

Evaluating History and Social Studies Textbooks: some non-technical considerations*

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Introduction

The search for a set of universal criteria with which to evaluate history and social studies textbooks cannot be an easy one; indeed it seems doomed from the beginning. Criteria can be of many different kinds but even as one tries to enumerate them for these subjects one could find oneself challenged with a very fundamental question which, answered affirmatively, would abort the exercise even before it is begun: should one have textbooks in these subjects at all? As I hope to show later this is far from being an idle question or a red herring. At the same time such textbooks already exist, they are in ready demand from teachers, their number on the market is growing, and they are not likely to be drawn from circulation in the schools and from the market in the foreseeable future no matter what some pedagogists and theorists like myself may say. What may be encouraging, in some countries at least, is that teachers and the public today appear, in general, to be more discerning, more concerned about the quality of the books on offer, and perhaps more discriminating because there are so many text books and schemes around to choose from when they are involved in the choice. In other countries the choice is made for the teachers by a centralised public authority. But whoever chooses and whatever the choice, the existence of a situation where choice is necessary, of itself, creates a demand for guidance on how one should look at the competing textbooks on offer; for criteria of evaluation.

Evaluating Interests

Who, looking into the matter more closely, is likely to be interested in these criteria? Those who are involved in the production of the textbooks would clearly qualify as among those most directly interested, but, at the other end of the spectrum, the general public also since it has a very

large stake in the quality of the education of its future members in general, and most particularly in their education as future citizens; an education towards which learning history and social studies, in particular, clearly have the potential to contribute. Again, the partners on the production side itself, who have different roles to play in the preparation and production of a textbook, have different interests. So whose criteria should we be discussing? No doubt each interested party will want to bring his/her own particular interests and priorities to the debate. Thus, for instance, for the publisher, as a business concern, an outstanding consideration in evaluating a book will be its prospective marketability. From the publisher's point of view high financial turnover and good profit will be a crucial criterion in its evaluation. The user, on the other hand, if one has the teacher in mind, will be mostly uninterested in production costs and profits and will primarily evaluate the book as a pedagogical tool.

The criteria that will interest authors will be complex. The author will also, like the publisher, but for different reasons perhaps, be interested in the marketability of the book. Like the teacher s/he will also be concerned with its potential as a pedagogical tool since this is what textbooks are written for, ultimately. But besides the book's methodology which must bridge the gap with the teacher, the author will be concerned with how the content will be evaluated scientifically and epistemologically, with how it will be assessed by fellow specialists. The stake of public authorities in a textbook, on the other hand, obviously varies with the kind of textbook that it is. Public authorities, evidently, have an important responsibility in guaranteeing educational standards for the general public, they will therefore, necessarily, be interested in the educational potential of the textbook. But another responsibility falls within their brief; that of safeguarding the socio-political and cultural

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interests of the community. This casts them in the role of censor, and the responsibility attached to this role is likely to feature very strongly among their concerns when they are evaluating history and social studies textbooks.

If a "good" textbook were simply one that heeds to satisfy the author, the publisher, the educational authorities, the teacher, and possibly the wider public also, the defining general criteria for it may not be such a difficult task; there are certain concerns that are particular to the different interested parties but there are clearly others also that cut across all interests. The matter, however, is not really so simple, particularly with regards to history and social studies books. But before I expand on this statement, I want to refer to one party interested in evaluating textbooks which I have not mentioned so far and which I have left apart precisely because its evaluation is not commonly considered or given weight, albeit that it is, arguably, the most concerned of all. This is the learner or pupil who is the one who is expected to learn from the textbook at the end of the day either directly or through the mediation of the teacher. How much notice is taken of how pupils evaluate the textbooks that they are required to use? This is a different question from the question of how their teachers evaluate them, or the question of how they actually learn from textbooks. Should it be regarded as an important question? The customary paternalistic assumption is that the pupils' opinions on curriculum matters are not significant or important. The choice of what they need to learn and how must be made for them since they are too immature to establish their preferences in a rationally informed way for themselves. I do not myself think that the assumption that teachers, public authorities, and so on are necessarily the best qualified persons to choose on behalf of and in the pupils' best interests is always a well-founded one, either empirically or morally, particularly with the older pupils. It may well be in the choice of textbooks where what is involved is a technical competence which they may not have. But, in any case, research into pupils' preferences from the point of view of their own demands on textbooks should clearly be of crucial importance in evaluating both because the textbooks are ultimately for them and because the matter affects the effectiveness of the textbooks themselves as learning media.

