

11. Why Is History Taught Like This?

(James W. Loewen (1995) *Lies My Teacher Told Me, Everything your American History Got Wrong*)

Ten chapters have shown that textbooks supply irrelevant and even erroneous

details, while omitting pivotal questions and facts in their treatments of issues ranging from Columbus's second voyage to the possibility of impending ecocide. We have also seen that history textbooks offer students no practice in applying their understanding of the past to present concerns, hence no basis for thinking rationally about anything in the future. Reality gets lost as authors stray further and further from the primary sources and even the secondary literature. Textbooks rarely present the various sides of historical controversies and almost never reveal to students the evidence on which each side bases its position. The textbooks are unscholarly in other ways. Of the twelve I studied, only

four of the two inquiry textbooks contain any footnotes. Six of the textbooks even deny students a bibliography.^{[1][2]} Despite criticisms by scholars, from Frances FitzGerald to Diane Ravitch and Harriet Tyson-Bernstein,

Year after year, clones appear with new authors but nearly identical covers, titles, and contents. What explains such appalling uniformity? The textbooks must be satisfying somebody.

Publishers produce textbooks with several audiences in mind. One is their intended readers: students' characteristics, as publishers perceive them, particularly affect reading level and page layout. Historians and professors of education are another audience, perhaps two audiences. Teachers comprise another. Conceptions of the general public also enter publishers' thinking, since public opinion influences adoption committees and since parents represent a potential interest group that publishers seek *not* to arouse. Some of these groups have not been shy about what they want textbooks to do. In 1925 the American Legion declaimed that the ideal textbook:

new editions of old texts come out year after year,

must inspire the children with patriotism. ... must be careful to tell the truth optimistically. . . .

must dwell on failure only for its value as a moral lesson, must speak chiefly of success

must give each State and Section full space and value for the achievements of each.

Shirley Engle and Anna Ochoa are longtime luminaries of social studies education who in 1986 voiced their recommendations for textbooks. From their vantage point, the ideal textbook should:

confront students with important questions and problems for which answers are not readily available;

be highly selective; be organized around an important problem in society that is to be studied

in depth; utilize . . . data from a variety of sources such as history, the social sciences, literature, journalism, and from students' first-hand experiences.'

Today's textbooks hew closely to the American Legion line and disregard the recommendations of Engle and Ochoa. Why?

Is the secondary literature in history to blame? We can hardly expect textbook authors to return to primary sources and dig out facts that are truly obscure. A few decades back, the secondary literature in history was quite biased. Until World War II history, much more than the other social sciences, was overtly anti-Semitic and antiblack. According to Peter Novick, whose book

That Noble Dream is probably the best account of the history profession in this

black was *ever* employed to teach history before 1945! Most historians were males from privileged white families. They wrote with blinders on. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., found himself able to write an entire book on the presidency of Andrew Jackson without ever mentioning perhaps the foremost issue Jackson dealt with as president: the removal of Indians from the Southeast. What's more, Schlesinger's book won the Pulitzer prize!

These days, however, the secondary literature in American history is much more comprehensive. About the plagues, for example, Herbert U Williams wrote "The Epidemic of the Indians of New England, 1616-1620," way back in 1909, and Esther W. Stearn and Allen E. Stearn wrote *The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the Amerindian* in 1945. P. M. Ashburn's classic *The Ranks of Death: A Medical History of the Conquest of America* came out in 1947. In 1951

century, looking at every white college and university in America, exactly *one*

1 John Duffy wrote "Smallpox and the Indians in the American Colonies." For

that matter, the most famous of all primary sources on the Pilgrims, William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation*, clearly discloses the plagues. So we cannot excuse history textbooks on the grounds that the historical literature is inadequate. The facts about Helen Keller are hardly obscure, either. No dusty newspaper archives need be searched. The truth about Woodrow Wilson's interventions and his racism has also been available in scholarly works for decades, although most biographies of the man ignore it. Indeed, every chapter of this book has been based on commonly available research. Competent historians will find nothing new here. The information is all there, in the secondary literature, but has not made its way into our textbooks, media, or teacher-training programs and therefore hasn't reached our schools. As a consequence, according to comparative historian Marc Ferro, the United States has wound up with the largest gap of any country in the world between what historians know and what the rest of us are taught."

Could these omissions be a question of professional judgment? Authors cannot include every event. The past is immense. No book claims to be complete. Decisions must be made. What is important? What is appropriate for a given age level? Perhaps teachers should devote no time at all to Helen Keller, no matter how heroic she was.

But when we look at what textbooks do include—when we contemplate the minute details, some of them false, that they foist upon us about Columbus, for example—we have to think again. Constraints of time and space cannot be causing textbooks to leave out any discussion of what Columbus did with the Americas or how Europe came to dominate the world, since these issues are among the most vital in all the broad sweep of the past.

Perhaps an upper-class conspiracy is to blame. Perhaps we are all dupes, manipulated by elite white male capitalists who orchestrate how history is written as part of their scheme to perpetuate their own power and privilege at the expense of the rest of us. Certainly high school history textbooks are so similar that they *look* like they might all have been produced by the same executive committee of the bourgeoisie. In 1984 George Orwell was clear about who determines the way history is written: "Who controls the present controls the past."