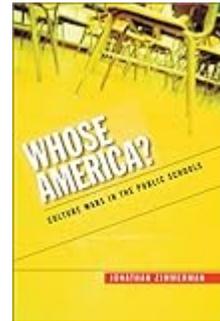




Jonathan Zimmerman. *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002. 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00918-9.



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Published on H-Education (December, 2003)

Inclusiveness and Its Discontents

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In the politics of public schooling, partisans often believe that what is good for some children might be best for all, and since young people's impressionable minds and our nation's future are at stake, insiders and outsiders to the public schools argue with fervor to influence the curriculum. Activists move with urgency in their manifold answers to the following: whose history gets told? Should religion provide guideposts for students' spiritual development? How inclusive can the curriculum be in the molding of Americans?

In his award-winning book *Whose America?*, Jonathan Zimmerman tells the story of ever-widening circles of inclusiveness in the twentieth-century public school curricula of history and religion. Textbook publishers have grafted representations of historical actors from a variety of social groups onto the Anglo-Saxon story of national progress. Spiritual divisiveness has shifted away from the schoolhouse with the removal of most religious practices from public school routines. Indeed, it seems that in the twentieth century, a more inclusive curriculum has gone hand-in-hand with greater

access to public schooling, as high school enrollments mushroomed and as governments rescinded *de jure* forms of ethnic exclusion. We can even say, without much hyperbole, that there has also been a convergence in the twentieth century on whom to blame for the shortcomings of public education—disrespectful students and the permissive adults who indulge them!

But observe this rosy picture of inclusiveness from a different angle, as Zimmerman has done, and consensus over the curriculum erodes into the product of struggles among an assortment of earnest, warring camps. Inclusiveness gives way to compromise and even stalemate among organizations all with their own truths about what is to be taught in the public schools. This is a book on the influence of "outsiders" and ordinary people on the curriculum, and I view it as a much-needed companion to Herbert Kliebard's wonderful analysis of the "inside" debates within the academic and public school leadership in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.^[1] In Zimmerman's book, hereditary patriotic societies joust with various non-British immigrant supporters; African-American civil rights leaders struggle with groups dedi-

cated to protecting the memory of the old Confederacy; main-line Protestant leaders quarrel with their Catholic and Jewish counterparts and all seek to distance themselves from activists with more fundamentalist roots; anti-Communist watchdog groups square off with leaders of the rising therapeutic professions; ordinary parents excoriate those who hold different views inside and outside of the schools. In each instance, Zimmerman captures well the passions of the debates among these outsiders and their differences with the leaders inside public education.

Zimmerman takes as his starting point Walter Lippmann's trenchant critique of two of the most notorious curricular spectacles of his day: the 1925 *Scopes* trial that kept the schools of Dayton, Tennessee, free of evolutionist taint, and Chicago Mayor William Thompson's 1927 election campaign that promised the removal of a school superintendent over pro-British textbooks. Lippmann argued in *American Inquisitors* that these controversies reflected a wider, single struggle for the direction of the country. On the side of modernism was "freedom of thought" and "scholarship"; on the side of tradition stood "popular faith" and "popular rule."^[2] Zimmerman, by contrast, posits that Lippmann's populist defenders of tradition in patriotism and religion have "two separate histories" and, as with more recent conflicts over the public school curriculum, we should not lump the two matters into manifestations of the same culture war (p. 3). In controversies over patriotism, policy makers defused unrest by acceding to many demands for inclusion of new actors in the history textbooks, but this inclusiveness has not altered the grand narrative of a new society proceeding to put its democratic ideals into practice. In religious conflicts, however, no easy solutions exist: the growing inclusiveness of religious instruction to the early 1960s left many groups—religious and secular—profoundly dissatisfied, but when the Supreme Court reversed such policies and removed religious instruction and prayer from the formal curriculum, this too triggered deep-felt resentments, with the result that religious disputes over the public school curriculum are intractable.

Zimmerman is at his best capturing, in a respectful manner, the raw power of the outsiders' internecine disputes and their criticisms of the schools. Their voices make for lively reading! In the interwar period, a Boston Irish-American calls the president-general of the Daughters of the American Revolution a "Tory" (p. 26), and as members of a Texas chapter of United Confederate Veterans protest a word problem that asked students "to calculate Ulysses S. Grant's age on the day he captured Vicks-

burg" (p. 38), Carter G. Woodson and others convince white school superintendents to approve black history textbooks for African-American students in the Lone Star State and elsewhere (pp. 45-46). After World War II, right-wing textbook critic Rose Wilder Lane confides that "I agree with Lenin that there is nothing to do with [American businessmen] but to kill them" (p. 99), black activist Richard B. Henry withdraws his son from public schools and "demand[s] a 'Purification Commission' " to remove all textbooks deemed "white supremacist" from the Detroit public schools (p. 113), and a Jewish parent in Massachusetts wants the public schools to counteract juvenile delinquency with the Ten Commandments, since they cover "every crime punished in our courts" (pp. 157-158). Sex education in the 1960s and 1970s generates perhaps the most heated opposition (Zimmerman reminds us that these so-called liberal decades had conservative detractors at every turn): "We are paying more attention to Masters and Johnson than to Moses and Jesus," laments a pastor in Illinois (p. 201), while an opponent of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States reminds the group that all this emphasis "on sex, sex, sex, sex sex sex sex sex sex sex is revolting" (p. 198).