On the other hand the question of who should be considered the best guardian of the pupils' interests, if it is allowed that their lack of technical competence requires it, cannot be left

dangling. I have already noted the role public authorities play in guaranteeing educational standards and vetting textbooks in the public interest. There should, in theory, clearly not be any discrepancy between the public interest and the interest of the pupil; the two should coincide. But public authorities may not see, or they may be mistaken about, this coincidence, or they may simply judge badly or have the wrong motives; for instance they may, for selfish reasons of some kind, be prepared to sacrifice the pupil's real interests in the interest of narrower considerations, political or economic. Teachers also may be, and they often are, misguided about the real interests of their pupils. Perhaps the best guardians of their children's interests are their parents. Recent research evidence in Western European countries points to a growing interest among parents in the textbooks used by their children (although it suggests also that this interest is mainly confined to middle class parents). But how informed is that interest, and what are the criteria parents adopt to decide which of their children's textbooks are of good quality and which are not? The reaction this question would seem to provoke is that perhaps the matter of choice is best left to the "expert".

But experts and authors may, and very often do, confuse their technical or specialist interests with the interests of the pupils. When this happens that "gap", described by Dewey, occurs between the subject matter and the child which makes the former inaccessible and uninteresting to the latter. The "gap" appears when textbooks ignore the child and present the material instead from the point of view of the specialist or expert, in terms of the "logic" of the subject itself rather than of the psychology of the learner. The obvious ideal is that textbooks should harmonise the relevant psychological considerations, particularly the learning readiness and the likely motivational factors that interest the targeted pupil, with the internal demands of the subject matter. But this does not always happen in practice; everything depends on the authors who write the textbooks and on their perceptiveness. Dewey's immediate point was that the "gap" could be closed only if the presentation of the subject matter is aligned with the child's actual existential background and interests. But he was making another point also, namely that as much of the material in textbooks as possible should be made directly accessible to the learner and that the need for the teacher's mediation should be the minimal necessary. Both points are important ones and reflect Dewey's own wider progressive pedagogical philosophy which was to enable the maximum amount of

participation possible for the pupil in his/her own learning.

From the point of view of the interests of this article this last reflection brings in an important factor. This is that the criteria of evaluation that will influence teachers and authors in the choice or the writing of textbooks, with regards to the manner in which they will regard textbooks as potential pedagogical tools, will depend on their particular pedagogical philosophy. It is important to point this out because questions about the accessibility of the text to the pupils often tend to be couched in purely technical terms. There are, of course, questions about textbook evaluation that are "purely technical", technical and nothing else. These are questions that concern what may be termed as the physical properties of the book; for example its material durability and safety for the user. But they are few and are not related in any way to the accessibility of the book or its text to the learner. On the other hand, technical questions relating to a book's size and aesthetic appeal, for instance, are. Indeed where textbooks are concerned, size and aesthetic presentation tend to be regarded not mainly *per se* but as a criterion of the particular textbook's accessibility and attraction for the prospective pupil. How important is the aesthetic as a criterion? Attractive books evidently appeal to children while unattractive books do not. So the matter of the book's attractiveness for the pupils who will use it, is a crucial one in designing and preparing it and, ultimately choosing it as a prescribed textbook. But this is because being attractive makes it a more effective learning instrument. Indeed, beyond the limited examples I have just given, technical criteria in general are always criteria of effectiveness of some kind. In the context of the textbook effectiveness is measured in pedagogical terms, in terms of its ability to aid or bring about learning or enable successful teaching.

