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High School Textbooks and the Changing Narratives of Woman Suffrage

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Woman Suffrage Portrayed in Textbooks

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Abstract

History textbooks are criticized for their dry prose, lack of description of causation, and ability to turn students away from the discipline of history. The authors surveyed 16 textbooks from 1933 through 2005 studying their coverage of woman suffrage. The textbooks treat the issue summarily and miss a great opportunity to describe the injustices perpetuated against women, the valor and courage of the activists who persisted and won during a sustained battle by hundreds of thousands of determined women. Furthermore, the textbooks surveyed end with the amendment and do not immediately put it into historical context, with the right to vote being only a milepost on the long journey women are still traveling to have legal rights to self-determination and self-authorship.

Introduction

Some female firsts this year have included women co-anchors for Newshour, Marin Alsop becoming the first female conductor of the Last Night of the Proms in its 118 year history. The University of California appointed Janet Napolitano the 20th president of the University of California. Women are still fighting for their right to serve in their chosen fields. The Equal Rights Amendment is reintroduced every year in Congress, as women continue the complex and conflicted journey to live a life of self-determination. Suffrage seems passé to young women, yet it was a hard fought battle lasting over a hundred years and involved the state torturing its proponents. It involved courage, tenacity, and willingness to suffer. While the impact of an individual vote can be dismissed, the right for everyone to vote in secrecy based on individual decisions is the critical marker of a democracy. The right to vote is an important milepost on an evolving story of women's self-determination. Citizens of our country understand that story through history, social studies, and civics classes taught in high school. While many go on to college, the majority of Americans form initial and long lasting impressions of our history through textbooks used in high school. This presentation will trace how suffrage was portrayed in textbooks, after surveying very briefly some of the issues with textbook production and use, the standards for teaching history, and a look, through previous research, of how women in general have been treated in our nation's history textbooks.

This paper is not an exhaustive study of textbooks in general. We neither looked at all textbooks ever used, nor studied every part of the textbooks we did study. We focused on looking at the introduction (what the authors were trying to accomplish) and the section (from a line to a few pages) on woman suffrage. This is not a general study of the nature, intentions, or standards

of textbooks. While we touch on this by necessity, the length of our paper prohibits a more in-depth look at these fascinating topics. This is not an analysis of how women's lives or accomplishments are treated in history textbooks. Again, we will touch on this, but this is not that. This is not an investigation as to the purpose of history instruction in relationship to citizenship or how much or little students know about history when they graduate, though these questions lurked behind our research.

On Textbooks

Some of the issues with textbooks are not specific to history. Freeman points out that teachers are not trained how to evaluate textbooks and may have little say in them (Freeman, 2006). Local politics and norms may dictate which textbooks can be used. A recent article in *History Teacher* described the situation in Texas:

A case in point might be the Texas Board of Education's recent attempt to revise its social studies curriculum. By reducing the role of Thomas Jefferson in the founding of the nation, emphasizing the religiosity of the Founding Fathers, calling attention to the communist infiltration of the government in the 1930s and 1940s, and comparing the Black Panthers to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the board may be hoping to promote a more sacred-like view of history in the curriculum. (Henry, 2011)

Textbooks may be out of date. (Freeman and Lucius, 2006). Teachers have time constraints both in choosing and using textbooks. O'Brien (1989) describes his experience with the production of a history textbook that was praised as the most literate and effective narrative. With vivid

descriptions, active narrative and strong point of view (p. 99). When O'Brien tried to sell it to his colleagues, though, it was rejected.

