

The Construction of Textbooks on World History

Textbooks are the workhorses of the academic world. They carry heavy educational burdens, but they rarely command the attention that glamorous, best-selling trade books attract. Since they occupy secure positions in educational curricula, most parties presumably agree that textbooks provide useful service by offering introductions to large bodies of information in more or less coherent and digestible compendia. They certainly play prominent educational roles in that they frequently serve as the organizational core of curricula as well as the principal sources of information for student readers. Yet they do not generally elicit passionate responses from their readers, nor do they usually inspire the kinds of spirited public comment, discussion, and debate that greet provocative trade books.

In spite of the relatively low profile of textbooks in general, history textbooks in particular have become the focus of considerable public attention and sometimes animated discussion in recent years. This recent expression of public interest in history textbooks is a global phenomenon. In East Asia debate focuses mostly on the issue of Japanese behavior in World War II as treated in secondary school textbooks used in Japan. In India it revolves around the accuracy of the Hindutva vision of south Asian history. In Europe it confronts the legacies of World War II as well as more general problems that overtly nationalist representations have generated in a region rich with distinctive national and ethnic groups. In the United States it represents a continuation of the culture wars of the late twentieth century in that it deals prominently with social and cultural issues like national identity and multicultural values. In Australia it centers on the nature of the relationship between Aboriginal Australians and European migrants.

Attention to history textbooks has taken several forms. Consider three approaches that illustrate the various ways this attention has manifested itself. In the first place, it often emerges in evaluations or critiques by those who object to the substantive content or the implications of textbooks. This essay will consider several cases of textbook evaluations and critiques by parties unhappy with what they consider to be improper political and ideological teachings. In the second place, groups of educators representing different national or cultural constituencies

have sometimes taken a step beyond criticizing existing works by organizing projects to produce consensus textbooks that avoid the partial perspectives and problematic formulations that have sometimes turned textbooks into political tools rather than instruments of education and enlightenment. German, French, and Polish educators have participated in textbook commissions, for example, that seek to bring focus to multiple perspectives on World War II in Europe, while tentative efforts along similar lines involving Japanese, Chinese, and Korean educators are underway in east Asia. Finally, in at least a few cases, interested constituencies have attained positions of power that have enabled them to rewrite textbooks unilaterally in order to promote their preferred views of the past. Perhaps the most dramatic recent example of textbook production for purposes of promoting specific political views came from the Republic of India, where the Hindu nationalist government (1998–2004) of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Bharatiya Janata Party pulled respectable and responsible history textbooks out of the schools and replaced them with works of crude propaganda touting a mythical past as zealous Hindus would like for it to have been.

In view of all this recently manifested public interest in history textbooks, the Kluge Center in the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.) organized an international conference on the theme “Stories of our Nations, Footprints of our Souls: History Textbooks in Middle Schools and High Schools” (May 2004), and the 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences (Sydney, Australia) featured the International Congress’s first-ever session devoted specifically to textbooks under the title “Textbooks: From the Narrative of the Nation to the Narrative of Citizens” (July 2005). At the same Congress, parallel sessions on world history organized by the International Society for History Didactics focused largely on textbooks. In all cases, these forums brought fascinating international perspectives to bear on questions of history textbooks.

In whatever forms it takes, and in whatever venues it finds expression, this increased public attention to history textbooks is a matter of some interest for professional historians. There are certainly reasons to welcome recent attentiveness, since it indicates a willingness to take seriously the larger political, social, and cultural implications of history education. This point holds true especially when constructive efforts to improve history education accompany investigations and critiques of textbooks. One conspicuous example of an organization dedicated to constructive efforts is the European Standing Conference of History Teachers’ Associations known as EUROCLIO. Since its foundation in 1993, EUROCLIO has worked to professionalize history teachers and

move beyond exceedingly nationalist history curricula that have inflamed uncritical passions, nourished memories of grievances, and wielded all too much influence in European educational systems. (Unfortunately, for lack of funding, EUROCLIO has dramatically downsized its programs beginning in 2006.) Yet there are also less constructive interventions into debates and discussions of textbooks. Much of the recent commentary on textbooks has come from parties promoting political or ideological causes with scant concern for the discoveries, reasoning, or perspectives of professional historical scholarship. In some cases, the positions staked out by these parties merit the label propaganda rather than respectable historical analysis.

