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Gentilucci, Louis T., "History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?" (2014). *Student Publications*. 299.
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History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

Abstract

By viewing bias itself as a product of history, educators and scholars can understand it better in their own times. By studying the historical path of the United States and Denmark, scholars can see that the nature of history can have subtle but important impacts on common education. Even when educators are aware of potential bias, history itself warps its dissemination.

Keywords

Denmark, United States, historical bias, history education

Disciplines

Cultural History | English Language and Literature | History | Intellectual History | International and Comparative Education | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

This project was created for the International Bridge Course, Fall 2014, and was funded by the Mellon International Bridge Course Grant.

The International Bridge Course is a unique opportunity for Gettysburg students to engage in a faculty-mentored research project of their own design over a three-semester period. IBC scholars began their research in semester one, carry out continuing or comparative research while studying abroad in semester two, and complete their research and submit their final project in semester three. Credit is awarded in semester three via an independent study. In this way, students, under the continued mentorship of a faculty member, may truly integrate their study abroad experience with the coursework they have taken on campus.

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History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

Louis Gentilucci, Class of 2015

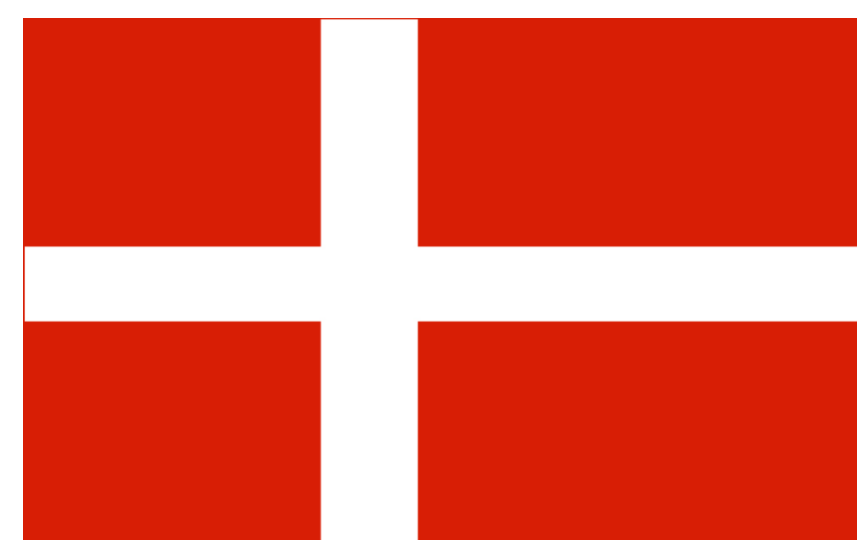
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Historical Bias

The teaching of history is always fraught with bias. From political bias to class bias to race bias, history is in the eye of the beholder. This bias can be observed in causal conversations as well as in academic debates.

But is this concept as universal as we believe, or do Americans suffer from a particularly virulent breed of bias? By examining a country whose history has taken a markedly different trajectory, we can explore how people deal with the historical hand they are dealt.



Case Study: Denmark

Denmark provides an interesting case study to the discerning scholar. It is a much smaller country than the United States. It resides in a distinctly different part of the world, one shaped greatly by the events of the 20th century and beyond. And it is a country of high international standards: 12th in education, 1st in transparency and democracy, and 1st in happiness. With much to emulate, Denmark serves as a prime example for investigation, both to see if its admirable traits include historical honesty and to see how conditions affect the bias of such a small nation.

Danish History

Danish history has two major differences with American history: its length and its expansion.

Denmark traces its history to the Vikings, who terrorized most of the European world throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, Denmark traces its heritage to Harald Bluetooth, the king who established Christianity amongst the Danish people. From the Viking period to the Reformation, Denmark was an expansionist state. Danes were raiding through Europe and the Middle East, exploring the Atlantic, serving as mercenaries, and conquering lands and kingdoms.

A Dane ruled in the British Isles shortly before the Norman Conquest. And the Normans themselves were descended from Danes who had invaded and settled in Normandy. Settlements were founded in Iceland, Greenland, and the Americas. Trade networks were established throughout what would become Russia. And the Danes dominated the North and Baltic Seas.