This engaging book has many strengths. The breadth of Zimmerman's evidence is remarkable—his scholarship draws from archives across the United States, and his knowledge of history textbook publishing adds to our understanding of the sometimes troublesome relationship between the American historical profession and the general public. He complicates the notion of North-South rapprochement after the Spanish-American War by showing that there was no such unity in textbook narratives of the Civil War. (Or was it the War between the States?) He demonstrates that the extension of anti-Communist criticisms of textbooks to include the Civil Rights Movement was another facet of massive resistance. He suggests that the growth of Black Studies electives after the late 1960s had the unintended consequence of leaving much of the U.S. history curriculum undisturbed.

Turning to religion, Zimmerman brings to light a forgotten chapter in the history of public schooling, that of Weekly Religious Education which, in its heyday of the 1940s, enrolled students in thousands of school districts from the smallest towns to the largest cities. He suggests that the rise of religious holiday celebrations were responses to the *Engel* and *Abington* rulings that removed prayer and bible reading from the public school curriculum. He highlights as well the ambivalence of African-American religious and secular leaders over these rul-

ings. He makes the case that since World War II the justifications for the promoters of public school prayer have changed, from helping bring peace and justice to the world to helping individuals achieve salvation. And in the religious responses to sex education, he demonstrates that there has been unstinting opposition from the beginnings in the Progressive era.

There are places where I wish Zimmerman had pushed his analysis further. The author relates that supporters of Negro History in the interwar period convinced southern, white school officials to adopt black-oriented texts, but he does not explain why these officials acquiesced and even greeted the texts, for black students, with enthusiasm. Relatedly, the author conceptualizes the inclusion of positive portrayals of new historical figures as a queue of growing inclusiveness from the 1920s to the 1960s, with European immigrant groups as just the first in the line of assimilation. But the process was more complicated than this, and Zimmerman even cites a 1938 study that concluded that anti-black slurs in textbooks “if anything ... were getting worse” (p. 48). Perhaps, following recent works by Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gary Gerstle, for descendants of European immigrants, the process of becoming American also included becoming white, which necessitated the enforcement of white-black boundaries in history texts.[3] An accomplishment of the post-World War II civil rights movements by and for African Americans and other groups deemed non-white, then, was the removal of U.S. history texts as a site for the enforcement of this racial boundary. In *Whose America?* the struggles of women’s movements to influence history texts, by contrast, go largely unmentioned, and this is a missed opportunity, since conflicts over men’s and women’s roles bridge the topics of the national past and religion.

There are other avenues of inquiry that may yield modifications to Zimmerman’s thesis. I do not pretend to have examined systematically U.S. history textbooks in the public schools. But given the segmented nature of the secondary school curriculum—by ability, electives, teacher autonomy, and region—I suspect that there might be more fractures in the inclusive-but-banal national narrative than the author indicates. And the inclusion of dissenting voices cannot help but alter the story to some degree. If the narrative remains the same, perhaps it is be-

cause too few accurate, contextualized, and multifaceted portrayals of activists and social movements make it into the textbooks. Returning to Lippmann’s dichotomy of modernism versus tradition, maybe it still complements Zimmerman’s metaphor of two separate roads, as there remains deep populist distrust of policies that are considered secular and expert. We see this in the efforts to reintroduce creationist interpretations of our origins, in the gulf between the debates within the historical profession and the content of K-12 textbooks, and in the growth of home-schooling and other movements to reduce secular and centralized authority in public education.

So here is a stimulating and well-researched book that is scrupulously impartial in its presentation of all factions and measured in its conclusion that we must continue to grapple with populist controversies in public education, even to the extent of presenting more than one historical narrative and conversing with company that we might deem unsavory. In this, *Whose America?* differs from Diane Ravitch’s contemporary critique of the adoption of school textbooks and tests, where she suggests that screeners should stop giving in to the cacophony of special-interest groups.[4] Zimmerman’s prescription is that in the hands of skillful teachers, the public schools and ultimately our nation will benefit from more democracy, not less.

Notes

[1]. Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

[2]. Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 8.

[3]. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[4]. Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

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Citation: Jim Carl. Review of Zimmerman, Jonathan, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

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