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HISTORY LESSONS: HOW TEXTBOOKS FROM AROUND THE WORLD PORTRAY U.S. HISTORY

DANA LINDAMAN & KYLE WARD
THE NEW PRESS, 2004
\$26.95, 404 pages

Reviewed by Cheryl Healy

We live in an increasingly global and interdependent society. The Internet has revolutionized the way in which diverse people and cultures can access information about each other. Cellular technology has facilitated worldwide communication. The proliferation of multi-national corporations has introduced Western culture to many regions of the world. It is hard to deny the fact that the world and its people are increasingly connected.

Globalization tends to be a one-way street in which diverse nations of the world are introduced to Western, and largely American, culture, while Americans in many ways remain woefully ignorant about the rest of the world. The authors of *History Lessons: How Textbooks From Around the World Portray U.S. History* argue that this sense of American isolationism is “nowhere more apparent than in our own educational system” (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. xviii). The authors argue that despite this isolationist tendency, the United States as a nation developed in a very global context. As such, they offer a way to examine how the United States intersects with other cultures through the lens of history. The authors describe their basic premise by stating, “[the book] looks at historical events and issues that are taught in U.S. history textbooks, but from the perspective of the other nations involved” (p. xxi). The authors offer an opportunity for better understanding of our increasingly diverse world by using history as the means for such understanding.

The authors make a case for using history textbooks as the vehicle for this understanding because they “typically represent the most widely read historical account in any country, and one encountered during the formative adolescent years” (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. xviii). Additionally, textbooks present the “quasi-official story, a sort of state-sanctioned version of history” (p. xviii).

The book offers excerpts from the diverse perspectives of Western and non-Western countries, including both developed and developing nations.

The book is organized into sections that emphasize the political history of the United States, such as “Westward Expansion”; “World War I”; and “The Cold War.” This emphasis on political history reflects the authors’ belief that U.S. history textbooks, “typically deal with national history from a political perspective, explaining events according to a chronology governed by presidential terms or political eras” (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. xix). The authors’ selection and ordering of the topics certainly affirms this theory and perhaps limits the scope of the work.

History Lessons offers a noteworthy examination of textbooks in general. Lindaman and Ward make a case that textbooks can be used to compare governments and cultures due to the commonality inherent in textbooks as textbooks are used by all nations to teach a nation’s history to a national audience. The authors argue that we must move “past the bias of national history” (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. xviii). Textbooks have been long criticized by teachers of history, and this reviewer was disappointed to find that international texts fall victim to some of the same criticisms of U.S. textbooks. They tend to be bland in writing, description, and analysis and they often oversimplify complex historical realities.

History Lessons provides some fascinating perspectives on U.S. history not found in U.S. textbooks. These include trivial and amusing pieces of information new to readers of only U.S. history books. For example, a British text notes that Thomas Paine “was born in England, where he earned a living first as a maker of ladies’ underwear, then as a customs official” (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. 36); it later adds that at the British surrender at the end of the Revolutionary War, General Cornwallis asked the British band to play the mournful old nursery rhyme, “Turn the World Upside Down.” More significantly, reading the excerpts included in *History Lessons* offers noteworthy perspectives that are omitted from U.S. history textbooks. For example, the book’s chapter on slavery presents a fascinating look at the international context of slavery, an issue that is often presented in American texts as a primarily North American phenomena. This chapter offers an excerpt from a Nigerian textbook that is explicit about Nigeria’s role in the slave trade and the cultural, political, and economic impact of slavery on Nigeria. A Portuguese text on slavery offers a disturbing disclaimer that, “to try to interpret the slavery trade as a unique form of colonial exploitation is to forget that it was a practice perpetrated by the indigenous” (p. 86). These multiple perspectives on an issue so central to U.S. history can only enhance understanding of the issue.

This work should find its place on the shelves of history educators. It reflects the need to teach students that history is more than a collection of facts, but rather a constructed story that contains an implicit perspective on the events and culture of a nation and its people. Social science education needs to

extend beyond mere student learning of content knowledge. Responsible social studies educators facilitate content learning as well as build important analytical skills that can be applied to other disciplines. This book is useful in providing the raw material for use by history educators and students, although it does not provide the tools for analyzing the texts. This analytical work will need to be facilitated by the instructor if used in the classroom.

The National Council for the Social Studies, the primary membership organization for social studies educators, adopted the following definition of “social studies” in 1992:

Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d., para. 1)

The last sentence of this definition validates the significance of *History Lessons* for the social studies educator and student. Social studies education aims to equip students to utilize critical thinking skills to better understand the world they live in. The authors of *History Lessons* urge that comparing historical accounts from other nations is increasingly relevant in our current political climate. They note that,

despite all the opportunities we’re given to learn about other cultures and societies, we still understand relatively little about the rest of the world and how they view us. This book is meant as one step forward in that effort. (Lindaman & Ward, 2004, p. xxi)

This reviewer affirms that the book is indeed a notable resource to educators in working with students toward that goal.

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