Denmark reached new heights at the end of the Medieval period. Denmark, at its largest, had lands stretching into Germany, along the Baltic and into Sweden. During the Kalmar Union, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were ruled by the same queen, uniting most of Scandinavia, pushing Denmark to its greatest heights yet.

However, by the end of the Renaissance Period, Denmark had begun to fall from grace. Sweden broke away and declared independence. Meanwhile, larger European nations pushed Denmark out of many colonial ventures in the New World. Sweden constantly tried to expand southward against Denmark, draining Denmark of the will to fight. Defeats followed defeats. During the Napoleonic era, the Danish fleet, the second largest in the world, was utterly destroyed by the British, and Copenhagen was occupied.

The final nail in Denmark's expansionist history was the loss of the duchies of Holstein-Schwig to the Germans and the creation of a powerful German state right on their border. Reduced to a rump state and surrounded by hostile or apathetic nations, Denmark had to do some soul searching to find its way into the 20th century.

Such soul-searching culminated in the declaration of one Danish politician, "To what end?!" when asked for military funding by the crown. Denmark had lost much of its birthright and heritage. The times required a new image and a new strategy.

Classroom Observations: Denmark

I visited two separate Institutions of high school education: Gl. Hellerup Gymnasium and KBH West Gymnasium. The Danish Institute for Study Abroad has an outreach program, DIS Ambassadors, where American students travel to high schools and discuss issues in the U.S. I spoke on several occasions about American policy on topics like gun control and culture, immigration policy, and creationism. I also observed several history classes at the Gl. Hellerup Gymnasium.

The DIS Ambassador visits were very informative. The students were able to readily engage me with in English. And they shared their own opinions and experiences readily. They were also well aware of events in the United States. On one of the classes was on the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, the U.S. as a major topic for many Danish students.

The classroom experience was of a very high quality. The teacher was engaged in a very high level of discussion with the students. Lecturing was used, but it was interspersed with much interaction between students and teachers. Some lessons were completely free to discuss and work with your peers.

In addition, some classes were left to their own devices. Students were expected to complete their work on their own, allowing the teacher to take a hands-off approach to learning when appropriate. Such a degree of freedom was impressive, since the students seemed to be using their time effectively and meaningfully.

The Danish curriculum was more international than its American counterpart. The Danish students could converse well in English and had a fair understanding of American laws and current events. However, this can be misleading in terms of their engagement with the world. U.S. policy can directly affect the lives of Danes, but Danish policy can have no such effect on the U.S. This means that knowing about the United States is more important to Denmark than vice versa. It also does not show how much Danish students are engaged in world events, only in U.S. events.

Other Sources

For my research, I relied on several sources. I joined the DIS Ambassadors program, which allowed me to meet and discuss issues of interest with Danish students and teachers. I observed several history lessons with different teachers and different teaching styles. I interviewed a consultant for the recent educational reforms about her impressions of Danish teaching methods. I also relied upon several personal encounters with Danes, ranging from a newspaper reporter to a tour guide. Finally, there was the extensive literature I studied and used while abroad from my European Memory and Identity course.



Classroom Observations: U.S.

In my observations in the United States, I saw a more direct educational approach. I observed two classes on a weekly basis at Littlestown High School: U.S. Government and Human Psychology.

Of the two, the U.S. Government class served as an excellent comparison to my Danish experience. Here were Americans learning about America, just as the Danes had been learning about America.

The students learned in a very lecture/teacher oriented environment. Students were not overly supervised, but group work was not utilized in the same way. Slideshows and lecture style classes were much more common. Students were sometimes not up-to-date with recent events, and such events had to be included in the curriculum.

One thing that is clear is that the standard of work is lower in the United States than in Denmark. My observation in American schools has shown that the demands on students are low, and they are not reaching them. The quality of work is not by any means extremely poor, however, it lacks the vigor and challenge of the Danish work that I saw.

Students were generally less interested in the material being reviewed. Their lack of engagement was disheartening, but was never fatal to their education.

Students were less concerned with higher education than in Denmark, where it is provided by the government and seen as an indicator of future economic success. Several were just waiting to graduation to get on with their lives. The culture of learning was markedly inferior to that abroad.

