are, by most accounts, so dull (Schudson, 1994)? People have generally wanted history texts to tell the official truth about the past. The search for a lowest common civic denominator has often resulted in terminal blandness, but even then critics have argued that texts did not get the public truth right. Textbooks resemble stone monuments. Designed to commemorate and *re-present* emblematic figures, events, and ideas—and thus to create common bonds—they may instead arouse dissent.

By law, many states have mandated that history textbooks be nonpartisan in politics and nonsectarian in religion (Pierce, 1926). Publishers have found a consensual approach a smart commercial strategy, for disaffected citizens would not buy their books. Advertisements for the McGuffey Readers—which sold more than 120 million copies—assured potential customers that the books contained nothing offensive to any religion, political persuasion, or section of the country. In their tone of solemn certainty, early textbooks resembled catechisms of political correctness (old version), and even some recent history texts have a catechetical flavor. "Those of us who grew up in the fifties," recalls historian Frances Fitzgerald (1979), "believed in the permanence of our American-history textbooks. . . . Those texts were the truth of things; they were American history. They were weighty volumes. They spoke in measured cadences: imperturbable, humorless, and as distant as Chinese emperors" (p. 7).

For two centuries, Americans have generally agreed that there was a public truth that should be taught to the young, but they have repeatedly and ardently disagreed about what that truth was. In 1915, Florida legislators attacked "the so-called histories" of the Confederacy written by Northerners and offered a prize to the author who best told the "True and Correct History" (Pierce, 1926, pp. 66–67). The South had lost the Civil War but was determined not to lose this battle. They would have their own textbooks just as they had their own monuments of the War for Southern Independence. Eight decades later, a popular book bore the title *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Loewen, 1995). It gave an opposite account of White supremacy.

No Golden Age of Consensus

Amid recent contention over multiculturalism and culture wars, some imagine a golden age in the past when there was only one story to tell about American origins and destiny. But no such consensus ever existed among Americans in all their variety. The Philadelphia riots of the 1840s over the Bible as textbook make most disputes over multiculturalism today look like minuets. For two centuries, citizens in their associations of many kinds—religious, ethnic, gendered, economic, regional, racial, and fraternal—have contested with one another about what story to tell. In status-group politics, citizens sought to enhance their own standing in the society and their representation in the public culture.

In a nation so diverse socially and economically, and with such a rich array of associations, it would have been surprising if there had not been conflict about the official truths of the textbooks. Irish complained in the 1850s that histories were anti-Catholic and in the 1920s that histories were too Anglophile. Southerners protested Yankee bias. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), beginning early in the 20th century, demonstrated that Blacks were either ignored or stereotyped in textbooks. The American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution enthusiastically pursued "the Americanization of America." Business leaders attacked the "socialistic" message in Harold Rugg's books. And labor leaders argued that unions were invisible in the textbooks. Most of the protesters—and for that matter, the textbook writers—were White prosperous males. Issues of race and gender, so salient in textbook critiques of the 1960s, arose infrequently before that time (Pierce, 1930, 1933).

As the ranks of professional historians swelled in the 20th century, historians themselves wrote textbooks and lobbied for their own brand of civic orthodoxy and historical truth in the public schools. But the American Legion and other superpatriotic groups believed that history was too important to leave to the historians. As Walter Lippmann (1928) argued in *American Inquisitors,* both these loyalty police and professional historians in the 1920s shared a commitment to truth even when they energetically disputed what that truth was.

Between the two world wars, conservative textbook lobbies like the American Bar Association, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the National Association of Manufacturers commanded considerable political clout in legislatures and local school districts. They successfully lobbied for laws requiring the teaching of American history and the Constitution. Occasionally, members of groups like the Knights of Columbus sought to represent the views of recent immigrants (Zimmerman, in press). In the past generation, outsider groups have attended to textbooks as they sought to achieve social justice through social movements. Organizations of feminists, African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos have lobbied against distortions and omissions in textbooks. Meanwhile, religious concerns have persisted, as Muslims and Jews have protested negative stereotypes, and fundamentalists have complained about humanist indoctrination in the texts.

Textbook critics used various techniques to influence the public truths taught in textbooks. They lobbied state legislatures to prescribe or proscribe content (in the 1920s, Oregon banned history books that spoke ill of the Founding Fathers). They vetted texts according to certain criteria (e.g., secular humanism or gender bias) and publicized the results in public hearings and the media. Critics pressed lawsuits. The American Legion used its national magazine and local posts to

keep track of patriotism in the schools. Politicians sometimes joined forces with ethnic associations, as in Mayor Thompson's Chicago of the 1920s, to make textbook bias a campaign issue and vote-getter (Pierce, 1933).