Effectiveness and Values

But what renders a book "effective", even in the sense just described, cannot arguably be the ultimate criterion for selecting it, for describing it a "good" textbook in an absolute sense. It is of vital importance that the criterion of "effectiveness", though it may be the final technical criterion of choice, should not itself be regarded as purely value-neutral, because it is not. Everyone knows that there are effective, very effective, ways of bringing about learning and of presenting knowledge that are nevertheless unacceptable because they are morally objectionable in some way. There is a whole range of "effective" teaching

and learning techniques, like brainwashing, conditioning, indoctrinating, propagandising, for instance, that we would reject if we detected them not because they lack effectiveness or no not work, indeed they usually work too well, but because they are moved by the intention to manipulate the learner morally or politically for the sake of some other interest rather than educate him/her in his/her own interest.

The point I am making brings into play an important distinction between the means and the ends of teaching and learning. Technical criteria, as criteria of effectiveness, are criteria about means that need to be used to bring about certain ends. The ends themselves may appear immediately to be technical too; the learning of some skill or some piece of information. But the knowledge of skills and facts is not valued only with respect to how it is achieved, but also in itself according to how it contributes towards the more general overall end which is that of educating the learner. And it should be an uncontroversial fact that educating is not just, and not even primarily, a technical business. It is fundamentally a normative business. To educate, whether one recognises this fact or not, is always to have assumptions about the sort of person and the sort of society one desires to have, and assumptions of this kind, even when they are undeclared, can be read into the means and techniques of teaching used. At the same time it is clear that the questions: "what sort of society is desirable?", and "what sort of person do we want for it?" are questions about the ends of teaching and learning that call upon the educator to decide which values, virtues and dispositions are desirable and should be cultivated in the learner. These values etc, are, in turn, inevitably of a socio-cultural, political, economic and moral nature. They are, therefore, set and evaluated differently than in terms of effectiveness and must be judged on non-technical effectiveness and non-technical criteria. So the questions immediately arise: what are the conflicts that can occur between the demands of technical effectiveness and these non-technical objectives that textbooks should be designed ultimately to fulfill? How clear are these non-technical objectives themselves, which may be described broadly as cultural and ideological, in the minds of their producers and users? Are they considered at all? Do they give rise to conflicts between the different interested parties I have identified?

Sometimes the intention of the author or of the controlling authority, the public authorities, the state, etc., to indoctrinate is blatant and even

announced in the book or curriculum. But this sort of thing occurs only in totalitarian societies. This does not mean, however, that there is no indoctrination, intended or otherwise, in our democratic societies. Of course, if indoctrination exists it must be in a more subtle form, it must be through the hidden curriculum. One aspect of the hidden curriculum is the presentation of the textbook as a teaching/learning tool because, as I pointed out earlier, this is never value-neutral, it always reveals a particular pedagogical philosophy which is always, in turn, further and more deeply rooted politically and culturally. It therefore becomes important to ask, with regards to different textbooks available, what kind of role in his/her learning they cast the learner. Is the designated learning process focused on the learner with the teacher fulfilling mainly the subsidiary role of facilitator, or is it the teacher who is designated the role of prime actor/actress, the necessary intermediary through which all knowledge is mediated for the learner? If the latter is the case, what is the designated role of the learner; to participate or to suffer the teacher's mediation passively? The answer to these and other pedagogical questions is ultimately also a political one; the way in which one casts the limits of the learner's initiative, discrimination, and power to act and the range of the teacher's authority over the subject matter and the style of learning is ultimately the way in which one projects to the pupil the limits of his/her legitimate personal political initiative and his/her relationship with power and authority as a future citizen. I wonder how conscious publishers and public authorities, and teachers themselves, are of this fact?! Whether many do not choose to ignore it if it embarrasses their other overriding interests, political, economic, or technical?

The Knowledge Issues

Textbooks, also, not only transmit knowledge but inculcate particular attitudes towards that same knowledge and towards knowledge in general in the learner. The overriding purpose of the morally negative manners of transmitting knowledge and inducing learning which I mentioned earlier, indoctrination etc., is achieved by presenting some particular knowledge as dogmatic and by undermining the exercise of a critical understanding of it on the part of the learner. What is wrong with this procedure is both that, to use the well-worn Kantian expression, it treats the learner not as an "end" (which is the true purpose of learning which has educational motives), but as a means, and that it is anti-democratic (since a truly democratic culture

casts the individual in the role of a critical chooser). Respect for the learner as a person, as a potentially autonomous, rational agent, in our Western conception of a person, and for the democratic purposes and practices of education, is the most basic criterion that needs to be brought to bear in the analysis of the presentation of knowledge in textbooks in general. But we also know that there are controversial epistemological and cultural issues of a different kind that are related to the particular knowledge content of the different subjects or areas of knowledge in the curriculum.

