

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher R. Leahey. *Whitewashing War: Historical Myth, Corporate Textbooks, and Possibilities for Democratic Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010. xiv + 146 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8077-5043-8; \$52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8077-5044-5.

Reviewed by Campbell Scribner (History and Educational Policy, University of Wisconsin)
Published on H-Education (August, 2010)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



Unjust Criticism of an Unjust War

Christopher R. Leahey is upset about how high school textbooks handle the issue of war. He believes that free-market educational policies, together with state and national curriculum standards, have encouraged publishers to avoid critical discussion of the causes and consequences of conflict. The result, he claims, is a narrative “scrubbed of controversy, new research, and alternative perspectives,” which forecloses critical thinking and perpetuates a patriotic “myth of war” (pp. 39, 90). Leahey, a history teacher in upstate New York, began exploring this topic in 2003 when his students analyzed media coverage of the War in Iraq. It became the subject of his dissertation and, now, of his first book, *Whitewashing War*. In some ways, *Whitewashing War* is a model of effective public history: it combines up-to-date historical scholarship, educational theory, and ready-made lesson plans in a slim, easy-to-read volume. No doubt it will be well received in schools of education and will be read by thousands of aspiring teachers. Hopefully, they will learn that “authentic historical inquiry treats knowledge as tentative, tolerates ambiguity, and leaves itself open to new information, interpretations, and ways of thinking” (p. 100). I worry, however, about some of the other lessons that it tries to impart.

Whitewashing War seeks to “uncover the overt and subtle ways that ideology shapes textbook treatments of the Vietnam War” (p. 4). It relies heavily on critical theory, an approach that asks “whose interests are being served by the textbook, methods, and curricula we use to

reconstruct the past” (p. 17). Specifically, Leahey points to elements of the testing and textbook industries that are dysfunctional and blatantly antidemocratic. The standards movement has diverted billions of dollars to private corporations while replacing “authentic instruction and open-minded inquiry” with rote memorization that minimizes the history of nondominant groups (p. 40). The curriculum narrows further when large states like Texas and California adopt statewide book lists—effectively setting standards for the nation—and publishers alter material to meet their requirements. As Leahey points out, “if the TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills test] specifically mentions South Africa’s Desmond Tutu, it is guaranteed that Desmond Tutu will obtain a prominent position in new [textbook] editions. If a largely unknown figure in antiquity, Eratosthenes, appears on the TEKS list, he too will flourish” (p. 37). Not only are these concepts arbitrary and atomized, but their sheer volume also imposes a new kind of discipline on social studies teachers. “Faced with hundreds of curricular objectives and measured by standardized exam scores,” teachers do not have the freedom to deviate from prescribed lesson plans and “have little choice but to choose ... a small number of corporate textbooks [as] the primary source of historical information” (p. 99). Finally, he argues that publishers moderate their depictions of contentious issues like war so as “not to offend the right or left” and ensure “state adoption and high sales” (p. 37).

All of these criticisms are true. However, while crit-

ical theory can generate valuable insights, it also allows Leahey to cobble disparate phenomena into an oversimplified ideological edifice. *Whitewashing War* opens and closes with denunciations of “conservative” educational policies, a category broad enough to encompass military recruiters on campus, the McDonald’s All-American basketball game, “duplicitous” corporations that promote both public health journals and gun shows, and legislative opposition to the national history standards in the mid-1990s (pp. 5, 9-13, 24, 30). For Leahey, this patchwork of examples signifies an ideological bloc that dominates school curriculum. For me, it too easily conflates military and business interests, rendering monolithic what critical theorist Michael Apple has described as a “complex, tense, and contradictory alliance” among disparate conservative groups. In the process, it confuses patriotism with the profit motive and contrasts both with an idealized image of grassroots democracy.[1]

Leahey blames corporations for “[purging] content that may be considered objectionable” but never mentions the parties who have objected to it in the first place: legislators; school boards; and, behind them, actual voters (p. 94). It is worth pointing out that most social movements—even those on the Left—have refused to engage in the kind of social criticism that he demands. As Jonathan Zimmerman observes, while “diversity and critical history both remain worthy goals [we] should resist the easy presupposition that one will spawn the other,” for even groups marginal in the United States have rarely “questioned [its] larger themes of freedom, equality, and opportunity” in their pursuit of justice.[2] That was the primary reason that the Senate unanimously condemned national history standards in 1995 and why even stalwart liberals like Senator Diane Feinstein from California demanded that teachers not “interpret history” but “simply [put] forward historical facts based on the validity of the fact and the historical value” (p. 11). Leahey is right that this sort of moderate, ostensibly objective history reinforces the status quo; he is wrong to write it off as a miscarriage of democracy by shadowy corporations. The deeper question facing scholars is how to foster critical, democratic education when hegemonic values seem to be inscribed in the democratic process itself.

Critical theorists have usually dealt with this paradox by working locally, replacing textbooks’ “official knowledge” with student- and community-driven curriculum (p. 4). At times, Leahey draws from this tradition, castigating publishers for assuming that “teachers and students need outside experts and political elites to guide them in crafting curricula” and for ignoring the “local

needs of ... diverse student populations” (pp. 16, 41). But he is inconsistent on the point. He does not want to get rid of textbooks altogether, only “corporate textbooks” and the “in-house writers” that sap them of controversy (pp. 34-35, 59). Nor does he necessarily prefer local, nonelite histories to authoritative narratives produced by “outside experts”: he discounts the opinions of conservative activists like Mel and Norma Gabler because they do not hold college degrees and repeatedly claims that the writing of “professional historians” would inherently improve existing textbooks (pp. 38, 59). This seemingly contradictory position derives from his misapprehension and misapplication of historical truth.