How much did these various protest groups and legislative lobbies actually change textbooks? It is hard to say, but scholars have found some discernable shifts in tone and content (Fedyck, 1980; Fitzgerald, 1979). The Confederate veterans and Southern historians who protested Yankee prejudices in accounts of Reconstruction contributed to a pro-White-Southern shift in textbooks in the early 20th century (no doubt publishers also wanted to add the South to their national market). Powerful groups of loyalty police during World War I and the cold war contributed to the fervid patriotism of the texts in those years. The civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s increased the attention textbooks paid to minorities and women, though often in a bland and additive rather than transformative fashion (Tetrault, 1986).

Episodes in the Politics of Truth

A variety of forces have triggered conflict over textbooks in American history: wars, immigration and other demographic shifts, religious conflicts, fears of subversion, and changing political philosophies and conceptions of citizenship. The aims of the textbook critics have differed, as have their strategies and achievements. But most activists shared these two common convictions: that textbooks should represent public truth and that existing textbooks had not gotten that truth right.

The educational intellectuals of the Revolutionary period agreed that correct political doctrines should be taught to the young and that leaders should exercise eternal vigilance against errors that could destroy liberty. If the young imbibed the wrong ideas, the republic itself was in danger. Thus, correct textbooks became essential in creating republican citizens, both leaders and followers. Noah Webster, avatar of homogenization, included catechisms of morality and civics in his famous spellers. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, wanted texts to give children heroes to emulate. Although he had not admired George Washington's conduct of the war, he thought it unwise to suggest that the Founding Fathers had faults, for "their *supposed* talents and virtues . . . will serve the cause of patriotism" (Rush, 1951, p. 388). Although Jefferson was a passionate advocate of religious and intellectual freedom, he thought it best to prescribe the political texts used at the University of Virginia and to expurgate the Tory passages in Hume's history. The republic was safe only insofar as republicans learned the same political principles. Of course, the political principles Jefferson wanted to teach were hardly those of Federalist opponents like Joseph Story, who wrote his own text to contradict Jeffersonian errors and instill an alternate version of truth (Tyack, 1966).

In the middle third of the 19th century, the crusaders who spread the common school across the nation thought that the textbook should teach the ideological *unum* that would bind together a diverse nation. Differences of class, ethnicity, race, region, religion, and political philosophy split the nation. Reformers like Horace Mann argued that the public school could counteract such fragmentation only by teaching nonsectarian and politically neutral knowledge, a common denominator of moral and civic instruction (Messerli, 1972). In constitutions and statutes, many states banned sectarian and partisan textbooks in the public schools.

For a time it seemed that religious controversies could be held at bay at the schoolhouse door. Mann and other school promoters had a simple set of propositions to justify the use of the Bible for "nonsectarian" moral instruction: The purpose of the common school is to train upright citizens; moral training of this sort must be based on religion; religion rests on the Bible; therefore, the teacher can accomplish nonsectarian moral instruction only by reading the Bible without comment. Some orthodox Protestants feared that Mann was thereby sneaking his Unitarianism into the public school, but in many parts of the country, this supposedly nonsectarian compromise, with the Bible as textbook, satisfied most citizens. One reason was that the Protestant-Republican ideology of the time so thoroughly blended politics and religion, piety and patriotism. Millennial reformers believed that the United States was literally God's country (Elson, 1964).

But Catholics disagreed, for they saw Mann's solution as sneaky pan-Protestant aggression and anti-Catholic propaganda. Proper moral instruction required the Catholic (Douay) Bible and authoritative interpretation by the priest. If anyone needed proof that the schools were anti-Catholic, said Irish activists, all they needed to do was to look at some of the textbooks used in places like Boston or New York that featured Catholics as the anti-Christ. What's more, the textbooks arranged nationalities in a hierarchy and described the Irish in despicable terms. How could one compromise with contempt (Cross, 1965)?

In the second half of the 19th century, Catholics developed their own parochial schools where they no longer felt like outsiders and where their children could learn the truth from their own textbooks in history. The story of Irish-American history told there was heroic, and the Puritans lost the luster the Yankee texts gave them.