This is the case with regards to history in particular where not only are there fundamental differences between historians and historiographers on the matter of how history should be represented, of what kind of knowledge historical knowledge should be regarded as being, but also differences between curriculum theorists on what the actual teaching of history should be concerned with. The former differences take metaphysical form and they are the consequence of the assumption that history cannot be satisfactorily presented to the learner as an objective chronology of "facts", of the assumption that "facts" need to be explained, and there are competing theories about how history should be understood. At the same time these theories have their corresponding political implications. Presenting historical knowledge as pragmatic "warranted assertibility" rather than objective fact, for instance, is also presenting it as democratic rather than dogmatic. More directly political questions are those about **what** and **whose** history pupils should learn and from whose angle, about how they should be encouraged to regard the past, the "facts" which they are required to know, and about how they should interpret that knowledge existentially, in their effort to achieve understanding of the contemporary world they live in, and, possibly in their effort to come to terms with the future. All of these questions give rise to controversy which is very real and, in some of its aspects, very political, while the last is what leads directly into metaphysics as one moves from explaining history as knowing "facts" to understanding them within an overall framework of interpretation. Then one is faced by the question of how to read history; whether teleologically, in terms of immanent purposes and unwritten laws waiting to be discovered, for instance, or hermeneutically as an "open" text capable of different interpretations and taking into account not merely the "success" but also the "failures" of the past, constructing different "histories", striving to understand and explain "failed" political and

cultural projects, speculating on what would have happened if certain events had taken a different turn, and so on.

Somewhat different questions (but only in a certain sense) need to be asked about the teaching of social studies which, if anything, is even more controversial than that of history since its potential political relevance is more obvious to people. The first question to be decided here seems to be about the very nature of social studies as a teaching/learning area in its own right since technically speaking social studies does not constitute a "subject", it is a grouping of subjects. The usual practice in social studies is to teach civics, to teach about social institutions and, thereby, to introduce, perhaps, some political science into the picture, and, perhaps also, some economics. The purpose of including social studies in the curriculum is, as its name indicates, to cultivate in pupils an awareness of themselves as social beings and an understanding of what this means. The most recent current suggestion, which I would go along with, is that social studies should be incorporated within a new curriculum area called "Personal and Social Education". In any event, apart from this territorial ambiguity the most controversial aspect of the teaching of social studies, as I have just said, is its alleged political neutrality. It seems obvious to me that it should not be presented or taught in a normatively neutral way. It should be clear that there should be a political framework for it and that this should be democratic in our society. But it is not really considered that way because of the fear that it will be tuned into something terrible; "political education", with the consequence that often results in the teaching of the area being rendered hopelessly vague and alienating instead of what it should be, a stimulating tool to inculcate the qualities of democratic citizenship. Also, the same fear of "political education" often leads teachers to ignore the different social theories that provide competing and conflicting explanations of the different institutions in society and how they interact with the state, and to present knowledge of these institutions in a falsely neutral and ultimately sterile way.

In sum, evaluating history and social studies textbooks must also be a matter of introducing normative, besides the usual technical pedagogical criteria that consider them as effective teaching/learning tools. One wonders how much the teachers themselves who teach these areas, whose task it is to mediate the knowledge in the text books to the pupils are aware of these considerations and these different potential

dimensions of their task!? The philosophical point underlying them, these dimensions, is that there is no ideologically neutral stance that can be taken towards the past, or, in the context of social studies towards our social and political institutions of the present either. Thus history and social studies text books must also, I would say must predominantly, be evaluated as potential ideological instruments. I am not, of course, really saying anything original in this. The epistemological points, originating in philosophy of science, have become orthodox today in the social sciences, and sensitivity to them is revealed by the fact that most, if not all, theoretical articles written about the issue of textbook evaluation in history and social studies, as well as actual evaluation projects carried out on them are concerned with the various kinds of underlying anti-democratic, and anti-human person intolerances or biases that they could be intended to promote. The biases that are usually singled out for close scrutiny are sexist, racist or xenophobic, and, though not to the same extent, those that are social-class related. These are, in fact, one would agree, negative biases that should be unambiguously extirpated from textbooks. But which are the positive biases that should be actively promoted instead?