Like all other expressions of historical thought, textbooks of course are cultural and intellectual constructions presenting some variety of situated knowledge rather than neutral, objective, final, or definitive accounts of the past. Indeed, in view of the various interests that inform them, the constructed nature of textbooks is perhaps even more obvious and more overt than is the case with other forms or expressions of historical knowledge. At least five distinct constituencies – textbook authors, textbook publishers, the scholarly community, student readers, and the general public – hold sometimes overlapping but also frequently conflicting or competing interests that leave more or less clear marks on textbooks in history.

Analysis of these constituencies, their interests, and their influence on textbooks in various fields of history would make a large and fascinating study. Here I would like to make a contribution to one chapter of that larger study by exploring the attention recently directed to textbooks in world history for use in high schools and colleges in the USA. This focus might seem somewhat narrow, in that it deals with textbooks in one field of history from a single land. Yet debate on these textbooks holds significant implications. World history has established its place in the educational curriculum more securely in the USA than in other lands, and many of the issues under discussion are generalizable to debates on textbooks in other fields of history and other lands as well.

First, let me outline briefly and in general terms (what I take to be) the principal interests of the five constituencies mentioned above. As for textbook authors, quite apart from pecuniary hopes or incentives, I would like to suggest that most if not all of them also believe they possess some special ability to make some kind of constructive contribution to the larger society. Most textbook authors are presumptuous enough to think they enjoy rare talents for interpreting the findings of professional historical scholarship and communicating them to audiences beyond the

community of professional historians. Moreover, they are often brazen enough to imagine that they have some peculiar insight or wisdom about the past that is crucially important to impart to their readers. As professional historians themselves, textbook authors naturally seek to reflect the best contemporary scholarship in their works. As mediators between the academic world and the larger society, however, they seek further to make historical scholarship useful by drawing out its implications for large audiences of lay readers who are largely unschooled in the finer points of historical analysis. They do so sometimes by instigating dialogues between the past and the present, often by explicitly comparing different societies. Most textbook authors stop short of overtly endorsing specific political, cultural, religious, or ideological positions, although a few unabashedly use their textbooks as vehicles for the communication and advocacy of their personal preferences. In any case, generally speaking, authors of textbooks in world history believe they possess some particular insight into the ways of the world, and they seek to demonstrate the significance of historical awareness for the understanding of the global past and contemporary issues as well.

If textbook authors have financial interests in their work, the stakes are even higher for publishers, who might invest a million dollars or more in the initial production of a major textbook in world history. In return for their massive investments, publishers obviously work energetically to develop projects that will succeed in the marketplace. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the quest for profits squeezes out the concern for quality, for at least two reasons. In the first place, publishers' editorial and marketing staffers are intelligent and reflective professionals who themselves seek to make constructive contributions to the larger society. Even if corporate officers constantly push for increasing sales and profits, my own experience is that editors and marketing professionals, who unlike corporate officers wield direct influence on the actual construction of textbooks, are just as deeply conscientious as textbook authors in their concern to serve larger social purposes as well as corporate interests. Furthermore, in the world of textbooks, and particularly those used in the world of higher education, commercial success hinges crucially on meeting the needs and interests of instructors who assign books for their courses. Publishers consult extensively with instructors for advice on their projects, and they commission much more professional reviewing of textbooks than is the case for scholarly articles and monographs. While instructors certainly take students' needs and interests into account, they demand good scholarship above all else. Publishers certainly have abundant incentive to enhance the appeal of

their textbooks for student readers, but their understanding of student needs and interests comes almost exclusively through the filter of instructors' evaluations. Thus in light of the advice they receive from their principal consultants, publishers have strong interests in the observance of the highest professional standards: commercial success depends directly on the development of textbooks that reflect high-quality scholarship. This point holds true for the world of secondary education as well as higher education, although it is true, as several commentators have recently observed, that publishers of high school textbooks also pay attention to the views of various interest groups as well as professional scholars.