The primary concerns of my colleagues in choosing a history textbook—which should not come as a surprise considering their course preparation workload, number of students they must teach every day, and the myriad other nonteaching responsibilities they must fulfill—is not the quality of the prose or how an author's prejudices can be used to teach historiography. Of much greater concern to them is how the photographs included can entice students to want to learn about something in which all the people involved are now dead, how graphs and statistical charts can be used to reinforce abstract concepts, and how will section focus questions get students to work together in groups to complete classwork and homework. (100)

Matt Downey writes of several issues that make for bad history textbooks: financial pressures to sell the text to as many audiences as possible, “authors” chosen for their name but whose work is edited to mush, and, most importantly, the lack of reviewing sources for history textbooks. He proposes several criteria to judge textbooks, from the obvious that they should be “well-informed”, they should be concerned about analysis as well as a recitation of facts, and the textbook's ability to convey to the student the process of history—not only about how events unfold but how the interpretation about those events are understood. He writes that one of the most used textbooks (Todd's Rise of the American Nation) is so popular because it offends no one. His eloquent plea is merely to have lengthy reviews of textbooks and a place where historians can collaborate to share their thoughts in some depth with their colleagues. Carl R.

Siler has performed exhaustive research about history textbooks using fourteen looking at “inclusion, historical accuracy, appropriate writing and perspective.” He looked at every aspect and included elaborate charts counting pages in chapters, maps, column space given to nontextual elements, even including the books’ dimensions and weights. He concludes that the writing is “lifeless, dry and boring” (p. 25) and that “superficiality of content” and lack of “cause and effect relationships” mean that students do not “gain a more meaningful understanding of history.” (p.28). This thought is echoed by the preeminent critic of history textbooks, James Loewen, in his very popular book about lies learned in history classes. In an interview in *Social Education* Loewen said that “students are just learning one damn thing after another,” (p.212) and that the textbooks “have no causation, no relevance to the present, and therefore do not induce students to think intelligently about the history of the United States” (p. 214). He thinks his book, which sold more than 330,000 copies, has helped teachers “realize that history is not just learning and memorizing the account, it is rather this process of winnowing out information and coming to one’s conclusions based on that thoughtful process. (216). Another writer on history wrote that students think that K-12 history is typically taught from a “triumphal grand sweep” perspective emphasizing places and dates, and the glories of the past in general. They contrast this with a college curriculum that emphasizes that there were great injustices in the past (Waters, 2005, p. 11).” He argues that both have their place and that “In a modern society where the dominant group is inherently in charge of the state, this means that textbooks will always tell a creditable story which glorifies the past, and justifies the present. Waters, 2005, p. 20). None of the literature we found discussed the intellectual developmental stage of the average high school student in relation to their readiness to grapple with the highly complex nature of our past.

History and Social Studies standards, both federal and state, as well as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have to be addressed, however briefly, in a discussion of textbooks and teaching history. This is contested territory. NCLB resulted, according to a study from the Center on Education Policy, in 71 percent of schools reducing class time on subjects such as history, art and music to teach to the tests for reading and math. (Coile, 2007) The frustrations from teachers can be felt in this comment from one study:

I go home at night feeling very disgruntled. I feel like I am not doing credit to the subject I love most, a subject that really is about becoming a citizen in this country and this world. (Burroughs, Groce and Webeck, 2005)

The National Social Studies Standards state in part “Through the study of the past and its legacy, learners examine the institutions, values, and beliefs of people in the past, acquire skills in historical inquiry and interpretation, and gain an understanding of how important historical events and developments have shaped the modern world.” (National Council for the Social Studies). The historical standards emphasize research, records, and want the students to “demonstrate a sound grasp of the historical chronology and context in which the issue, problem, or events they are addressing developed.” (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). A survey done a doctoral candidate at Iowa State University, found that only seventeen percent of history teachers surveyed in Iowa and Oregon expected to use the material in the Standards and/or the new teaching sourcebooks. (Burroughs, Groce and Webeck, 2005).

The intention of teaching history must be touched on is reflected in the standards set forth.

America Revised, by FitzGerald recounts the changing stories of our nation's textbooks. She is concerned about the bland and idealized vision presented. Miss FitzGerald writes

To the extent that young people actually believe them, these bland fictions, propagated for the purpose of creating good citizens, may actually achieve the opposite; they give young people no warning of the real dangers ahead, and later they may well make these young people feel that their own experience of conflict or suffering is unique in history... To the extent that children can see the contrast between these fictions and the world around them, this kind of instruction can only make them cynical" (p. 218).

