

Point of View

PROBLEMS OF BIAS IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

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Americans place great faith in textbooks as a means of providing their children with an understanding of American history. To a significant extent, textbooks define and determine what is important in American history. Yet textbooks do not deserve their reputation as impartial educational tools that simply teach students facts and skills. History textbooks incorporate attitudes and ways of looking at the world. In making judgments about what should be included and what should be excluded, and how particular episodes in history should be summarized, textbook authors assign positive or negative interpretations to particular events, thereby asserting a set of values. The fact that these values are often not declared explicitly, but remain implicit, does not make them less powerful. As FitzGerald pointed out more than fifteen years ago,

what sticks to the memory from those textbooks [from her schooldays] is not any particular series of facts but an atmosphere, an impression, a tone. And this impression may be all the more influential just because one cannot remember the facts and the arguments that created it. (FitzGerald 1979, 18)

In my opinion, the problem with history textbooks is not that they promote a particular understanding of history—it would be impossible to do otherwise—but rather that they pretend rhetorically not to do this. As McLaren argues, “Knowledge acquired in school—or anywhere, for that matter—is never neutral or objective but is ordered and structured in particular ways” (1989, 169). The ideas of German social theorist

Jurgen Habermas are also relevant to this issue. In the view of Habermas (1971), “knowledge” cannot be considered something that is objectively “out there,” but consists of information and ideas that reflect specific interests that we bring to the knowing process. Different interests construct different ways of knowing that influence our perception of the world.

Although Habermas identifies three forms of knowledge, this article is concerned with what he would regard as

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technical knowledge. Technical knowledge assumes that an objective world exists where knowledge can be neutral and value-free. In the social sciences, a commitment to technical knowledge is reflected in a belief that “what is important is to get the facts straight”; the philosophical origins of faith in technical knowledge lie in positivism,¹ the approach that attempts to analyze societies and social relations in the same “scientific” way in which natural scientists analyze physical phenomena. The influence of this approach is visible in those history textbooks that focus on the collection and classification of facts.

In textbooks, being “factual” does not necessarily mean being unbiased or value-free. As any good lawyer knows, it is possible to present extremely biased arguments that can be alleged to be “factual” because they are compatible with a given set of facts. By the careful choice of what facts to include or exclude, it is possible to construct arguments that can be wholly one-sided, yet can be asserted to “fit the facts.” Textbooks are influenced by the political,

ideological, or moral beliefs of their authors (or by the beliefs that authors presume to be held by the “typical” teacher for whom they write). Usually, these beliefs support the status quo, or conventional understandings about what is praiseworthy or blameworthy in history.

In short, passages in textbooks that are “factually correct” may also be communicating very selective values and moral judgments. This form of bias is more subtle than is bias resulting from inaccurate facts, but it can still be very powerful.

One of my principal concerns is with the presentation by textbooks of issues that are important to understanding the historical situation of minorities in the United States. I am concerned in particular with the way in which the plight of Japanese Americans in World War II is portrayed, as well as with ways in which major historical developments are described as having an impact on minorities. In this article, I will describe some conclusions of a review I made of ways that textbooks treat these subjects. It is important to point out that it is not my purpose to make a full assessment of the merits and demerits of each textbook cited, or to attempt to rate textbooks against each other. My intention is rather to review ways in which apparently “factual” passages in textbooks can communicate biased assumptions and judgments.

I examined the content of five well-known secondary school American history textbooks.² The publishers of these books were the top five major textbook publishing companies, according to information supplied by the American Textbook Council and the American Association of Publishers.

Because publishers consider certain

information dealing with textbook usage confidential, it is difficult to estimate the number of schools and students that actually use any one of the books in the sample. I requested that the marketing department of each publishing company supply me with the title for what they considered to be their "best-selling" secondary American history textbook.³ Because a limited number of textbooks are on the market, their best sellers serve as a valid sample of the major history textbooks used in most American public schools.

Treatment of Minorities

An example of the kind of passage I examined was the following statement about the American home front in World War II:

Americans also suffered deep anxieties and fears. However, these fears did not lead to the widespread repressions of minority groups that occurred in World War I. (Todd and Curti 1990, 807)

The communication of the idea that there was no "widespread" repression of minority groups in World War II allows the authors to present the impression that an improvement had taken place in American treatment of minorities. Yet the treatment of Japanese Americans—not to mention continuing discrimination against many minorities—was surely sufficiently dramatic in its violation of human rights that it would be more appropriate to present its historical context as one of continuing American failure to treat minorities justly rather than as one of improvement in the minority situation.