Interests of the larger scholarly community, particularly instructors who assign textbooks for their students, overlap those of textbook authors – not surprisingly, since most textbook authors are also scholars and instructors themselves. The scholarly community obviously demands the observance of high academic standards and the integration of recent scholarship. Yet different instructors seek very different combinations of the myriad potential topics that any given textbook in world history might address – ancient times, the contemporary world, Europe, Africa, women, gender, politics, social history, intellectual history, religious history, and so on – according to their own professional interests and commitments. Furthermore, the world of history education is so varied that different instructors look for very different qualities in their textbooks. Some prefer compact textbooks that offer broad outlines of the global past but little detail – particularly those whose students cannot or will not read extensively because of work or family obligations. Others prefer textbooks that are almost encyclopedic – particularly those seeking to provide their students with a single volume including historical narrative as well as primary source excerpts, discussion of historiographical issues, attention to historical methods, and other features that support a course in world history. A few have abandoned textbooks altogether in favor of readings that focus on particular themes rather than attempting to survey all the world's past. Most, however, continue to rely on comprehensive textbooks that provide reasonably coherent narratives and reasonably thorough discussions of the world's major societies while resisting temptations to swamp readers with detail that does not immediately serve to substantiate the analysis. This is an elusive middle ground, which is the more difficult for authors to find when they are also seeking to integrate the most important recent scholarship and devote attention to issues of high historiographical significance.

As for the students who are the principal readers of world history textbooks, a widely held popular suspicion suggests that many want little more than information that will enable them to do well on the next exam. My own experience in the classroom confirms that this suspicion holds true for some indeterminate number of students. For that group we can at least hope that our courses and textbooks in world history will plant intellectual time bombs that will detonate in some future day and prompt the development of a more sophisticated approach to the world that these students inhabit. Yet it is also clear to me that the popular impression of students as dullards has limited value. Both at my own university and elsewhere I have encountered students who read carefully and think critically about their textbooks. Some of the most incisive comments and spirited queries that have reached me in connection with my own textbook have come from high-school students reading the book for their AP courses in world history. An intermittent stream of messages from these students (sometimes forwarded by their instructors) demonstrates that many students take their courses and their textbooks seriously, read them carefully and critically, and reflect thoughtfully on the messages they encounter. My sense is that alongside those who regard the study of history as a needless bother, some indeterminate number of students takes their study of the past as an opportunity to understand themselves in time and bring historical perspective to their own experiences. For these students, up-to-date scholarship is obviously crucial, as are features such as maps, illustrations, and primary source excerpts that textbooks offer in hopes of illuminating the global past. Another indispensable element is guidance in digesting the best available scholarship and in using it to think critically about the world and its development through time. This characteristic calls for a narrative that prompts students into active and constructive engagement with the world beyond their own society by motivating them to understand it as the product of development through time under specific historical conditions rather than despising or dismissing different peoples, different values, and different social orders because they are unfamiliar or unappealing.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the general public has an enormous stake in world history textbooks and education in world history more generally. After all, general education in world history is not a purely scholarly or academic activity. Rather, insofar as it shapes the ways citizens and voters understand the world in which they live, and insofar as their understanding of that world influences their choices of political leaders, world history textbooks and courses have profound

political implications. In the USA, efforts to articulate the larger public interest in world history have come in several forms, including expressions of individual views in books or essays, reports by commissions that make recommendations about history education, and the work of numerous individuals such as state legislators, local education officials, and members of review boards who seek to represent the public interest when they determine what topics are essential for courses in world history and which textbooks are acceptable for use in their jurisdictions. It is not a simple matter to gauge the general public's interest, understanding, and opinions about textbooks in world history. Some of the most influential individuals work on boards or commissions that review textbooks but do not issue formal, published explanations of their decisions. In these cases it is difficult at best to understand the reasons why some textbooks find favor while others languish. Recently, however, several individuals and groups have published discussions of textbooks or issued public evaluations of textbooks that offer opportunities to take some soundings of lay public opinions about textbooks in world history.