On the Use of textbooks

The Organization of History Teachers (OHT) has standards relating to the teaching of history, including the textbooks. They write that an adequate textbook prepares "users to encounter new data and new kinds of historical developments with enhanced capacities for understanding and analysis" (OHT, 2008). A survey of new England teachers done in 1991 reported that only a quarter of the teachers used the text for less than 20% of the instruction time, and about half spent less than 40% of the time using the text (Banit, 1991, p. 53). One recent, albeit small study, looked at a promising strategy of embedding the process we want students to get to within the text:

The features include: (1) posing and answering questions, (2) identifying and analyzing the sources of documents, (3) corroborating documents, (4) considering historical context and (5) developing historical empathy. While these heuristics characterize historians' work

(Collingwood, 1948; Davis, 2001; Wineburg, 1991a, b), they are typically implicitly rather than explicitly present in completed monographs. (Lee, 2013). This strategy is to combat what the author ably documents are concerns with “unelaborated, straightforward writing where the voice of an anonymous authority simply gives one fact after another” (Lee, 2013).

Women in Textbooks

Trecker (1973) did a study in 1973 that concluded that the way women are treated in her sample of a dozen popular textbooks make women seem optional and supplementary” (p. 134). This study was echoed in 1975 that reported, “The typical U.S. history textbook devotes one out of its 500 to 800 pages to women, their lives and their contributions. Where women are included, they appear under separate headings, in special sections, even on different colored paper. They are made to appear supplemental--as postscripts to history rather than an integral part of it” (Arlow, 1975). Thompson Tetreault (1982), looked at the situation in 1982, concluding that, “there is still little relevant information on women included in textbooks. The effects on women's lives of education, law, the sexual segregation of the work force, and legal, political, economic, and social restrictions are considered unimportant and not included. (Thompson Tetreault, 1982). By 1985, (Thompson Tetreault 1985) she concluded that textbooks were improving in that they were starting to include “the idea that women's consciousness of a distinct role in society has been evolving throughout our history.” By 1995, Loewen’s *Lies* brought the story forward by a decade describing a “add women and stir” textbook, another kind of lie. “How could high school girls understand their place in American history if their textbooks told them that, from colonial America to the present, women have had equal opportunity?” (Loewen, 1995, p.217). Lerner, Nagai and Rothman studied the increased number of representation of women that occurred during the 80s and concluded this represented “filler feminism” with

students learning a lot about minor players in history and not enough about the significant narrative. They conclude, as many before them, that this will result in another kind of cynicism (Lerner, Nagai & Rothman, 1995).

A more recent study yet done in 2004 noted that while indexes can show more entries for women in history textbooks, chapters, subheadings, charts and maps show dearth of women, and as the saying goes, It doesn't count unless you count it. Women's story still on some level doesn't really count. The author notes wryly, "Paintings and photographs, on the other hand, often seem to be the vehicles by which women are brought into the survey text" (Frederickson, 2004).

Historians on Woman Suffrage

Trecker's 1973 article reported, "A full page on suffrage and women's rights is a rarity and most texts give the whole movement approximately three paragraphs. The better texts include something on the legal disabilities which persisted into the nineteenth century. These sections are sometimes good, but always brief. Most of them end their consideration of the legal position of women with the granting of suffrage, and there is no discussion of the implications of the recent Civil Rights legislation which removed some of the inequities in employment, nor is there more than a hint that inequities remained even after the nineteenth amendment was passed. (Trecker, 1973) Thompson Tetreault (1985) notes that improvements have been made by the time she did her study in 1985, in terms of number of women represented, and in particularly to suffrage, but "references to the arduous work of building national women's rights organizations or efforts to secure both state and federal women's suffrage amendments are so brief as to be unintelligible "

The following textbooks were interlibrary loaned after studying the collection at the Center for Research Libraries. The year of the textbook we requested is given in the text. The

bracketed years are those the text was being printed, based on OCLC records and/or CRL records.