Like the Catholic/Protestant differences that found their way into textbooks, the split between North and South on slavery could not be papered over, even in textbooks that specialized in avoiding controversy. Southerners protested in the 1850s that their children were forced to learn from books written by Yankees hostile to slavery and Southern culture. When the Civil War came, Southerners produced a few books of their own, and by the end of the century Confederate veterans lobbied for laws (like the one in Florida) requiring that textbooks give a "true account" of the War for Southern Independence. Meanwhile, the Grand Army of the Republic pressed for its own truthful text and erected monuments to the War of the Great Rebellion. Little common denominator there (Pierce, 1930, 1933).

By the turn of the century, educational policy makers and text writers were no longer so concerned about sectional and religious conflict. Time was ripe for a new kind of progress in education, they believed, a period of scientific efficiency and moral uplift. History could document progress and give guidance to the present.

But all was not well: The massive immigration of "new immigrants" from southeastern Europe threatened this progress. They were such unpromising material, many educational leaders complained. These newcomers were illiterate, easily misled by agitators, and unaccustomed to Anglo-Saxon concepts of justice and representative government. Such stereotypes of immigrants often found their way into the textbooks their children read—no celebration of cultural pluralism or self-esteem there. But most textbooks, like most educators, did show faith that the newcomers might one day prove themselves worthy of taking part in American progress (Fass, 1989).

During World War I, conservative noneducators came to dominate policy talk about Americanization and to portray loyalty not as something assumed but as imposed on "foreigners." Employers grew

panicked when immigrant labor organizers spoke to workers in Polish, Italian, or Serbian. When World War I broke out, civic leaders spoke of domestic fifth columns. As the Red scare spread, schoolchildren were even enlisted to inform on disloyal neighbors, and the word *alien* took on a distinctly unfriendly ring. The "Americanization of America" became a motto of the loyalty police (Hartmann, 1948; McClymer, 1982).

The climate of opinion, then, was favorable to a whole host of conservative activists who sought to use public schools, and specifically textbooks in American history, as instruments to enforce their own notions of patriotism. Organizations like the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Bar Association, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the National Security Council lobbied successfully in state capitols for teachers' loyalty oaths, instruction in English only, and mandatory courses in the Constitution and American history, and even sponsored their own textbooks for use in schools. Agencies of the federal government helped to coordinate these efforts and actually wrote textbooks for Americanizing immigrants (so much for local control in that era of mobilization). In this superheated patriotic atmosphere, history became an ally in the crusade. Historians eagerly rewrote school histories to illustrate the evils of the Huns and the virtues of our friends, the English.

The war was hardly over when the pro-British version of official truth became anathema. Irish and German ethnic associations and groups like the Knights of Columbus attacked the historians and their textbooks as un-American because they exalted the British. Aside from the Irish joy in pulling the lion's tail, there were many immigrant associations resentful of the demand for Anglo conformity during the war years. Critics attacked one historian because he said that the British had "returned courageously to the attack" at Bunker Hill. Tongue-in-cheek, he changed the textbook to declare that "three times the cowardly British" went back into battle (Fitzgerald, 1979, p. 35). The American Legion attacked David Muzzey, the most popular text writer of the 1920s, as an English sympathizer.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a number of textbooks began to shift to a more inclusive and welcoming attitude toward the "strangers." Experts on "Americanization," many of them second-generation immigrants themselves, came to realize that insulting the "new immigrants" was no way to absorb them into the society and that public schools were too often wedges between parents and children. Negative stereotypes of the "new immigrants" began to give way to positive textbook images of their contributions. Wartime movies in the 1940s, with their "foxhole pluralism" of ethnically mixed troops, echoed the celebration of diversity often found in the textbooks of the 1930s and 1940s (Fedyck, 1980; Tyack, 1993).

A leader in cultural pluralism in the curriculum was Rachel Davis DuBois. The American Legion denounced her, which no doubt helped her multicultural cause in some circles. Individual Black activists like W.E.B. DuBois (no relation to Rachel) and organizations like the NAACP worked to improve textbook representations of African Americans. Harold Rugg wrote an influential series of social studies textbooks that took a very different view of the "Americanization of America" from the Anglo-centered views of most 1920s texts. He saw Americanism as the enlargement of social justice, welcomed cultural diversity as a virtue not a threat, and adopted a more inclusive concept of citizenship that welcomed the underdog and the outsider to the pages of his texts (Olneck, 1990).

Rugg's broad definition of Americanism and his left-liberal views on the economy made him the bête noire of conservatives in the Hearst Press, various business organizations, and patriotic societies. They wanted history to reflect traditional interpretations of the nation-state. Their well-publicized attacks on Rugg effectively destroyed the market for his liberal textbooks (Fitzgerald, 1979). When Senator McCarthy tried in the 1950s to root out subversive people and subversive ideas, in education and elsewhere, he had plenty of precedent. Efforts to police loyalty have been common in periods of stress like World War I and the cold war, and some textbooks from each era reflected the prevailing draconian definitions of patriotism.

