MOLDING

THE

The Politics of High School History Texts

Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman

Molding the Good Citizen

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Robert Lerner and Althea Nagai: To Josh

Stanley Rothman: To Irma Goodman, with love, and to Murray Goodman, in loving memory

PREFACE

This book describes the changes in the content of American history textbooks that have taken place in recent decades. It also analyzes the reasons for these changes in the broader context of the transformation of public education in the United States. The study is sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social and Political Change at Smith College. It is part of a larger examination of social change in the United States, directed by Stanley Rothman.

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As usual, the tapes, codebooks, and code sheets for this study have been placed on file at the Roper Center of the University of Connecticut for examination by interested scholars.

Northampton, Massachusetts Rockville, Maryland

CONTENTS

Preface		xi
CHAPTER 1	Introduction: Textbooks and Citizen Education	1
CHAPTER 2	Progressive Thought and the Rise of the Progressive Era Intellectual Class	7
CHAPTER 3	Progressive Education Changes the Curriculum	25
CHAPTER 4	Filler Feminism in High School History Textbooks	55
CHAPTER 5	History by Quota?	69
CHAPTER 6	On Judging Civilizations: The Discovery of America, Noble Savages, and the Like	89
CHAPTER 7	The Rise of American Capitalism: The Story of the Robber Barons	101
CHAPTER 8	Historical Hindsight and Appraising Presidents	125
CHAPTER 9	Conclusion: Education and Civic Order	151
APPENDIX 1	Methodology	159
APPENDIX 2	Textbooks Used in the Study	163
APPENDIX 3	Coding Scheme for Content Analysis of High School American History Textbooks	165

x	Contents

Bibliography	171
Index	183

of every philosophical stripe, whether Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, William T. Harris, or John Dewey.

This broad agreement on a key function of education does not mean that educators agree on which values should be taught. Do schools exist to transmit the values of parents, the local community, or the nation? Or should schools reflect the values of the education profession whose members are trained and shaped by teachers' colleges? The adoption of curricula, including textbook choice, often becomes a crossroads of conflict among parents' groups, local communities, national values, and the values of educators.

Textbook struggles have been recorded and often deplored. The events are usually discussed, however, without any explicit theoretical framework. This is the case with such writers as Frances Fitzgerald (1979), Jack Nelson and Gene Roberts, Jr. (1963), Lee Burress (1989), Philip Altbach and his colleagues (1991), and Joan DelFattore (1992). They tend toward a simplistic heroes-and-villains format and present textbook controversies as essentially refighting the Scopes trial.

Conservative groups within the local community, often composed of evangelical Christians, become upset over what their children are reading or studying. They challenge the prerogatives of teachers, principals, and the school board to prescribe a curriculum for their children. In extreme cases, violence erupts, and the community becomes polarized between contending factions.

One historically recent example of this kind of textbook struggle occurred in Kanawha County, West Virginia, where an angry group of parents rejected textbooks and other material as anti-Christian and subversive of traditional morality. The protest, which briefly turned violent, ended when the local board of education let parents indicate whether or not their children could use the textbooks in question (e.g., Hillocks 1978; McNearney 1975). Accounts of these events, while accurate, provide a one-sided and incomplete view if they are taken to represent all textbook controversies.

Just briefly consider three other critical disputes. The first emerged from the appointment by the New York State Commissioner of Education of a committee to examine multicultural content of New York's social studies curriculum. The report, written by Leonard Jeffries of the City University, referred along with other issues to the need to diminish the self-esteem of white students (e.g., "Mr. Sobol's Planet," New Republic 1991; Schlesinger 1991; Kirp 1991). The Commissioner retreated in the face of sharp criticism by leading historians and appointed a second, more moderate committee. A second conflict involved the attempt of New York City's commissioner of education to require local school districts to accept his multicultural Rainbow curriculum, which is charged with teaching first graders tolerance for homosexual "marriages" (e.g., "Schools Across U.S....," New York Times, January 6, 1993; Decter 1993). A third controversy took place at prestigious Brookline High School, in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the school committee voted to abolish the high school Advanced Placement European history course on the grounds that it "was not

Introduction 3

'compatible' with multicultural education and did not fit in with the 'unified set of values' the [school's] department of [social studies] wanted to promote' (Stotsky 1991a, 29).