Another related example is that in many textbooks, the issue of Japanese American loyalty is raised, but loyalty is reduced to the concept of military service and performance. The same book discusses loyalty in the following manner:

Yet there had never been any real proof that these Japanese Americans had been disloyal. Indeed, nearly all of the Nisei remained loyal, patriotic American citizens despite their harsh, unfair treatment. Many of those allowed to

serve in the armed forces distinguished themselves for bravery. (1990, 808)

For the Japanese American, proof of loyalty is reduced to military service and performance. This not only eliminates many possible alternative aspects of what it means to be loyal, but also camouflages issues of justice and equality. For example, Japanese Americans were citizens by birth, taxpayers, members of communities, voters, parents, and children alike. Even though "there had never been any real proof of disloyalty," the implication is that Japanese Americans needed to prove their loyalty through military service. The result is a draconian message that the standard for determining the civic and national loyalty of an American minority group is the willingness of its members to make war as Americans on persons sharing the same ethnic heritage. And in this particular chapter, many important issues are not properly discussed, such as the government's denial of basic civil rights and its moral and legal responsibilities for the welfare of its citizens; racism and discrimination; and other ethical questions of justice and equality for all citizens. In contrast to the issue of just and equal treatment of citizens, the usefulness of military service is presented as the criterion for loyal citizenship. A concept of citizenship in which military service is more important than is a commitment to justice communicates a sense of priorities that can encourage non-democratic values.

Regarding the treatment of African Americans and their economic advancement at the time of World War I, Bragdon, McCutchen, and Ritchie argue that

although discrimination against workers led to race riots in 26 northern cities in 1917, African Americans in the north made significant economic gains during the war. (1992, 747)

This sentence structure suggests that violence and racism against African Americans can be tolerated in exchange for economic gains. The use of the word "although" to describe the race riots reduces the reference to racist violence to a subordinate clause in the sentence,

while the main part of the sentence stresses improvements in the African American situation. This deflects attention from a consideration of our democratic ideals and suggests that issues of discrimination and violence are less important than is economic gain. It considers issues related to justice and equality unimportant because blacks were rewarded with economic gain.

Jordan, Greenblatt, and Bowes describe the plight of African Americans in a similar manner when they argue that "despite the violence, however, the economic standing of blacks improved considerably during the war" (1988, 661).

These passages suggest that economic growth is the ultimate goal, well worth the suffering Black Americans endured. In a sense, economic gain is presented as equivalent to justice. This represents a particular understanding of our democratic ideals in which issues of human and democratic rights are balanced against economic advantages. Justice is treated on the same level as is compensation (economic gain), and equality is discussed in economic terms. This view is at odds with true interpretations of democracy, and it should not be presented as a textbook-certified truth.

The Authority of Language

Although textbooks claim rhetorically not to promote a particular understanding of history and to be objective, they advance a value-laden perspective of reality. Because the selection and structure of knowledge affect our perception of the world, the language and context used to articulate knowledge are crucial. Textbook authors select particular language that creates impressions in the minds of students. These impressions have power and authority because they are presented in the printed and bound textbook with its aura of an authority that is beyond question and criticism.

Although textbooks are used in many different ways, they are still dominant and powerful educational tools that shape students' views. I believe that the authority of textbooks coupled with the "objectivity" of the technical knowledge that they communicate encourages students to accept unquestionably

the impressions and worldview created by the language of textbooks. In turn, this shapes their view of American history and our democratic ideals.

As an example, in several textbooks, the portrayal of Japanese people and culture prior to the internment of Japanese Americans creates a particular image. The Japanese are described from a military perspective in which the impression is strongly conveyed that they are aggressive, militaristic kamikazes. The language portrays the Japanese in a deterministic manner, i.e., all Japanese are aggressive. This perspective is reinforced by most textbooks when they fail to discuss the difference between the military and the civilian population in Japan. Excluding other vital elements of Japanese culture helps in reinforcing the aggressive image. I believe that this impression of the Japanese as "kamikazes" (Bragdon et al. 1992, 874) who are "willing to risk war to get their way" (Boorstin and Kelley 1990, 541) might reinforce stereotypical images held by readers, and that those impressions may affect students' views of the internment.

If students accept and believe this image, it is possible that their view of the internment and their definitions of justice and equality will be affected, because they may presume that Japanese Americans were also militaristic, and loyal to their ancestral land, and that their internment might have been a military necessity. And if they believe, as one text states, that "defending the country becomes a matter of life and death" in times of war (Boorstin and Kelley 1990, 677), they may come to the conclusion that those who love justice and equality should not look too closely into wartime violations of human rights that are carried out in the name of "military necessity" or "national security."