Even on the basis of a cursory consideration it is clear that the interests of these five constituencies overlap to some extent but also offer ample opportunity for conflict and competition. Opportunities for debate and dispute are particularly plentiful at points where professional historical scholarship has generated perspectives that diverge from long-held, widely-shared, and deep-rooted popular views on the nature and purposes of education in history. Granting that no textbook will please all readers, to what extent might it be possible to negotiate the interests of these various constituencies so as to produce world history textbooks that are as meaningful and responsible as possible?

The task of negotiating interests falls largely to textbook authors as guided by their publishers, the evaluations their publishers solicit from instructors, and any comments they might receive from students or the general public. Tensions arise when authors seeking to prepare focused, analytical accounts face calls by the dozens or scores (or hundreds) to devote increased attention to the myriad chronological, regional, and thematic topics that are dear to instructors, students, and others who comment on books in progress of development or revision. Even if they wanted to please everybody, textbook authors and publishers readily understand that they would not be able to do so. Nevertheless, even when they are selective in their efforts to respond as best they can to those suggestions that reflect good current scholarship and that hold best potential to strengthen their works, authors and publishers run the risk of

swamping their textbooks with so much information as to compromise their analytical integrity and render them intellectually indigestible.

Decisions concerning the economics of inclusion or exclusion of specific information can be difficult to make. Yet two other issues – one intellectual, the other ideological – strike me as larger and more substantive problems for textbooks in world history. At the present moment, in my view, the single biggest intellectual challenge for textbooks in world history is the integration of women's history, gender history, and social history more generally into a persuasive analysis of the global past. Reviewers persistently call for more and better attention to these approaches, and rightly so, since they represent some of the most important historiographical developments of recent decades. While world historians have done a generally good job of integrating environmental history, economic history, and the history of technology into their analyses of the global past, they have experienced much greater difficulty with women's history, gender history, and social history. One reason for this difficulty is that scholars have conceived and studied women's history, gender history, and social history almost exclusively within the contexts of individual societies that are supposedly distinct and ostensibly coherent, most of which are indeed national societies.¹ The metanarratives informing these approaches suggest that gender and class are historical categories of universal significance, or very nearly so, but as a matter of everyday historical practice, scholars have conceived and explored women's history, gender history, and social history almost exclusively within the frameworks of national histories rather than in cross-cultural, transregional, or global contexts.

As most practitioners currently understand it today, however, world history as a distinctive approach to the past concentrates on comparative, cross-cultural, systematic, and global analyses of processes that cross the boundary lines of societies rather than the study of social dynamics within national states or individual societies. It is certainly possible for textbooks to incorporate recent scholarship on women's history, gender history, and social history when they discuss individual lands, and indeed most of them are increasingly doing so in their successive editions. It has proven more difficult to develop fresh approaches that make women's history, gender history, and social history central to global historical analysis, although Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Peter Stearns, and

1 See for example Joan W. Scott's influential programmatic essay on Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis, in: *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-75, which conceives of gender as a focus of historical analysis exclusively in the framework of national communities.

others have begun to chart some promising new directions.² How might historians make the roles of women, gender, and social relations central rather than peripheral issues in the analysis of large-scale historical processes such as the Indo-European migrations, the African diaspora, trade and exchange over the silk roads, the spread of missionary religions, the Columbian exchange, and the like? What are the implications of women's history, gender history, and social history for grand narratives of world history that seek to bring these and other similar processes into clear historical focus? Recent scholarship has offered limited guidance on these questions. Yet large-scale historical processes are some of the defining frameworks of world history as presented in textbooks and introductory courses, so in order for women's history, gender history, and social history to play larger roles in world history, scholars presenting basic research and textbook authors will all need to find imaginative ways to promote integration of intellectual projects that have heretofore followed largely separate paths.

The second big issue, to which I would like to devote a more expansive discussion, has to do with ideological matters. This issue directly engages the distinct interests, as outlined earlier, of textbook authors, student readers, and the general public. Like most other historians, authors of world history textbook flatter themselves with the notion that they possess some special insight into the nature of the world and its development through time, and they view their books as works that can communicate their understanding to larger audiences. In the realm of higher education, authors of world history textbooks mostly take a fairly eclectic approach and seek to accord due attention, as appropriate, to political, social, economic, cultural, gender, technological, and environmental issues. The prevailing assumption at the level of college and university education seems to be that a reasonably balanced account of the past with minimal sermonizing will help readers develop useful perspectives on the global past and the contemporary world. It of course