- 1) Appleby, J.O. (2003). *The American Vision*. New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill. [2003-2010]
- 2) Barker, E. C., & Commager, H.S. (1947). *Our Nation*. Evanston, IL Row Peterson & Co. [1941-1953]
- 3) Berkin, C., & Wood, L. (1983). *Land of promise: a history of the United States*. Glenview, Ill. : Scott, Foresman
- 4) Bragdon, H. W., McCutchen, S. P. (1961 & 1967). *History of a Free People*. New York MacMillan. [1954-1981,]
- 5) Cayton, A. R. L., Perry, E. I., & Winkle, A. M. (1995). *America: Pathways to the Present*. Needham, Mass.: Prentice Hall. [1995-2007]
- 6) Divine, R. A. (1991). *America, the People and the Dream*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman. [1991-1994]
- 7) Garcia, J. (2005). *Creating America: a history of the United States*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell. [2001-2007]
- 8) Gavian, R. W. & Hamm, W. A. (1954). *The American Story*. Boston: D.C. Heath. [1945-1964]
- 9) Grossier, P. L., & Levine, S. (1997). *USA: The Unfolding Story of America*. New York: Amsco School Publications.
- 10) Graff, H. F., Krout, J.A. & Sprague, W. (1965). *The Adventure of the American People: A History of the United States*. (2nd Ed.). Chicago: Rand McNally. [1950-1973, 2]
- 11) King, D.C., McRae, N., & Zola, J. (1993). *The United States and its People*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley. [1993- 1995]
- 12) Muzzey, D. S. (1924). *The United States of America*. Boston: Ginn. Published textbooks under *Our Country's history*, and *A History of our Country* between 1911 and 1968.
- 13) Muzzey, D. S. (1936). *A History of Our Country*. Boston: Ginn.
- 14) Schwartz, M. O'Connor, J. R. (1963). *Exploring American History*. New York: Globe Book Co. [1963-1991. The 1968 is the 4th edition.]
- 15) Todd, L. P., Curti, M, & Bryant, S. (1977). *Rise of the American Nation* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich [1950-1982]
- 16) Wilder, H. B., Ludlum, R. P., & McCune Brown, H. (1948). *This is America's Story*. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press

The following briefly describes the textbooks studied in regards to their coverage of woman suffrage. Muzzey aimed at introducing students to the “heritage of American political ideals.” (p. iv). His account takes into account the length of the struggle, discusses its connection with

slavery and refers to women's position as "scarcely more than chattels of their husbands and their social position as drudges or playthings" (p. 470). He emphasizes women's stake in working conditions, welfare, and he notes the influence of the British Women's Political Union. He argues that the Western successes had more impact than did direct social action in the form of the protests. His 1936 textbook aims at relevance: "Simply to collect and memorize events of the past is of no more use than to preserve old almanacs. We must try to discover how these events help us to understand the world" (p. vi). The text about woman suffrage is the same as his earlier text. Barker's book, in 1947, aims to help students "comprehend the significance of historical experience, to make history a living force in our everyday lives" (p. 3). The only reference to woman suffrage, however, is "the 19th [amendment] gave women the right to vote" (p. 774). *This is America*, published in 1948, represents a dramatic departure from earlier textbooks, including as it does graphs, many images, even comic books (of Clara Barton, for example). While the text about woman suffrage is brief, about a paragraph, with a pleased statement declaiming that "Women today not only vote, but hold many offices in our national, state, and local governments" (p. 518). There is also the addition of questions to help students think about the relevance of the past to the present: "What are some of the rights and opportunities that women enjoy today that they did not have a hundred years ago " (p. 518)? *The American Story* published in 1954 includes more context for the struggle, noting that concerns about alcohol, local government, labor, health, and food as well as prison reform were all of interest to women everywhere but the lack of the vote reduced their ability to impact the issues of concern. This book includes a map (p. 422) with the years of passage of suffrage. *History of a Free People*, published in 1960 note western states were early to grant women the right to vote. The authors write that women's "contributiions to the war effort caused many who had opposed