None of these cases fits the "refighting the Scopes trial" format. The initiative to alter the curriculum was taken by school officials, not by members of the general public. Moreover, many of the dissenters were distinguished scholars, not merely members of the general public; nor were they evangelical Christians. Lastly, in the case of the Rainbow curriculum, the question turned on whose values should be taught.

From these and other examples, it becomes clear that two different groups are attempting to influence textbook content at the local level: the members of the education profession who are *inside* the system, and the parents of the children being taught. As our two multicultural-curriculum examples indicate, professional educators themselves impose value-laden changes in textbook content and curriculum policy, guided by their view of the greater social good. Most authors writing about the pressures to shape curricula and textbooks ignore the complexity of this process. In considering how curricula change, neglecting the role of the education professions leads to a parallel neglect of how textbook content is actually determined.²

A second distinction in classifying textbook disputes is between proactive measures and reactive measures taken to influence the outcome of the disputes. Proactive measures attempt to replace an existing curriculum or textbook with a new one. An example of such is the action taken by New York State and education authorities to alter the curriculum in a direction of their liking. Reactive measures are actions designed to restore the status quo ante—often, but not always, taken in response to attempts at curricular and textbook reform. An example of this is the action of the mother in the Kanawha County controversy who found her children were assigned reading in English and social studies classes that she considered to be immoral and blasphemous.

These distinctions define four types of textbook and curriculum pressure: proactive change by insiders, and by outsiders; reactive change by insiders, and by outsiders. For the most part, writers on textbook conflicts assume that all attempts at influence are reactive changes by outsiders seeking to maintain the traditional status quo. In contrast, our book examines the development of the professional ethos of the education professions, which has led to increasing educator-initiated attempts to alter curricula and change textbooks.

Such a development has serious implications for democratic societies. It implies that the larger society is prepared to allow educators to impose their own views on school-age children, possibly at the expense of views held by the general public. How did educators come to feel at liberty to assume this role? How did the public come to accept such a process?

One possible answer to the second question is that textbook controversies have had no serious educational consequences—they are "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." To examine whether this is true, we report the results

of our study of the content of high school American history textbooks. While numerous textbook studies have been completed, most of them have had various limitations, which we have tried to overcome. First, many studies analyze only contemporary textbooks. This limitation encompasses some of the best and most thorough treatments, such as Paul Vitz's Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks (1986).

Second, many studies, even if they are longitudinal, focus only on how coverage of a specific topic has changed over time (e.g., Glazer and Ueda 1983). Third, the two studies that aim at longitudinal and comprehensive treatment, an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Micheline Fedyck (1979) and Fitzgerald's *America Revised* (1979), fail to examine the books in use after the early 1970s. Even more important, these two studies, like the others cited above, and like many more that could be mentioned, are purely qualitative in their methods. None of the authors attempt to determine systematically what books were the most popular during a given period of time. Finally, all studies using only qualitative methods, and dealing with the massive amounts of text characteristic of high school history textbooks, which are typically 800 pages in length, are liable to suffer from the interpretative biases of those who describe them.

To overcome these limitations, our study consists of a quantitative content analysis of the leading high school American history textbooks from the 1940s through the 1980s. Our study proceeded in two steps: First, we systematically ascertained which were the leading high school American history books during each of the five decades of the study. Perhaps because of its difficulty, this has never been done before. Second, we devised a general content analytic coding scheme that could be reliably used by trained coders. This enables us to present an in-depth analysis of changes in the content of high school history textbooks from the 1940s through the 1980s. The details of the project's methodology are presented at length in Appendix 1, the fifteen books we selected to be content analyzed are listed with complete bibliographical information in Appendix 2, and the coding scheme used is found in Appendix 3.

Our book, then, examines education's role in reflecting and producing social change. It is based on (a) our quantitative, content-analytical study of the leading high school American history textbooks over the past fifty years and (b) the historical record of the teaching profession. The following chapter summaries indicate the scope and structure of our undertaking.

Chapter 2 sketches out a framework for understanding the role of education in creating and sustaining the American civic culture. It discusses the rise of liberal-Progressivism as a political ideology, especially John Dewey's notion of collectivist liberalism as the true democratic alternative to laissez-faire individualism. It then links Progressivism as a political ideology with progressivism as an educational philosophy, again primarily through the figure of Dewey and his disciples.

Chapter 3 traces the history of the transformation of the school into an instrument for social change. We contrast the changes in curriculum during the Introduction 5

1930s, under the dominance of Progressives in education, and the period of the 1960s, when new social movements, federal involvement, and publishers' acquiescence transformed textbooks and curricula into national programs.