2 Merry Wiesner-Hanks has called for comparative and cross-cultural approaches to women's history and gender history in several recent publications: *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London, 2000); *Gender in History* (Oxford, 2001); and *World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality*, in: *Journal of World History* (forthcoming). Peter Stearns has recently called for closer integration of world history and social history: *Social History and World History: Prospects for Collaboration*, in: *Journal of World History* (forthcoming). Peter Gran has also sought to develop a global social history, but his project has numerous problems, and it has attracted limited interest to date. See P. Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History*, Syracuse, NY 1996.

goes without saying that historical knowledge always reflects some set of ideological principles or implies some understanding of the dynamics governing historical development. As a result, it is inevitable that even when they strive for balance and resist temptations to promote their personal views in overt fashion, textbook authors offer accounts that emphasize their own best understandings and explanations for historical development, which in turn reflect their larger conceptions of the world and the dynamics governing its development. Yet in spite of the occasional (or perhaps inevitable) political or ideological tinge, textbooks intended for college and university students have not commonly become the focus of intense debate on political or ideological issues.

The situation is rather different in the realm of secondary education, which has recently been a site of particularly contentious debate and discussion. Controversy has arisen partly because of concerns that authors have smuggled their personal views into textbooks and partly because of worries that high school textbooks in world history (as well as other fields of study) have been highly susceptible to various pressures to use the historical record as a point of departure for the promotion of social policies, ideological positions, and even religious preferences. To a large extent this problem arises because authors and publishers of high school textbooks must take account of numerous school boards, interest groups, and review agencies that all push for the inclusion of specific information or the development of specific perspectives in textbooks. Diane Ravitch has recently complained with considerable cogency about the skewing of high school textbooks so as to push particular social agendas by sanitizing the historical record, censoring objectionable information, or using the past to reinforce contemporary values. In doing so, she has drawn attention to everyday practices of interest groups, educational agencies, and publishing houses that sometimes result in obfuscation or even outright distortion in world history textbooks used in secondary schools. At the same time, she has also argued that textbooks should present very conservative, patriotic accounts that cast American history and American political values in favorable light while pointing out the flaws of other societies.³

Ravitch is one of the more cogent contemporary critics of high school textbooks. Although she promotes a highly conservative agenda, Ravitch presents a thoroughly principled critique, and she also offers a series of constructive suggestions for improvement of textbooks. In the cases of some other recently published evaluations of world history

3 D. Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, New York, 2003.

textbooks, unfortunately, educational and intellectual principles have not thrived so well in their contest with destructive critical impulses and even with conservative political ideology, which has sometimes become the principal criterion for the evaluation of textbooks. A brief look at the work produced by two textbook evaluation projects will lend substance to these points.

One project was an initiative of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an affiliate of the very conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, which promotes reforms to improve primary and secondary education.⁴ Since 2002, the Fordham Foundation has sponsored a series of reports and publications that invoke the tragedies of September 2001 to promote the teaching of patriotic values in social studies and history courses.⁵ Entitled *A Consumer's Guide to High School History Textbooks*, the report discussed here presents ratings of twelve textbooks widely used in American schools – six for courses in U.S. history and another half-dozen for courses in world history. The report appeared under the name of Diane Ravitch, although it is clear that Ravitch served more as organizer, compiler, and editor than as author of the report. The procedure adopted for the evaluation of the textbooks, as outlined in the report itself, was the following: Ravitch selected individuals to serve as reviewers of the chosen texts (four reviewers for the U.S. history texts, five reviewers for the world history texts); Ravitch and the reviewers collaborated to develop a set of criteria for evaluation; each of the reviewers read all six of the chosen textbooks (presumably from cover to cover) in either U.S. history or world history; the reviewers independently rated and commented on all the textbooks that they read; Ravitch compiled their individual contributions and edited them into the final report.