In addition, the use of specific expressions often camouflages significant issues of justice and equality. For example, Bragdon, McCutchen, and Ritchie (1992, 882) select the term "bargain hunters" to describe individuals who profited from the Japanese American internment, in terms of property, money, and material items:

Detainees had as little as 48 hours to make arrangements for their homes, businesses, and farms. Many had to sell their property at a loss or abandon it. Bargain hunters descended on them, taking advantage of their plight.

In our culture, the expression "bargain hunter" conveys a positive image that downplays the lack of ethical responsibility of individuals who gained economically from the internment. The term justifies economic gain by any means instead of addressing the ethical issues regarding the exploitation of the victims. Furthermore, the textbook fails to mention that much of the property not immediately sold was stolen, vandalized, or sold through legal loopholes, and downplays the issue that Japanese Americans were treated unjustly, and that the U.S. government denied constitutional rights to a group of its citizens without due process. The language used creates an overall impression that con-

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ceals significant ethical issues related to "taking advantage of their plight," which remains unquestioned. In a sense, students may learn from this passage that certain injustices are deemed acceptable in the name of economic advancement or "getting a bargain."

In contrast, the textbook *American Voices* uses the term "human vultures" to describe those who took advantage of the Japanese American plight, and this constructs a different impression. The term creates an image of individuals preying upon victims and striking "with cunning and cruelty" (Berkin et al. 1992, 669). It is possible that the expression raises questions about the fairness and justice of the selling and profiting from confiscated Japanese American property. In turn, this encourages students to raise issues about the morality of the action, and requires them to struggle with issues of justice and equality.¹ It is important to realize that the impressions created and legitimized by text-

books become important elements in shaping how students understand our democratic ideals.

Conclusion

One of our educational goals in a democratic society is that schools develop critically thinking, socially conscientious students who have grasped the meaning of democratic values. Although educators consider these values vital for a democracy to survive and flourish, my findings suggest that most history textbooks that I analyzed describe historical events in a manner that promotes a worldview of which students are barely conscious, but nonetheless shapes their understanding of the world. This unarticulated worldview defines our democratic ideals in terms of means-to-ends reasoning, performance, economic profit, and advancement. This language fails to raise other morally significant issues about our democratic ideals such as justice, equality, and individual civil rights.

These findings indicate that we need to encourage changes in our assumptions about the content and use of textbooks. Students cannot learn the meaning of our democratic ideals by studying textbooks that underemphasize the need for justice and equality or by memorizing historical events that portray injustices. We must begin to respond critically to the meanings and impressions history textbooks construct. As Carlson argues, students must learn to "penetrate the ideological subtexts embedded in their history textbooks and also the contradictions within these ideologies" (1989, 53). History classes must begin to use strategies that identify and challenge biases found in textbooks, and develop ethical frameworks based on justice and equality that students and teachers can use to interpret and evaluate American history. ■

Notes

- 1 Habermas identifies three forms of knowledge based on the theory of knowledge-constitutive-interests. These are the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory.
- 2 The U.S. history textbooks surveyed were the following: Carol Berkin, Alan Brinkley, Clayborne Carson, Robert W. Cherny, Robert A. Divine, Eric Foner, Jeffery B. Morris, Arthur Wheeler, and Leonard Wood, *American Voices*

(Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman and Company, 1992); Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks M. Kelley, *A History of the United States Since 1861* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990); Henry W. Bragdon, Samuel P. McCutchen, and Donald A. Ritchie, *History of a Free Nation* (Westerville, Ohio: Glencoe Division, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill School Publishing, 1992); Winthrop D. Jordan, Miriam Greenblatt, and John S. Bowes, *The Americans* (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal, Littel and Company, 1988); Lewis P. Todd and Merle Curti, *Triumph of the American Nation* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, Inc., 1990).

- 3 The five publishing companies whose books were used in this study refused to release information concerning the number of books sold, the number of schools using the particular title, or any estimates concerning the number of students using their textbooks. However, the marketing departments agreed to disclose the titles of their best-selling books. These titles are not based on the publisher's opinion of the quality of the textbooks; each

title simply represents the U.S. history book that sells the most copies. Because the top five publishers provided the information, the books examined can be considered to be very popular U.S. history textbooks used in American public schools.

- 4 *American Voices* places a strong emphasis on social history. At times, the textbook moves beyond technical knowledge and begins to raise issues of justice and equality.

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