woman suffrage to change their minds” (p 139). Schwartz and O’Connor’s text, *Exploring American History*, published in 1963, was intended to help students “learn how our Constitution may be adapted to meet the changing needs of the people” (p. 159). This is another one liner about suffrage without any additional information. *The Adventure of the American People*, published in 1965, (interesting, this is the 10th printing, not edition) states that “it was the progressive movement that helped make woman suffrage acceptable to the nation. The woman’s club movement grew strong after the beginning of the century as the “weaker sex” attempted to put its increasing leisure time to good works. Opposition was great at first, but the old arguments that voting was not lady-like and that suffragettes were just trying to become “self-made men” generally fell to the ground” (p.474). The treatment of the suffrage movement is in the context of the progressive movement and while other social movements are described in brief -- temperance, slum clearance, and playground creation, the role of women in these movements isn’t mentioned. What is covered is the ideal female beauty, the Gibson girl: “slender and graceful, a lover of sports and the outdoors, a trifle arrogant and aloof” (p.478). The 1967 edition of *History of a Free People* equates women’s economic role in industry with their success in getting the vote, along with their “dramatic parades” and “monster petitions” (p. 532). Our next textbook seems like a barometer for coming change. Graff and Kraut write in the Teacher’s Edition, “Young people, in particular, want history to be not only readable but also unvarnished...They know from observations..that “little people” as well as “big people” have shaped the American way of life” (p. 2). However its coverage of suffrage is little changed from previous textbooks. A textbook that is often referenced through studies is *Rise of the American Nation* published in 1977. The coverage begins with the fight for equality in education and women’s activities such as “women’s clubs”. *Rise of the American Nation* also specifically

acknowledges that, “Black women also established clubs, which concentrated on social welfare. Leaders in this movement were Josephine Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell, who also led in founding the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National Association of Colored Women” (p. 453). This is unique because African-American women are only recognized in one other text, *America: the People and the Dream*, published in 1991 for their roles and activities during this era. There is also a focus on the influence of social work on women’s daily lives and the merging of it with the suffrage movement. Our first textbook with a woman author/editor appears in 1983. Carol Baruch and Leonard Wood’s *Land of Promise* has the most robust coverage of suffrage. Names are included, the contested territory between competing women’s groups is explained and strategies are outlined. The “Winning Plan” for suffrage is described, the roles of the state’s women’s groups are presented and the actual excitement is conveyed as the women wait outside for the vote that will take a few years to get the two thirds majority. This is the first textbook, as well, that acknowledges that this isn’t the end of the story. “The right to vote did not, of course, end the struggle for equality for women in America. Women were still discriminated against in many areas of their lives, from the paycheck they received in the workplace to their rights under law” (p.200). *America: the People and the Dream*, published in 1991, is a technicolor wonder with pictures of students learning in the frontpiece. Many teachers are listed as consultants and sections are easily found by startlingly bright separators. This is the first time we see a taste of the reality of the vast number of activists, critical to the success of woman suffrage: “In 1918 a parade of 5,000 women marched in Washington, D.C. The group was attacked by hoodlums who were not stopped by police” (p. 613). A half page biography of Alice Paul fleshes out the story of suffrage. This textbook, too, brings attention to the role of the West in making whappen. Published in 1993

The United States and its People uses Carrie Chapman's statement, "A Congressman is a green toad on a green tree, a brown toad on a brown tree. He reflects his constituents" (p.xxviii) to discuss different points of view. *The United States and its People* then state that, "Catt's view of Congressmen, for example, was colored by her frustrated efforts to gain their support for women's rights" (p.xxiv). In the chapter women's suffrage is covered under the umbrella of the Progressive era. The introduction connects the movement to women's leadership and significant participation in reforms. A unique aspect is the pictures of every day items found during this time period to provide students with context and interesting items of daily life.