The panel of reviewers for world history textbooks included a university professor of education who is particularly knowledgeable about Japanese history, an instructor of AP world history who holds a Ph.D. in Japanese-American foreign relations, a university professor who is a specialist in the history of early modern European science, another university professor who is a specialist in the Renaissance and early modern

4 D. Ravitch, *A Consumer's Guide to High School History Textbooks*, Washington, D.C. 2004.

5 The other reports include the following: Ch. E. Finn, Jr. et al., *September 11: What Our Children Need to Know*, Washington, D.C. 2002; Ch. E. Finn, Jr. et al., *Terrorists, Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know*, Washington, D.C. 2003; J. Leming/L. Ellington/K. Porter (eds.), *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*, Washington, D.C. 2003; and S. Stotsky, *The Stealth Curriculum: Manipulating America's History Teachers*, Washington, D.C. 2004.

English history, and an expert in contemporary foreign relations. The reviewers are all quite distinguished in their own fields. It is notable, however, that none of the five manifests any familiarity with recent scholarship in world history, nor is there any sign that any of them has grappled with the substantive issues and genuine problems of world history as a subfield in the larger discipline of history. Although they have not hesitated to subject the chosen textbooks to stern critique, none of them has published a textbook in world history or otherwise contributed to scholarly historical analysis from transregional or global perspectives.

Nevertheless, any review can be useful, and any critique can be enlightening, both for instructors seeking a textbook for their classrooms and for authors who will sooner or later prepare revised editions of their works. The reviews and critiques presented in the *Consumer's Guide* bear this point out, and readers will determine for themselves the extent to which the report contributes usefully to the larger debates and discussions about world history textbooks. Here I would like to observe that the report exhibits several problems that compromise its value. One problem is that Ravitch, the report's organizer, hand-picked a team of reviewers and chose them on unspecified criteria. It is interesting that many if not most of the reviewers' comments resonate closely with Ravitch's own previously published views. There is little reason why readers of the report should place particular credibility in the review panel or regard it as suitable for its task. Another problem is that the reviewers appear to have paid closest attention to discussions in their own fields of specialization. Time and again, the reviewer with expertise in early modern European science faulted textbook discussions of the scientific revolution, while the reviewer with expertise in the Renaissance cited shortcomings in treatments of that era, and the reviewers knowledgeable about Japan dwelt on factual errors in discussions of Japanese history. Yet another problem, following from the second, is that the panel did not include a single reviewer familiar with recent scholarship in world history who could have paid attention to textbook treatments of global issues. Not surprisingly, the criteria for evaluation make no place for the consideration of large-scale transregional and global processes, and in twenty pages of commentary on world history textbooks, there is not a single mention of any global historical process. It is difficult to resist the inference that the Fordham Institute recruited reviewers and commissioned an evaluation of textbooks in order to lend the cover of academic credibility to the project organizers' preexisting opinions.

A second effort to review world history textbooks is the work of Gilbert T. Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council, which is the operational unit of the Center for Education Studies. Both the American Textbook Council and the Center for Education Studies are extremely conservative agencies, and indeed it would not be unfair to characterize them as organizations aligned with right-wing political interests.⁶ As representative of the American Textbook Council, Sewall has intervened frequently in debates on history curricula. He recently issued two online reports that subject high school textbooks in world history to ideologically charged critiques. "Islam and the Textbooks" assesses treatments of Islam in high school textbooks on world history, while "World History Textbooks: A Review" offers a more general critique of high school textbooks on world history.⁷

Sewall appears to be the sole author of "Islam and the Textbooks," which criticized treatments of Islam in seven popular world history textbooks. The 35-page report focuses on four issues: the concept of *jihad*, the nature of *sharia*, slavery in the Islamic world, and the position of women in the Islamic world. The author consistently characterized the Islamic world as radically different and darkly threatening to American society. The report's opening lines strike an ominous chord: "How classrooms deal with Islamic aggression is an unresolved school-related question of great importance" (p. 5). In fact, Sewall's report does not offer a review of the seven textbooks so much as a running complaint that their treatments fail to characterize Islam in sufficiently negative terms. The report holds that *jihad* refers almost exclusively to holy war, and it insists that *sharia* is "not a legal system as Americans understand it" but rather "an accreted medley of precepts, proscriptions, and religious devotions tied to the Koran, interpreted as dicta by an authoritarian, priestly caste" (p. 14, with emphasis in the original). The report's discussions of slavery and women's roles are equally tendentious. Throughout its pages, the report overlooks the large library of respectable scholarship that demonstrates the complexity and diversity of Islam in favor of scare-mongering ideology that portrays Islam as an alien and

6 According to the organization Media Transparency, the Center for Education Studies has derived its financial support for its programs, including textbook evaluations by the American Textbook Council, from extremely conservative and right-wing foundations such as the John M. Olin Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the John Templeton Foundation, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. See <www.mediatransparency.org>.

