EDUCATION

History Class and the Fictions About Race in America

High-school textbooks too often gloss over the American government's oppression of racial minorities.

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Earlier this month, McGraw Hill found itself at the center of some rather embarrassing press after a photo showing a page from one of its high-school world-geography textbooks was disseminated on social media. The page features a seemingly innocuous polychromatic map of the United States, broken up into thousands of counties, as part of a lesson on the country's immigration patterns: Different colors correspond with various ancestral groups, and the color assigned to each county indicates its largest ethnic representation. The page is scarce on words aside from an introductory summary and three text bubbles explaining specific trends—for example, that Mexico accounts for the largest share of U.S. immigrants today.

The recent blunder has to do with one bubble in particular. Pointing to a patch of purple grids extending throughout the country's Southeast corridor, the one-sentence caption reads:

> The Atlantic Slave Trade between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.

The photo that spread through social media was taken by a black Texas student named Coby Burren, who subsequently texted it to his mom, Roni-Dean Burren. "Was real hard workers, wasn't we," he wrote. Roni-Dean quickly took to Facebook, lambasting the blunder: the reference to the Africans as workers rather than slaves. A video she later posted has been viewed nearly 2 million times, and her indignation has renewed conversations around the Black Lives Matter movement while attracting coverage by almost every major news outlet. "It talked about the U.S.A. being a country of immigration, but mentioning the slave trade in terms of immigration was just off," she told *The New York Times*. "It's that nuance of language. This is what erasure looks like."

McGraw Hill swiftly did its damage control. It announced that it was changing the caption in both the digital and print versions to characterize the migration accurately as a "forced" diaspora of slaves: "We conducted a close review of the content and agree that our language in that caption did not adequately convey that Africans were both forced into migration and to labor against their will as slaves," the company said in a statement. "We believe we can do better." Catherine Mathis, the company's spokeswoman, also emphasized that the textbook accurately referred to the slave trade and its brutality in more than a dozen other instances. And McGraw Hill has offered to provide various additional resources to any school that requests them, including supplemental materials on cultural competency, replacement textbooks, or stickers with a corrected caption to place over the erroneous one. But Texas school districts were already in possession of more than 100,000 copies of the book, while another 40,000, according to Mathis, are in schools in other states across the country.

If nothing else, the incident may serve as yet another example of why social studies —and history in particular—is such a tricky subject to teach, at least via textbooks and multiple-choice tests. Its topics are inherently subjective, impossible to distill

into paragraphs jammed with facts and figures alone. As the historian and sociologist Jim Loewen recently told me, in history class students typically "have to memorize what we might call 'twigs.' We're not teaching the forest—we're not even teaching the trees," said Loewen, best known for his 1995 book *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. "We are teaching twig history."

This is in part why a growing number of educators are calling for a fundamental shift in how the subject is taught. Some are even calling on their colleagues to abandon traditional models of teaching history altogether. Instead of promoting the rote memorization of information outlined in a single, mass-produced textbook, these critics argue that teachers should use a variety of primary-source materials and other writings, encouraging kids to analyze how these narratives are written and recognize the ways in which inherent biases shape conventional instructional materials. In an essay for *The Atlantic* earlier this year, Michael Conway argued that history classes should focus on teaching children "historiography"—the methodologies employed by historians and the exploration of history itself as an academic discipline:

> Currently, most students learn history as a set narrative—a process that reinforces the mistaken idea that the past can be synthesized into a single, standardized chronicle of several hundred pages. This teaching pretends that there is a uniform collective story, which is akin to saying everyone remembers events the same. Yet, history is anything but agreeable. It is not a collection of facts deemed to be "official" by scholars on high. It is a collection of historians exchanging different, often conflicting analyses. And rather than vainly seeking to transcend the inevitable clash of memories, American students would be better served by descending into the bog of conflict and learning the many "histories" that compose the American national story.

But according to Loewen, the shortcomings of the country's history teachers make the improvement of its instruction, let alone the introduction of historiography, a particularly difficult feat. Compared to their counterparts in other subjects, high-school history teachers are, at least in terms of academic credentials, among the least qualified. A report by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences on public high-school educators in 11 subjects found that in the 2011-12 school year, more than a third—34 percent—of those teaching history classes as a primary assignment

had neither majored nor been certified in the subject; only about a fourth of them had both credentials. (At least half of the teachers in each of the other 10 categories had both majored and been certified in their assigned subjects.)