America: Pathways to the Present is our next textbook. Published in 1995, *America: Pathways to the Present* gives an entire section dedicated to women's suffrage titled, "Suffrage at Last: A Turning Point in History." Within their section they provide a journey through the struggle to win the vote, using aids such as political cartoons, pictures, maps, portraits, and first hand arguments concerning suffrage (p. 539-543). Concluding the section the lasting political influence and progress of the women's suffrage movement is displayed through a timeline (p. 545). Our next textbook, *USA: The Unfolding Story of America*, published in 1997 The preface notes their emphasis on the for student and keeps the facts short and to the point (p. iii). Groisser and Levine combine education and women's improved status together under Progressivism (p. 486). In the introduction to the lesson, differentiate between social and political history and cover both in regards to suffrage (p. 486-487). They designate one paragraph to cover the force feedings during the hunger strikes of women which is the first time in our study that we see this mentioned (p. 488). In the text they continue to briefly discuss significant political gains and role changes for women with facts dating up to 1981 (p. 489). Groisser and Levine's coverage of women's suffrage is covered in one paragraph and two pages

(p. 487-489). Our next textbook is the *American Vision* published in 2003. Once again, the suffrage story is placed in the context of progressivism but there are one and a half pages dedicated to the fight for women's struggle (p. 549-551). *American Vision* provides ample political context for students but coverage ends abruptly when women achieved the right to vote. The most recent textbook surveyed is *Creating America: a History of the United States* published in 2005. This textbook features a Multicultural Advisory board made up of members who reside in various offices of Social Studies, History, Multicultural Education, Education, and a former teacher (p. v). This textbook has the longest section dedicated to women's rights. "Women Win New Rights" (p. 650-653) begins with a "voice from the past" clip of Lillian Wald. They cover the new roles for women of the Progressive era and end with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. After the Nineteenth Amendment is described, there is no other information given to the ongoing struggle for equality or a follow up to the progress that was made (p. 653).

Pattern Recognition

Throughout the textbooks surveyed, the vast majority of books have stated an intention to make the student critically think and view American history with a eye to, in earlier days, understanding their heritage and from the 1960s on, understanding the relevance to today. While this has been there goal, the texts reveal this intention has not sadly unfulfilled with regards to woman suffrage. Accounts are somehow bland and without agency. It happened. Never is the injustice of denying the women the vote, the passion for the women who fought for it, the suffering and the excitement of the activists, even, the agency of the women acknowledged.

Earlier textbook coverage of women's rights and history was brief, often a few sentences. Actual physical space dedicated to women's suffrage has significantly grown, as have images, biographical information and import. Few textbooks, however, explain the crippling impact or the symbolic significance of the lack to choose the leaders of local, state, and federal offices. None discuss the learning curve women experienced being activists for schools, conservation, or playgroups as preparation for larger fights. None pose questions for students to think about the critical need for the vote or the lasting influence of the women's suffrage movement. The earliest textbook that provides students the opportunities to investigate and analyze further is Carol Baruch and Leonard Wood's *Land of Promise*. The vast majority of women's equality and suffrage coverage ends abruptly after the nineteenth amendment, omitting the continual struggles decades after the right to vote up to current affairs today. This provides a primitive coverage on women's history and gives the illusion that women had full legal treatment and rights after the nineteenth amendment.

Another significant omission by textbooks is that of the torture of women's suffragists. The earliest and longest mention of one of many atrocities was in 1977 by Grossier and Levine in *USA: The Unfolding Story of America*. They dedicated a paragraph to the arrest of Alice Paul but only mentioned the hunger strike and force feedings in two sentences. No other examples were given, making it appear as an isolated event.

Conclusions

The textbooks surveyed regarding women's suffrage and equality have significantly improved over time in both length and content. One of the significant shortcomings in the textbooks studied was the lack of followup after the nineteenth amendment was passed. It didn't

address the major questions or information about how voting changed women's roles and daily lives. It left out that while women had the right to vote that they were still misrepresented politically and still lacked fundamental rights that men continued to hold. Students are left with a sense of satisfaction and an end to the struggle. Omitting the continuing story for the right to be self authored and self determining can contribute to men, and maybe more importantly, young women, feeling that the problem was solved in 1920. It presents a conflicting reality from what the student experiences in his or her daily life.

We know that many things are left out and not included in our textbooks but the question really is, what should be included? When women are half of the population and voting a critical responsibility in a democracy and activism the means by which we separated from the mother country, the cursory treatment of woman suffrage represents an opportunity lost. The biggest criticism levied at history textbooks is that they have boring writing, do not describe causation, and cause students to lose interest in history. The coverage of woman suffrage in these textbooks surely is ample evidence of all of these issues.

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