7 G. T. Sewall, *Islam and the Textbooks*, New York 2003; and *World History Textbooks: A Review*, New York 2004. Both reports are available on the website of the American Textbook Council.

threatening specter. The tenor of Sewall's report is readily apparent in the questions the author would like textbooks to address: "Why have Muslims provoked fear in adjacent civilizations since the seventh century?" and "Why do Muslims so often have difficulty living with their neighbors?" among others (p. 28). Since the textbooks under review do not dwell on questions such as these, the report laments, "American students lose the chance to compare American and 'Western' constitutional values – favorably, one would hope, even triumphantly – to other political systems and ideologies" (p. 28).

Thus Sewall's preferred textbook discussions of Islam would seek to reinforce a conservative, patriotic American identity by pitting it against a disagreeable, alien foil characterized as a dangerous and monolithic "Islam" rather than helping students understand the Islamic faith and the historical processes that have influenced the Islamic world in its development through time.⁸ Indeed, it is not inconceivable that Sewall had even more direct political purposes in mind for his report, which he released in February 2003, on the eve of U.S. President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. In light of this timing, it is difficult to suppress the conjecture that Sewall understood his report as one part of the larger campaign to justify the launching of a widely unpopular and highly dubious military operation.

In "World History Textbooks: A Review," Sewall broadened the scope of his review. This 35-page report appeared under Sewall's name, but it draws selectively on comments offered by four conservative reviewers who provided critiques of six textbooks for courses in world history and world cultures for use in grades six through twelve. One of the four reviewers was the same university professor of education with expertise in Japanese history who served also on Diane Ravitch's review panel. The other three included another university professor of education (since deceased) who was knowledgeable in European history, a prominent conservative critic of contemporary society, and a book critic. As in the case of Ravitch's panel, none of these reviewers was conversant with recent scholarship in world history, nor had any of them contributed to

8 Alongside Sewall's report, see also a cogent critique and rebuttal written by Susan Douglass on behalf of the Council on Islamic Education: The Council on Islamic Education's Response to the American Textbook Council Report 'Islam and the Textbooks' (2003). This document is accessible on the website of the Council on Islamic Education website. From Sewall's rejoinder, it is clear that Fred Donner, a distinguished historian of early Islamic society, also issued a strongly worded rebuke of Sewall's report. See G. T. Sewall, *Islam and the Textbooks: A Reply to the Critics* (December 2003), which is accessible on the website of the American Textbook Council.

the understanding of substantive issues and genuine problems of world history as a field of scholarship. From several references in the report, it appears that Sewall also drew on comments from an indeterminate number of unnamed teachers and university historians who did not serve on the panel of reviewers. The report provides only the briefest mention of the issues that the reviewers examined. It does not explain how the team developed criteria or how reviewers went about their work.

“World History Textbooks: A Review” reiterates many charges familiar from Diane Ravitch’s various critiques. The report faults textbooks for poor writing, incoherent discussions, trivial presentations, meaningless classroom activities, promotion of social policies, and distracting clutter in the forms of cartoons and sidebars. The report charges also that the textbooks under review subject European and Euro-American peoples to stern critique while glossing over the problems of other societies and that they spend too much time on insignificant topics like medieval women and sub-Saharan Africa while ignoring more important issues like the Enlightenment and modern science. More than other interventions, Sewall’s report holds that textbooks should make student readers aware who are the friends and who are the enemies of the United States. This point is clear from several passages, including discussions of the Soviet Union, Islamic terrorism, and the following passage on Fidel Castro:

What is missing [in one textbook’s treatment of Cuba] or at least very hard to discern? That Fidel Castro is dictator [*sic*] who has crushed his people for forty years. He has aided and abetted U.S. enemies in the hemisphere by stirring up unrest. He promotes drug trafficking in cocaine. As such, he menaces the U.S. and preys on its underclass. Why is the U.S. doing nothing to free Cuba while it is making efforts to build democracy in the Middle East? Textbooks are silent on this and other timely geopolitical subjects (p. 25).