In fact, of the 11 subjects—which include the arts, several foreign languages, and natural science—history has seen the largest decline in the percentage of teachers with postsecondary degrees between 2004 and 2012. And it seems that much of the problem has little to do with money: The federal government has already dedicated more than $1 billion over the last decade to developing quality U.S.-history teachers, the largest influx of funding ever, with limited overall results. That's in part because preparation and licensing policies for teachers vary so much from state to state.

A recent report from the National History Education Clearinghouse revealed a patchwork of training and certification requirements across the country: Only 17 or so states make college course hours in history a criterion for certification, and no state requires history-teacher candidates to have a major or minor in history in order to teach it.

"Many [history teachers] aren't even interested in American history," said Loewen, who's conducted workshops with thousands of history educators across the country, often taking informal polls of their background and competence in the subject. "They just happen to be assigned to it."

This disconnect can take a serious toll on the instruction kids receive, according to Loewen. Absent a genuine interest in history, many teachers simply defer to the information contained in textbooks. "They use the textbook not as a tool but as a crutch," Lowen said. And chances are, that makes for a pretty lousy class. Loewen suspects that these and other textbook woes are largely why students frequently list history and other social-studies subjects as their least favorite classes. And perhaps it's why so few American adults identify them as the most valuable subjects they learned in school. In a 2013 Gallup poll, just 8 percent of respondents valued history most, while just 3 percent voted for social studies. (First place, or 34 percent of votes, went to math, while 21 percent of respondents selected English and reading.)

And as the McGraw Hill example demonstrates, the textbooks teachers rely on so heavily are prone to flaws. A National Clearinghouse on History Education research

brief on four popular elementary and middle-school textbooks concluded that the materials "left out or misordered the cause and consequence of historical events and frequently failed to highlight main ideas." And the flaws can be much more egregious than isolated errors, disorganization, or a lack of clarity—sometimes they're fundamental distortions of the contexts leading up to many of today's most dire social ills.

Take the Civil War. As Loewen argued in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, textbook publishers tend to "mystify" the reasons for the South's secession largely "because they don't want to offend school districts and thereby lose sales." Some of the most widely used history textbooks today even insinuate that the South's motivation for secession was simply to protect states' rights—not to preserve slavery. And this "mystification" can come with significant societal implications. As *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates has pointed out, Americans still disagree about "What This Cruel War Was Over." A recent national poll found that while 54 percent of Americans identify slavery as the cause, 41 percent do not; beliefs over what schools should teach children about the cause mirror that distribution.

Perhaps these realities help explain why racial achievement gaps are so large in social-studies subjects—comparable to the divide in math, a subject notorious for socioeconomic disparities in proficiency. One of the largest gaps is in geography, which saw a 33-point difference between black and white eighth-graders' average scores on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); the difference between Hispanic and white students was 25 points. But the gap was also notably large on the 2013 U.S. history and civics exams, too. These disparities aren't likely to improve, considering how No Child Left Behind has reduced the time dedicated to social-studies instruction nationwide—a concern highlighted just last week in a report published by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

And the overall lack of achievement and engagement in social studies has been a concern among educators for decades. An Institute of Education Sciences report published in 1982—"Why Kids Don't Like Social Studies"—found "largely indifferent or negative attitudes toward social studies subjects" among adolescents. "Many students found social studies content boring, citing that the information is too far removed from their experience, too detailed, or too repetitious," the report concluded. "These reasons suggest the need to strive for greater variety in instruction and provide more opportunities for student success."

Ultimately, these education dilemmas extend beyond the classroom. Jen Kalaidis explored the consequences of declining social-studies instruction in an article for *The Atlantic* in 2013. Citing a report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Kalaidis noted that "students who receive effective education in social studies are more likely to vote, four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues, and are generally more confident in their ability to communicate ideas with their elected representatives."

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The McGraw Hill fiasco is the latest manifestation of the Lone Star State's fraught history of textbook politics. A few years ago, the state's school board famously established a social-studies curriculum that, according to the *Times*, gave the subject's textbooks a conservative bent. Texas's high-school standards, for example, require that students identify Moses as one of the individuals "whose principles of laws and government institutions informed the American founding documents" and establish how Judeo-Christian, and "especially biblical law," "informed the American founding." The standards also effectively aim to distinguish religious freedom in the U.S. from "the separation of church and state."

But as Dan Quinn, a former social-studies-textbook editor who now works with the Texas Freedom Network, has noted, when it comes to textbooks, "what happens in Texas does not stay in Texas." The state buys nearly 50 million textbooks each year, according to the National Education Association, giving it enormous influence on the entire country's instructional-material market. Zack Kopplin, an activist best known for his efforts to keep creationism out of schools, wrote in an *Atlantic* piece last year, school districts across the country "buy books that were written to meet Texas's standards, flaws included." Kopplin even quoted Don McLeroy, a former chairman of Texas's Board of Education who has advocated for the teaching of intelligent design, as saying, "Sometimes it boggles my mind the kind of power we have."

