

Problematizing History Textbooks. Transnational Framework and the History Profession

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The one-day textbook conference entitled »History Textbooks and the Profession: Comparing National Controversies in a Globalizing Age«, held at the University of Chicago on May 4, 2007, attracted scholars and students from various fields. Organized by Professors Prasentjit Duara and Michael Geyer, the conference consisted of three parts: Politics, Boundaries, and Futures. The first section was on the relationship between textbooks and current politics. How do current politics affect the way in which textbooks are written and used in classrooms? Also, how do politicians »use« textbooks to establish and legitimize their power? The second section was on national boundaries (nationalities) and how textbooks are written within given politico-geographical borders. In other words, what limitations do national borders create when we write a history textbook? In the third section, our attention was directed to the future. If learning and teaching history are future-oriented, what exactly are we targeting? What can we, and should we, achieve by learning and teaching history in this globalized era? Discussing history textbooks in all three sections inevitably speaks to our concerns about history education. What the conference told us was that history text-

books are not simply a medium of historical education, as they might often be considered. Rather, they are an integral part of the complex processes of creating history education and the historical profession.

»What is a history textbook?« This, one of the most fundamental questions of the conference, will have occurred to many attendees throughout the day. Listening to problems and controversies raised by Professors Yoshiko Nozaki and Mark Selden in the case of Japan, Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya in the case of India, or Professor Charles Ingrao in the case of Central Europe, one might have looked back and wondered about the history education that s/he had received in middle and high school. Was it all about politics? It seems that history education is very much in control of contemporary politics. Professor Ingrao articulated this problem using a powerful term: »Weapons of Mass Instruction (WMI)« pointing at the way in which history textbooks (and history education) have been used as a legitimization of newly created state authority. Looking at textbooks as »weapons«, the question of how to teach and learn history seems to feature prominently in the minds of politicians (which, Ingrao argues, even schoolchildren are aware of). If so, is it impossible to go beyond national boundaries when one tries to learn the history of a nation/country? (Is the prospect for transnational historians so bleak?) And could history be only written from poli-

tical standpoints? (Is history always national?)

The second section of the conference tried to answer these questions in a variety of ways. Professor Tom Bender, in reviewing American history textbooks of the 1920s, discussed »hypersensitivities« toward national history and national history education. Also, as seen in the title of his paper, Professor Mauricio Tenorio Trillo examined the »limits of historical imagination« bringing up the Mexican case. Both scholars found that »national« history created powerful myths that people within a national boundary share, and an irreplaceable identity. In turn, a national identity helps to continuously build a national historical narrative. Accordingly, this centrality of national history often results in exclusiveness when one shared identity is confronted with an outsider (and feels a certain threat); accordingly, »hypersensitivities« can appear as discussed by Professors Bender and Tenorio. These are based on a type of sensitivity about one's identity based on the »shared« national history and current political ideology.

If this is the case, how should we construct history and textbooks from now on – when the world is globalizing and thus overcoming national boundaries on many levels?

The third section offered some future prospects for »history« textbook projects. Professor Hanna Schissler gave us an optimistic outlook on the possibilities of creating transnational textbooks. She looked at how histo-

ry books have been written within the framework of the nation state, and how »normative«, limiting or even segregative this experience has been. »Re-orientation« in the world was her key concept. Can we »re-orient« our history in the globalizing world? If so, through which method? Will the nation-state framework be one of the sections in such history textbooks? Her most convincing argument is that education is an essential element in overcoming the »challenges of multiple modernities« and creating »an integrated world«. Yet again, what does such an integrated world look like? In the process of »integration«, will there not be issues concerning how to integrate?

Professor Elazar Barkan responded to these questions in his paper, entitled »Historical Reconciliation«. If Professor Schissler showed a way for the future of the »history« project, Professor Barkan tried to »reconcile« various groups, such as ethnicities, nations and nationalists, by presenting each with the respective histories of the other, thus effectively creating an »alternative view« of history and the world. More specifically, while Professor Schissler aims to achieve this goal by moving toward a »transnational« history, Professor Barkan's »alternative« history or historical project seeks a solution in an appeal to historical commissions and civil-society projects. Considering states and countries as sources that create antagonism, both scholars suggest that bridging efforts are necessary. That is exactly where we,

historians, should proceed to build a constructive »history« as an education and a profession. Textbooks written in that context must naturally reflect that effort.

One of the highlights of the conference was that it was »comparative.« By bringing prominent scholars from various fields and areas together, we were able to learn a great deal about the textbook cases that we might not have otherwise discovered. A transnational view is another product of this comparative perspective. When only one nation or a country is under consideration, it is rather difficult to grasp the whole picture and the problem that it contains. Yet, when looked at comparatively, we could see that »nationality« is a common and basic issue shared by all cases. This dialectical view helps us proceed to the answer of »transnational history«. Whether or not an ideal transnational textbook is possible, it is the direction in which to proceed. While not everybody agreed, this seemed to emerge as the majority opinion.

There is one final question I would like to raise in closing this report: What is a history textbook? If a textbook is always considered in relation to history education, the history of textbooks must be quite long. The textbooks examined and discussed in the conference were the ones used in the context of modern history. Yet, if history education itself has a longer history, what were textbooks like before modern education began? What are the differences

between textbooks before and after modernity? If geographical comparison, as featured in this conference, was a meaningful way in which to approach the subject, temporal comparison of history textbooks should have something to offer in considering history education as well. The »nation-state« dominates our view, which also becomes the very reason why our review of historical education and textbooks should not be blocked by the concepts of modernity and the nation-state. A conference on the comparative history of history textbooks is therefore suggested as a future project.