From this passage and others it appears that in Sewall’s view, some principal purposes of education in world history are to endorse contemporary American political and social values, to legitimize them by focusing attention on their deep historical roots, and to justify American historical experience, including the projection of American influence into the larger world. The practical effect of this approach is to promote friendly discussions of American historical experience and generous treatments of societies that anticipated American political and social values or that contributed to their development, while portraying other societies as cautionary examples of paths to avoid. This “patriotic world history” (as I have called it in another essay) differs profoundly from

most professional historical scholarship, which seeks to understand the world through rigorous analysis of its development through time.⁹ The goal of most professional historical scholarship is to bring the best available evidence and reasoning to bear on the general efforts to discern patterns of continuity and change in human experience and to understand the dynamics that have driven historical development, without preconceived favor or prejudice to any political or ideological persuasion. By contrast, patriotic world history becomes something like a handmaiden to American identity and even a bulwark of support for American policy.

It is clear from a consideration of their textbook review projects that the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the American Textbook Council have not found effective ways to intervene in discussions about education in world history. Meaningful contributions to the debates will need to reflect familiarity and engagement with the large volume of area studies and world history scholarship that has emerged over the past several decades. Participants in the debates on world history need to do their homework and learn something about the shape of the larger global past and the nature of the world beyond their own society. In their quests for a usable past, however, Ravitch, Sewall, and other exponents of patriotic world history have promoted representations of the global past that reflect their own political and ideological commitments rather than the best available historical scholarship. In extreme cases, the advocates of patriotic world history abuse the educational system by seeking to turn textbooks and curricula into soap boxes on which they promote their preferred political and ideological positions.¹⁰

There are much better ways to teach world history and represent the global past in textbooks. My own opinion is that both student readers and the general public have interests in a more ecumenical world history that seeks to understand the world and its development through time by way of rigorous, hard-headed, critical analysis that refrains from special ideological pleading in the expectation that this study will foster the development of good judgment about the world and its ways among students who will soon take their places as citizens, voters, and leaders. The kind of ecumenical world history that I have in mind would not deny recognition to peoples or societies on the grounds that they did not

9 For a discussion and critique of "patriotic world history," see J. H. Bentley, *Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History*, in: *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), pp. 51-82.

10 For discussion of some extreme cases, see *ibid.*, and F. R.A. Paterson, *Democracy and Intolerance: Christian School Curricula, School Choice, and Public Policy*, Bloomington 2003.

contribute to American political and social values. Nor would it turn the study of history into a game in which those peoples who anticipated contemporary American values win praise while others merit condemnation or simply disappear from view. Rather it would seek to understand the dynamics that have molded the world in its development through time, paying attention as needed to the roles of all peoples who were active participants in the processes that shaped the world's historical development. It would do so by drawing on the best available scholarship rather than building a vision of the global past around the assumption that American political and social values are superior to all others.

My point is not that there is some neutral or objective approach to world history that is free of ideological entanglements: we all know that is not the case. Yet there are many respectable approaches to world history that do not enslave the global past to some particular political or ideological agenda. The kind of ecumenical world history that I have in mind would help students and citizens learn to deal constructively with the world beyond their own societies by engaging it in active study and understanding it as the product of development under specific circumstances through time, rather than simply assuming that different peoples, different values, and different forms of social organization are suspect or dangerous because they are unfamiliar. Because the United States are so wealthy, powerful, and influential, American students and citizens have a moral responsibility to make special efforts to understand the larger world and the effects of American policies in the larger world. Ecumenical world history will not provide easy or automatic answers to specific policy questions, but it stands to reason that honest, rigorous, reflexive study of the global past can help foster the development of good judgment among students and citizens about the world and its ways. Ecumenical world history is a noble and inspiring goal for those seeking to construct world history textbooks that serve the needs of students who are striving to understand the nature of the interconnected, interdependent, globalizing world of the twenty-first century.