Behind Leahey’s vision of textbook reform is an assumption that there is historical consensus on Vietnam; that it is real, not a myth; and that it vindicates his ideological views about war in general. All of those are specious claims, but the first is the strongest: most historians agree that the U.S. government escalated the war under false pretenses and that it was a mistake. However, since U.S. involvement in Vietnam has become widely unpopular with the public as well as with historians, mainstream portrayals of the conflict conform fairly closely to scholarly work by historians and do not yield the sort of “whitewashed” passages that Leahey’s title suggests. In fact, by equating moderation with hegemony Leahey sets himself the awkward task of objecting to the unobjectionable, giving much of the book a tone of overreaction.

Consider how various textbooks describe the Gulf of Tonkin incident: “Few Americans questioned the president’s account of the incident. Years later, however, it was revealed that Johnson withheld the truth from the public and Congress”; “Johnson did not reveal that American warships had been helping the South Vietnamese”; and “President Johnson said [the American ships] were attacked without cause.” Later it appeared that South Vietnamese gunboats had been making raids on the North. “Johnson claimed that the attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin were unprovoked. In reality, however, the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* had been spying in support of South Vietnamese raids ... and had fired first” (p. 50). These passages may not present the subtlest rendering of the incident but they do capture the confusion, contingencies, and ambiguities that surround it. They hardly constitute “the smooth flow of events [behind] the United States’ decision to escalate the war” that Leahey suggests or an uncritically “patriotic rendering of the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis” (pp. 45, 62). The same holds true for his later claims about “patriotic descriptions of the Tet

Offensive” and the My Lai massacre (pp. 88, 91). None of them proves that publishers purposely “avoid any elements that would disrupt or mar their efforts to establish a patriotic or benevolent imperialist rationale for American involvement,” and, frankly, if these are the most damning examples that Leahey can provide, one is not inclined to credit his other, unproven assertions that textbooks actively “divert students’ attention away from ... covert war” or that anything less than a full account of the army’s cover-up at My Lai constitutes a “textbook cover-up” (pp. 15-16, 51, 62, 88).

Leahey’s proposals for textbook reform are even more problematic. To end the “cover-up,” he writes, textbooks must include more details. Or, at least more of the *right* details. On the one hand, he argues that students will only understand the “true,” “accurate,” and “balanced” history of Vietnam by reading pages and pages about American aggression, “mercenaries,” and massacres (pp. 51-52). They must read statistics about drug use and look at photographs of the dead, for “to include this evidence would complicate the historical narrative, undermining the myth of war” (pp. 90-91). On the other hand, they should not read about Viet Cong atrocities or the horrors of guerilla war—conservative canards to provide “justification for civilian deaths” caused by Americans—nor, presumably, about the crimes of the Communist regime after reunification in 1975 (pp. 88-89). Leahey does not explain his criteria for including or omitting these “well documented facts,” except to say that those he includes have been “considered important enough to be fully explored in scholarly accounts” (pp. 50, 52).

Whatever one’s feelings are about Vietnam or about war in general, it is absurd to claim that a certain number or constellation of facts will accurately recreate the past. And it is a particularly strange argument for Leahey to make. After complaining that textbooks reify dominant bodies of knowledge and cannot capture objective truth, he suddenly believes that that truth has merely been obscured. After criticizing burdensome lists of terms and content requirements, he expects teachers to list every example of malfeasance in U.S. history and to master the scholarly literature for every unit they teach. Teachers

are pressed for time, and publishers are pressed for space. They cannot expound on every detail found in professional scholarly work. However, economic and democratic pressures demand only that they keep their presentations balanced and fair. Textbooks have evolved in response to these pressures, and, as long as he wants to use them at all, Leahey needs to accept their limitations. As history simplifies and distorts the past, textbooks simplify and distort history.

I agree with Leahey that moderation is no virtue when teaching about past conflicts. “A richer understanding of war-making” can only result from a diverse and perhaps divisive exchange of ideas (p. 99). But those ideas must come from around the world and across the ideological spectrum. To imply that critical thinking requires one to oppose war or that true history must be written from a left-wing perspective is simply to replace one brand of hegemony with another. If teachers expect students to think critically, textbooks must provide them with the philosophical foundation to discuss complex and contentious issues. That foundation can include Leahey’s notion of “emancipatory pedagogy”—shattering illusions and exposing hidden interests—but it must also address elements of just war theory and realpolitik (pp. 99, 111). Nowhere does Leahey ask what might constitute a legitimate threat to U.S. interests or human rights, or how leaders can wield power responsibly, or how policymakers should weigh moral dilemmas or counterfactuals. These are crucial questions, for students cannot simply indict the leaders of the past. They must understand them in their time and place and wrestle with the same quandaries. They must explore their responsibilities and hopes as well as their hubris. And if they would make different decisions in hindsight, they must realize that future generations will judge them by the same standard.

Notes

[1]. Michael Apple, “Putting ‘Critical’ Back into Education Research,” *Educational Researcher* 39 (2010): 154.

[2]. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4, 31.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Campbell Scribner. Review of Leahey, Christopher R., *Whitewashing War: Historical Myth, Corporate*

Textbooks, and Possibilities for Democratic Education. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30842>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.