This is a more difficult question to answer, especially when it is posed within the context of democratic, pluralistic, and multi-cultural societies like ours in the West, and when these characteristics are rendered more complex by pan-European ambitions. Epistemology, we have said, rules out the possibility of value neutrality; this is what makes the proposal that one could achieve it by concentrating on "facts only" educationally untenable. One could, technically, present the learner with a start compendium of dates or events, "inert facts" as Dewey called them. But which dates and events? It is difficult to find facts that are truly "inert"! Besides, if the object of learning is becoming educated, as opposed to becoming a mere storehouse of information, then pupils must be taught also to interpret facts and events critically, and the pedagogical task is to present them to the learner in that way, as facts to be interpreted critically. So we are returned to the question, if impartiality is epistemologically and technically impossible, whose biases should textbooks reveal? Who should decide? The experts, working with a knowledge of democratic political theory but aware also that theory is itself for the most part controversial? The public authorities who are, after all, set up as the ultimate guardians of the public interest? The teachers who are those who are most directly responsible for the

education of the pupils? The publishers, who provide the material?

Deciding this kind of question is clearly not a technical matter in any way either, but a political one. It does, in the manner of technical questions, ask how the textbook should be evaluated, but the criteria for deciding the "how" are normative or value criteria not technical ones. It is partly the difficulty involved in establishing a universal consensus on such criteria, even within a mutually accepted framework which includes a commitment to such things as democracy and human rights and, from the other point of view, assumes the epistemological points I made, that makes one despair of the point of having textbooks which I cited at the beginning. That despair is also very strongly associated with the other issue, which I have just referred to, which the question raises; the issue of "who should decide?", or, in plainer words, "who is to have ultimate political control?" on the knowledge that is to be made accessible to the pupils. Entering into it with the fullness required would evidently take me beyond the scope of this article. Arguing that there should be no textbooks may be fine provided that its purpose is to escape the possible hegemony and limitations of perspective of single textbooks and is not meant to support a more politically deep-seated proposal that the decision on how history and social studies should be taught should rest exclusively with teachers. This proposal is not what I would subscribe to since, as I have explained elsewhere, it runs contrary to my understanding of democratic control which requires the accountability of teachers to the community.

Conclusions

Finally, it may be a good idea for me to re-capitulate the points I have endeavoured to make in this article. The reader will recall that I started by distinguishing technical criteria of evaluation, but I argued that technical criteria about effective means are themselves subject to

moral and political considerations that regard not only the mode of presentation of the knowledge itself, whether it is presented dogmatically and with indoctrinatory or other objectionable purposes or whether it is intended to educate (in the normative sense of the word), but also the pedagogical style which can serve to domesticate the learner by discouraging his/her initiative, or to liberate him/her by raising his/her critical consciousness. This is I suggested, a fruitful issue to consider; how can it be ensured that text books are not merely effective instruments of teaching and learning, but morally and politically desirable instruments also, in the sense that they present knowledge, and encourage dispositions towards it that are liberating to the learner rather than dominating or manipulative? If it is discussed within the framework of history and social study text books account should be taken of the kind of knowledge with which they are, or should be involved. This seems to me to be particularly important since these are subjects which seem particularly vulnerable to the abuse of the indoctrinator. How does one detect such abuse when it occurs? How is one to frame the whole question of whether a text book indoctrinates or not within a state of affairs in which value-neutrality is not possible and in which, at the same time, there are different competing values and cultures coexisting within the same society? Who are the ultimate guardians of the democratic interests of society and of the moral and political interests of the pupils? Should the teachers, for instance, or the publishers, whose interests appear to be narrowest, enter into these considerations that I have been outlining, or should they simply be concerned with "teaching" on the one hand, or marketing on the other? What is the actual state of affairs, and how do these political questions affect the interplay of relationships between the partners in the production of the textbooks and between the different partners and the users? These last ones are further empirical questions that, given their undoubted importance, invite urgent investigation.