Chapter 4 introduces the reader to our quantitative findings, showing how textbooks have dramatically changed their treatment of women. While the earlier books treated women's issues as an interesting, but essentially peripheral, part of American history, more recent treatments have expanded and glorified the role of women at the expense of men. The most recent textbooks consider the feminism of a Betty Friedan to be women's 'natural' view of themselves and of men.

Chapter 5 concentrates on changes in the role of racial and ethnic minorities in the textbooks. While contemporary proponents of multiculturalism often assert that textbooks are seriously deficient in their treatments of these groups, we have found that this characterizes only the books of the earliest decade. By the 1980s, minorities had moved to the center stage of American history, and leading textbooks emphasize America's mistreatment of these groups.

Chapter 6 documents changes in the story of America, from "Columbus discovers America, and it is a marvelous thing" to "Columbus lands in the Americas, and native cultures are wiped out." The 1980s texts portray native Americans and their culture prior to Columbus in a positive light and increasingly portray European civilization in a negative light.

Chapter 7 focuses on changes in the treatment of American capitalism from the Gilded Age to the present. We find that textbooks have always treated business and businessmen in an unflattering light and, since the 1940s, have ignored or downplayed conservative ideas and personalities supporting American capitalism. In contrast, liberals and their ideas about political, social, and economic life are treated relatively seriously.

Chapter 8 focuses on the role of the presidency as portrayed in the textbooks. The presidency provides the integrating focus of the American political system. The evaluation of presidential performance thus provides a ready measure of how the United States itself is evaluated. Consistent with our general hypothesis, contemporary textbooks stress the flaws and limitations of today's presidents compared to those of earlier years, except on economic issues where presidents on the whole are praised when they enact liberal-Progressive welfare-state programs.

Chapter 9 summarizes our findings and offers a conceptual overview of educational controversies as Tocqueville might situate them in the American social and ideological framework.

The issues we examine, together with the evidence we record, suggest the presence of a factor of enormous importance in shaping America's political and civic culture: the outlook and convictions of the nation's educators. If only by default, American educators have assumed great powers that deserve public scrutiny. Until scholars grant this subject the detailed attention it deserves, cur-

ricular controversies are likely to be misunderstood and misrepresented in both the press and the specialized literature.

In 1992, Congress passed legislation calling for the drawing up of national public school educational standards in a number of subject areas. The bill was the inspiration of those in the Reagan and Bush administrations who wished to increase the rigor of public school teaching.

News stories reporting the release of one of these reports, *National Standards* for *United States History: Exploring the American Experience*, a voluntary guide to American history for grades 5 through 12, came into our possession as the page proofs for this book were being returned from the printer. We have neither the time nor the space to engage in a detailed discussion.

The volume, one of three dealing with the teaching of history released over the period of a month, was sharply attacked by some of those who had originally pressed for the promulgation of such standards. Thus, Lynne Cheney, former Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, criticized the guide for its negative portrayal of American society. For example, McCarthy and McCarthyism are mentioned 19 times in the text of the guide and the Ku Klux Klan 17 times. Paul Revere, Thomas Edison, Robert E. Lee, and Albert Einstein are not mentioned at all.

The standards are also designed to give a larger place in history books to various "marginalized" minorities by teaching history from the "bottom up" rather than from the "top down." Thus, as an example, Harriet Tubman receives five mentions.

As this volume demonstrates, the outcome of the attempt to create national standards should come as no surprise. The rewriting of American history, by reading a "progressive" present into it, has been going on for some time in the schools and is likely to continue with what we believe will be important consequences. That, indeed, is what our study is all about.

NOTES

- 1. When parents of the school asked for more information about the new curriculum, the social studies department and the school board refused, attempting to stifle any criticism. The parents then appealed to the secretary of state, who ruled that under the state's Freedom of Information Act, all relevant information was to be made public. Finally, after a ruling by the state board of education, the course was reinstated some two years later. However, while all students who took two years of European history were required to take a course in non-Western civilization, the converse was not the case (Stotsky 1991b, 27–28).
- 2. At the national level, various social movement groups play a role in articulating demands for various content restrictions and inclusions. They are not a factor, however, unless they influence members of the education professions, and, thus, they can be ignored for the purposes of this typology.