The challenges facing the class were greater: greater economic disparity and greater amounts of material to cover. As Americans, these students would necessarily have a global reach to their studies. Every country on Earth would be a valid choice for study, making it harder to properly cover global affairs. And economic differences at home impaired the ability of students to focus on their school work.

Other Sources

In the U.S., my main source of information was my observations in the field. Once a week, for two hours, I would observe two classes taught at Littlestown High School. I consulted with several high school teachers as well as my professors at Gettysburg about how history is taught and why it is taught the way it is. I had the pleasure of teaching two of those classes while in the field and have those first-hand experiences to use. I did research into educational theory and relied on information provided by colleagues in the field. I also had my own personal history to rely upon, as a former high school student in the United States. For my literature I relied upon recommendations from the Education department, as well as works from previous classes.



Context

The trajectory of Danish history has influenced the culture of Denmark and subsequently, the way it remembers its past. Denmark has always had to contend with powerful neighbors, even at its peak. It decline throughout the modern period required a new lens for viewing Danish history. Danish history, by traditional standards, had shown a declining trajectory: lost lands, weakened economy, and defeated ambitions. A much more open and progressive style of teaching was the result of this culturally shift. History was open to discussion because history had not been kind to Denmark. Harsher questions about national identity became acceptable, and teaching conformed itself to this idea.

American history, having taken the opposite trajectory, developed a different cultural view of the past. History was linear, with nothing but unbridled growth and success. Therefore, a straightforward, triumphalist, narrative became the dominate method of teaching education. It fit nicely both with the perception and the realities of American history, allowing it to perpetuate itself.

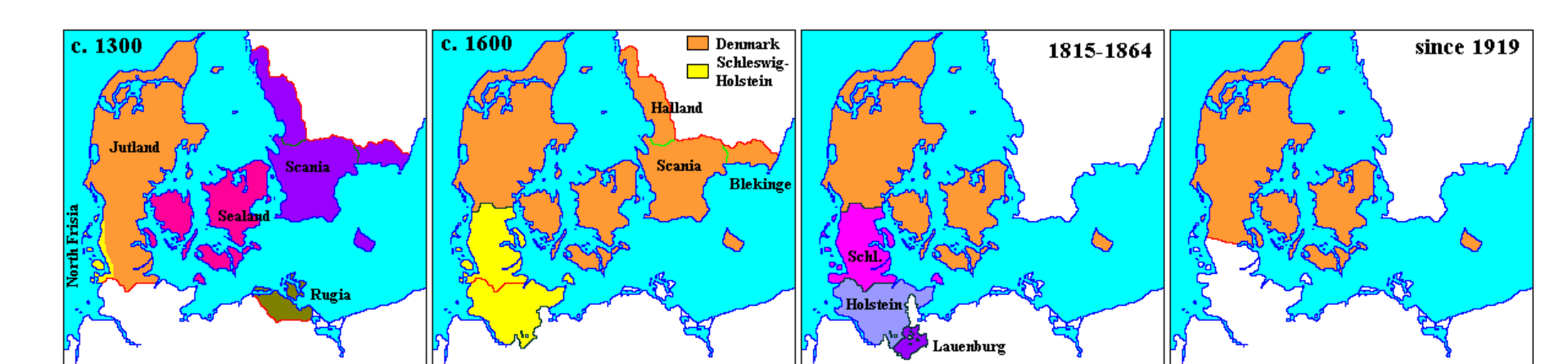
Conclusions

My study was not nearly broad enough to make national generalizations. However, my work has develop a useful perspective for looking at bias in America.

By viewing bias itself as a product of history, educators and scholars can understand it better in their own times.

Danish history has a long train of unrealized ambitions and thwarted expansions. Danes have to address the realities of their nation's history, which confront them every day. It is in their living memory from WWII. It is in their landscape, as Danes enter neighboring countries they once ruled. It is in their policies, as Danes craft an identity to fit their circumstances. Danes are acutely aware of everything Danish outside of Denmark, as a sign to the world that they are here and worthy of attention.

American history, by contrast, is short. The United States is a young country and a young country with an incredible past. It is a nation that known, quite literally, nothing but growth since its inception. In light of this, American history takes on a progressive, positivist view. Is it not reasonable to see how such success could lead to bias at all level of a culture?



Acknowledgments

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