

Robert Lerner, Althea K. Hagai, and Stanley Rothman. *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995. Pp. 200. Cloth, \$55.00; ISBN 0-275-94919-2. Paper, \$17.95; ISBN 0-275-95100-6.

James W. Loewen. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: The New Press, 1995. Pp. 372. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN 1-56584-100-X.

The teaching of American history is a strategic battleground in the culture wars that now rage in the United States. Critics, who often are political conservatives, charge that the history curriculum is deeply flawed. They claim that history has degenerated into a therapeutic multiculturalism more concerned with upholding political correctness than with cultivating national pride and a sense of common heritage. The targets of this attack tend to be liberals and leftists who only now are beginning to respond. They accuse the Right of wanting to return to a nationalistic history that ignores blemishes in the American past and that leaves out women and people of color.

Rarely—Russell Jacoby's *Dogmatic Wisdom* comes to mind—has the debate moved beyond these general lines. *Molding the Good Citizen* claims to do so. Written by social scientists, the work purports to be an objective study of the leading U.S. history textbooks utilized in American high schools over the past half-century. The authors explain that they have subjected the texts to "a quantitative content analysis" that relies on a coding scheme. Categories for coding, centered upon historical actors, include the number of column inches devoted to each person; pictures of these characters, references to their ethnicity, educational levels, family background, religion, and wealth; and their "spheres of activity," a grab bag of eclectic areas such as technology, war, colonial America, and race relations. A numerical value is assigned to the textbook's evaluation of each person, ranging on a sliding scale from positive to negative. From all of this Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman conclude that, for some decades now, history in U.S. high schools has been politicized by a cabal of elite educators hostile to meritocracy, capitalism, and indeed to American Civilization in general.

As the last comment suggests, the social science apparatus fails to hide what this work really is, a conservative diatribe aimed at textbooks that stray from celebratory American political history. The authors tip their hand in the Preface, where they acknowledge funding from the Bradley, Olin, and Sarah Scaife Foundations, three of the largest bankrollers of right-wing cultural warriors. Things go downhill after that. Attempting to place the declension of historical education in historical context, Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman take the reader back to the early twentieth century when, they argue, a radical new intellectual class emerged. Spearheading an "adversary culture" and seduced by the ideology of "liberal-Progressivism"—which the authors variously tie to modernism, muckraking journalists, bohemianism, pragmatism, liberalism, socialism, evolution theory, and the educational ideas of John Dewey—the intellectuals allegedly captured control of education, including the history curriculum, before the Second World War. Ever since, they have used history textbooks to indoctrinate America's youth.

To anyone who looks at the nation's distribution of political and economic power, which most emphatically is not "liberal-Progressive," it is apparent that this argument cannot be taken seriously. Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman have written potted history that borders on conspiracy theory if not caricature, and they offer up occasional errors of fact that are outright howlers—my personal favorite is when they link Theodore Roosevelt to democratic socialism, a notion that would have enraged the Rough Rider and horrified genuine democratic socialists. More damning, the authors evade important questions. When was history teaching not politicized in one manner



or another? Does not the kind of history that they prefer represent simply a different political agenda? And even if history textbooks are slanted to the left, how many students genuinely read them? Do the texts engage student interest? How much information do young people retain over the long haul? A decade of teaching American history surveys at the university level leads me to believe that most college students remember almost nothing from their high school textbooks, which they nearly always characterize as boring, and what little they do recall is largely superficial.

Which leads us to James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Loewen wants to understand why so many high school students hate history, and he contends that textbooks bear much of the blame. He claims convincingly that, for one thing, textbooks whitewash American history. Scrutinizing twelve texts widely in use today, Loewen examines their treatment of a series of historical topics, from Columbus to recent history. He demonstrates, contrary to the assertions found in *Molding the Good Citizen*, that textbooks avoid anything that might be controversial. Granted, unlike textbooks in the days of old, the modern ones point out problems and evils that existed in the past but quickly dismiss them by insisting that national progress has rectified all wrongs.

This is part of a larger problem that Loewen identifies, and it is his most important insight because it gets to the ultimate crisis of history in our schools today. The textbooks flatten history—employing an omniscient tone rendered in passive voice, they are crammed with dry facts and lack context, drama, and personality. Differences in historical interpretation are glossed over if mentioned at all. Simply put, texts do not suggest the genuine excitement that is possible when doing history, so they fail to engage student interest. Whatever interpretive bias they may carry really does not matter very much, since students pay little attention to textbooks anyway.

Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Loewen blames American society as a whole—publishers afraid of controversy, flag-wavers who sit on textbook adoption boards, teachers who lack adequate training and fear the kind of open-ended teaching that would invite debate and inquiry, parents who do not trust that their children can handle historical unpleasantness. Pointedly Loewen questions whether American society is honest enough to deal with its history directly. With delicious irony, he points out that Russia recently has begun to confront its history with candor; surely the United States could do as well.

Loewen thus helps us move the issues of history curriculum beyond simplistic arguments about Harriet Tubman receiving two more sentences than Paul Revere, or whether or not Thomas Jefferson should be identified as a slaveowner. Until we convince high school and college students that history matters, until we help them to connect to history in a way that makes the subject come alive to them, quantitative content analysis is extraneous.

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**David Pace & Sharon Pugh. *Studying for History*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. Pp. ix, 208. Paper, \$10.50. ISBN 0-06-500649-6.**

David Pace and Sharon Pugh have produced a work for the student taking his or her first college history course. The first three chapters give the student sound advice on getting oriented in this first course, discuss the "new" kinds of history now being taught in colleges and universities (in which the authors assume, not altogether correctly, that the student is unlikely to have