CHAPTER 2

PROGRESSIVE THOUGHT AND THE RISE OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA INTELLECTUAL CLASS

The rise and development of the modern American intellectual class, whose dominant outlook we call liberal-Progressivism, dates from the 1890s. Liberal-Progressivism developed and spread until, in the 1920s, it had become the dominant paradigm of American intellectuals. Before the Progressive era, however, conservative (or classical liberal) views among American intellectuals were undergirded by a variety of intellectual tendencies.

BEFORE THE PROGRESSIVES

The revolt of liberal-Progressive thinkers against their conservative and formalist predecessors was so successful that the works and even the names of these predecessors are now almost totally forgotten. They embraced no single philosophy. Herbert Spencer strongly influenced intellectuals and academics in a wide variety of fields, from philosophy and economics to education and sociology. But Georg W. Hegel likewise impressed others, including the philosophers William Torrey Harris and Josiah Royce.

In journalism, E. L. Godkin's *The Nation* argued for clean government with "mugwump reforms" and for Grover Cleveland–style classical liberalism, complete with laissez-faire economics (Goldman 1952; Fine 1956). In sociology, Herbert Spencer, mentioned above, and later William Graham Sumner, his leading American disciple, made the case for laissez-faire capitalism and survival of the fittest, and pointed to the folly of most social reform. One of Sumner's essays, as relevant today as when it was written, is entitled "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over" (Sumner 1963).

In political science, John W. Burgess, organizer of Columbia University's faculty of political science, taught the value of limited government to students who included A. Lawrence Lowell and Nicholas Murray Butler—future presidents of Harvard and Columbia (Fine 1956, 91–95). In law, Justice Stephen Field and other orthodox legal scholars prescribed constitutional interpretation that supported laissez-faire capitalism. In economics, Francis Bowen, Laurence Laughlin, Amansa Walker, and Simon Newcomb extended the principles of classical economic theory (Fine 1956, 48).

In education, the classical liberal William Torrey Harris was an important educational leader and reformer, superintendent of St. Louis's schools, U.S. commissioner of education, founder of the philosophical school known as "Saint Louis Hegelians," editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and member of the National Education Association's Committee of Ten. He disparaged the necessity of manual training in schools and argued that the primary purpose of education at all levels was to transmit to students the heritage of Western civilization (Curti 1959, 310–347; Hirsch 1987, 116–117; Ravitch 1985, 71–72, 119–120, 137–143; Cremin 1988, 157–164). Harris spoke in favor of free enterprise and the necessity of preserving private property as a force in maintaining the level of civilization (Curti 1959).²

Noted historian of education Lawrence Cremin claims that Harris's philosophy was "obsolete" even before he left the office of commissioner of education. Cremin does admit to "a radical nobility about Harris's insistence that men and women of all classes were educable and that properly schooled, they would create a popular culture worthy of the finest aspirations of the founders of the Republic" (Cremin 1988, 164).

History as an academic discipline had its own classical liberal scholars, but their works have been likewise disparaged by modern historians (see Hofstadter 1970, 25–29). Pre-Progressive history, in Richard Hofstadter's words, "reflected the laissez-faire mentality; history was not conceived as a positive instrument of social change; it had no positive relationship to the problems of the present" (Hofstadter 1970, 41). Notable "Federalist" historians included such figures as James Ford Rhodes, a significant contributor to the now-standard abolitionist interpretation of the Civil War. He was the brother-in-law of Mark Hanna, a prosperous businessman who retired from business and moved to Boston to write history (Hofstadter 1970, 25). Rhodes today would clearly be called a conservative or, in his own words, "one inclined towards individualism," who believed in the permanence of the debate between socialism and individualism (Rhodes 1928, 9:166, 165).

Hofstadter judges Rhodes's work quite negatively. While conceding it some merit, Hofstadter believes that Rhodes embodied "the ideas of the possessing classes about financial and economic issues," "underwrote the requirements of property," and "had only a slightly less biased view of workers and unions than was customary among his fellows" (Hofstadter 1970, 29).