Texas's controversies are emblematic of the kinds of disputes taking place nationwide. For one, close to half of all states, like Texas, adopt textbooks on a statewide basis. That means state education boards—not districts or schools—dictate the textbooks used in classrooms, a policy that the Fordham Institute has described as "fundamentally flawed." In a report titled "The Mad, Mad World of

Textbook Adoption," the institute argued that "it distorts the market, entices extremist groups to hijack the curriculum, and papers the land with mediocre instructional materials."

Meanwhile, the last year alone has witnessed an array of clashes over history education. There's the recent (and ongoing) battle over the AP U.S.-history curriculum, which has become embroiled in a tug-of-war between those who say it's too patriotic and others who say it isn't patriotic enough. Similar debates have taken place over the teaching of civics—and, in particular, over one group's effort to make the U.S. citizenship exam a high-school graduation requirement in every state. And this summer, Dylann Roof's massacre of nine African Americans in a Charleston church—and the concerns subsequently raised about the persistence of white supremacy and ideologies symbolized by the Confederate Flag—renewed conversations about the distorted ways in which the history of slavery is taught in so many of America's schools.

A consistent point of tension across all these examples is whether history classes and their accompanying texts are misleading kids with Eurocentric interpretations of the actors and events that have shaped the human experience. "Research finds that the overwhelming dominance of Euro-American perspectives leads many students to disengage from academic learning," wrote the author and teacher Christine Sleeter in a 2011 report promoting the academic and social benefits of teaching ethnic studies in schools.

The critiques are certainly growing in prevalence and reach, and they're resulting in all kinds of phenomena. Earlier this year, Jessica Huseman wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* about the rise in homeschooling among black families, a trend that experts have in part attributed to the skewed teaching of world history. Schools "rob black children of the opportunity to learn about their own culture" because of these curricular biases, Huseman wrote, citing Temple University's Ama Mazama. "Typically, the curriculum begins African American history with slavery and ends it with the civil-rights movement," Mazama told Huseman. "You have to listen to yourself simply being talked about as a descendent of slaves, which is not empowering. There is more to African history that that."

And it's not just the black-white dichotomy that's driving these controversies, of course. Tucson, Arizona, remains caught at the center of a legal battle over the

state's ban on a Mexican American Studies class—a clash that's helped fuel a movement to bring ethnic studies into schools across the country. And in a piece for *The Atlantic* last week, Melinda Anderson wrote that some schools have started to teach children a more nuanced version of Christopher Columbus's role in America's founding.

Perhaps many of these controversies trace back to the history-class dilemma—the reality that its instruction often suffers because of under-qualified or under-engaged teachers who, in turn, rely on textbooks that at best oversimplify and at worst flat out lie. "Most history teachers don't *do* history, and don't know *how* to do history," Loewen said. "And by that, I mean they were never asked to actually research something. They just took courses with textbooks and that was it."

This, again, is where historiography comes in. "Historiography asks us to scrutinize how a given piece of history came to be written," wrote Loewen in his introduction to the *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The "Great Truth" About the "Lost Cause,"* a compilation and analysis of primary-source documents related to the Civil War. "Who wrote it? When? With whom were they in debate? What were they trying to prove? Who didn't write it? What points of view were omitted?" The importance of historiography, Loewen argued, is especially evident when it comes to teaching about the Civil War.

In his workshops with teachers—and not just those in the South—Loewen regularly found that small percentages identified slavery as the reason for the Civil War. "Most teachers continue to present and misrepresent this issue to the next generation of Americans … Most of them had been presenting an untrue version of why the South seceded" he wrote in the *Reader*, "*because they didn't know the key documents.*" These documents, which include the declarations of the 11 Confederate states marking their departure from the union and speeches like the one Henry Benning gave to the Virginia Convention, rarely get much, if any, play in mainstream history textbooks because it's risky. But the risks that come with such "erasure," as Roni-Dean Burren would put it, are even greater.

"At its best, history embodies the triumph of evidence over ideology," Loewen wrote. "Textbooks do not embody history at its best … White history may be appropriate for a white nation. It is inappropriate for a great nation. The United States is not a white nation. It has never been a white nation. It is time for us to

give up our white history in favor of a more accurate history, based more closely on the historical record… Surely a great nation can afford that."

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