Criticism of textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s came increasingly from the left of the political spectrum, although the right was still organized and vocal. Activists in the civil rights and feminist movements complained that the public truths of the textbooks were radically wrong for they omitted or distorted the experience of excluded and oppressed groups. History was not just a story of the exploits of White male politicians and generals (Apple [& Christian-Smith], 1991; Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995; Schlesinger, 1991).

Demands for representation in texts coincided with the flourishing of social history "from the bottom up." Once marginal as fields of inquiry, African American and women's history have entered the mainstream of historical scholarship. The history of immigration and the working class have also enjoyed a resurgence. Scholars wishing to develop multicultural approaches in American history gained rich resources on which to draw (Nash, 1995).

Traditionally sensitive to criticism, not to say timid about it, textbook publishers have rapidly added images and stories about women and minorities. Scholars and activists have complained, however, that previously excluded groups have appeared not as main characters in the narrative but as figures in sidebars and illustrations. Surveys of high school textbooks have generally found that the development of the nation-state is still the master narrative in most books. And an ingenious study by historian Michael Frisch (1989) shows that the old icons (like George Washington, Betsy Ross, and Abraham Lincoln) are the people who spring to the minds of his college students when they are asked to free associate about historical figures through the Civil War.

Whither Textbooks?

Today a noisy confusion reigns about what stories the textbooks should tell. Worries abound about old truths betrayed and new truths ignored. Many groups want to vet or veto what children learn, and it is unclear what roles teachers, parents, ethnic groups, historians, and others should play (Schlesinger, 1991). Tempers rise. In New York debates over a multicultural curriculum, Catherine Cornbleth and Dexter Waugh (1995) observed, "Both sides engaged in a rhetoric of crisis, doom, and salvation" (p. 79).

In the United States, unlike most other nations, private agencies—publishing companies—create and sell textbooks. Thus, commerce plays an important part in deciding which historical truths shall be official. So does politics (Schudson, 1994), for public agencies decide which textbooks to adopt (about half of the states delegate text adoption to local districts, and the rest use some form of state adoption). For all the conventionality of the product, the actual production and sale of

textbooks is a somewhat risky business. It is very expensive to create and print textbooks, and the market (the various agencies that actually decide which to adopt) is hard to predict. In addition, at any time some citizens are likely to protest whatever messages the texts send (Fitzgerald, 1979; Tyson-Bernstein, 1988).

Thus, it is not surprising that textbooks beget textbooks. To control risk, companies find it wise to copy successes. It has been easier to add to the master narrative than to rethink it [and] easier to incorporate new content into a safe and profitable formula than to create new accounts. Old icons (Washington) remain, but publishers respond to new demands by multiplying new state-approved truths. Current American history textbooks are enormous: 888 pages, on average (Loewen, 1995, p. 279). Publishers often seek to neutralize or anticipate criticisms by adding topics.

The traditional American fear of centralized power, salient today in debates over national standards and tests, has resulted in a strange patchwork of agencies and associations—textbook companies, state and local governments, lobby groups of many persuasions—to choose and monitor the public truths taught in the texts (Delfattore, 1992). One of the most rapid ways of changing what students learn in American schools is to transform the textbooks, but the present Rube Goldberg system of creating and selecting textbooks makes such reforms very difficult although occasionally fine texts do appear (Stille, 1998).

What might be some strategies to cope with the cross-cutting demands on history textbooks? These are some possibilities:

- muddling through with modest improvements,
- turning over the task of writing textbooks to experts,
- giving parents choices about what their children learn,
- subsidizing ethnic and racial groups to write their own group-centered books, as in Afro-centric programs, or
- devising texts that depart from the model of state-approved truths and embrace instead multiple perspectives. . . .

Those are some current ways of coping with choices about textbooks. In earlier times, decisions seemed simpler. Noah Webster was so certain about how to produce good citizens that he wrote a political catechism to accompany his texts. David Muzzey assumed that political and military history—read, White males running the polity—was the stuff of history. But today, the scholarly subfields of social history blossom, while many previously ignored groups demand a place in the public culture. History today is hardly a catechism. Instead, it resembles pieces of a sprawling novel with diverse characters and fascinating subplots waiting for an author to weave into a broader narrative.

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