THE PROGRESSIVE INTELLECTUAL REVOLT

Beginning with the 1890s, the intellectual revolt against formalism, moral absolutism, laissez-faire, and Herbert Spencer began in earnest with results so pervasive that only the names of the innovators need be mentioned. In sociology, the work of Lester Frank Ward and Albion Small decisively eclipsed Sumner's in popularity. In history, Charles A. Beard and V. L. Parrington emerged as the leading historians of the day (Hofstadter 1970). In philosophy, pragmatism, especially including the thought of John Dewey, became what many came to call the national philosophy. In economics, Thorstein Veblen became the most important institutionalist critic of neoclassical economics. In law, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes declared in his famous dissent to the *Lochner* decision that the Constitution does not assume Spencer's social statics. In journalism, the most important magazine for the Progressive intelligentsia became Herbert Croly's *New Republic*. (On all of these thinkers, see White 1949; Goldman 1952; Forcey 1961; Fine 1956.)⁴

The liberal-Progressive revolt was not all of a piece. Two stances were discernible on how to deal with the problems posed by the tremendous expansion of laissez-faire capitalism.⁵ There were moderates who believed that the system could be made to live up to its own promises, provided specific institutional reforms were enacted, as distinct from radicals who believed that the system required fundamental structural change. Both Henry Demerast Lloyd and Ida Tarbell, for example, were critics of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Corporation. Lloyd, a crusading journalist, became an advocate of a "cooperative commonwealth" and by the end of his life supported Eugene Debs's Socialist party. Tarbell, on the other hand, while critical of Standard Oil, became an advocate of big business capitalism. Similarly one can distinguish between Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, which envisioned his single tax on land correcting an otherwise healthy capitalistic economic system, and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards*, which described a future society where a socialist utopia was fully established.

The moderates were initially more prominent and argued that the full potential of the American system could be achieved or restored by a series of ad hoc institutional reforms: the Pendleton Act (civil service reform), the single tax, the Sherman Antitrust Act, a bimetallic currency, lower tariffs, and avid trust busting. They were influential from the turn of the century until World War I, at which time they were submerged in the transformation of Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism into Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom. They returned with the late New Deal's stress on trust busting and remained a permanent, albeit diminishing, part of liberalism.

The radical group, the American equivalent of the British Fabian Socialists, believed that the defects of the capitalist system were so great that their remedy entailed fundamental change. Many of these intellectuals ended up supporting one form or another of democratic socialism. While the radicals were marginal

at first, they acquired more influence with the New Nationalism of Roosevelt and Herbert Croly (the first editor of *The New Republic* and author of *The Promise of American Life* (Croly [1909] 1965). World War I's "war socialism" provided an experiential basis for further social reform in this direction (e.g., Higgs 1987). The radicals' influence pervaded the New Deal's quasi-corporatism and their economic policy provides the core of what we call collectivist liberalism (Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman 1990; Rothman 1992b).

The collectivism of the liberal-Progressive tradition is not the whole of liberalism. In the 1920s, the emancipationist tradition of contemporary liberalism (e.g., Shils 1986) received a strong assist from the articulate attacks on the mindless conformity of Main Street, Babbitts, and the "booboisie," further assisted by a generous mixture of Freud and artistic-literary expressionist writers (e.g., Coben 1976). This contributed to the birth of modernism in the United States, which, as part of the later *Partisan Review* tradition, produced what we have called elsewhere the expressive individualist strand of liberal ideology (Bell 1992; Shils 1979; Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman 1990; Rothman 1992b).

The dominance of this more radical group of thinkers marked the American intellectual class as a distinct, self-conscious entity. Despite the brief interregnum in its political influence of the 1920s, the liberal-Progressive, reform-Darwinist "synthesis" became dominant among American intellectuals during the Great Depression and the period following. By 1950, Lionel Trilling could write that liberal ideas were the only ideas in circulation, and historian George Nash could conclude that the conservative intellectual movement had reached the nadir of its influence (Trilling 1950; Nash 1976).

Hofstadter himself characterizes American intellectual activity since the turn of the century as a major assault on traditional American values.

[T]he modern intellectual class, which in effect came into being in the United States only around the turn of the century, lost no time launching an assault on the national pieties. . . . On some fronts it was a war of rebels and bohemians, realists and naturalists, against the conventions and constraints of Protestant middle class society and the gentility and timidity of its literature, on others a war of radicals against business society, on still others of metropolitan minds against the village mind, or even in a few instances, of a self-designated intellectual elite against the mob. But whatever its guises, and whatever was felt to be at stake, the intellectual revolt demanded a revaluation of America. (Hof-stadter 1970, 86–87)

In what might be called a charter statement for future activities of the American intellectual class, philosopher William James, in his essay "The Social Value of the College Bred Man," writes:

We [the educated classes] should be able to divine the worthier and better leaders.... In our democracy, where everything else is so shifting, we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only aristocracy which corresponds to that of older countries.... our motto too is noblesse oblige and unlike them we stand for ideal interests only, for we