

The Struggle Over America's National History Standards

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IN October 1994, a remarkable event occurred in the history of humanities education in the United States. A unit of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) released *National Standards for United States History*, a first-ever set of national educational standards for teaching American and world history. Initially funded by the Bush Administration, *Standards* was some three years and US\$2m in the making. It involved several thousand teachers, educators, officials, and scholars in its preparation.

This event was remarkable because from the 18th century until today the United States has never had nationally recognised criteria for what children should be taught in school. Instead, American education has been decentralised; a vast expanse of separate educational fiefdoms presided over by local school boards governing some 15,000 public school districts. While there is some oversight by state governments of what is taught, elected local school boards have discretionary power, constrained by numerous factors that differ from state to state, such as limited budgets, caps on taxes (in California and elsewhere), teachers' unions, tenure, aroused parents, and, of course, the courts.

In the 1980s a consensus formed that this state of affairs was unsatisfactory because it was delivering poor-quality education to too many children. The principal stimulus for reform has been the growing belief that education from kindergarten to grade 12 must be improved if the United States is to meet increasing international economic competition. How to remedy the situation has been a central focus of national debate for at least a decade.

Origins of the Standards Movement

By the late 1980s, the first project to develop a set of criteria for what students should know had been successfully undertaken in the subject of mathematics. Influenced by this example, a movement began to create standards in all major subjects. In time, nearly every field in the curriculum had a standards project going, some wholly or partly funded by the federal government, some supported by private foundations, or, in the odd case, *samizdat* in nature. A sceptical chorus decrying any movement away from local control of education was never far from centre

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stage. Conservative forces in particular feared the imposition of liberal ideology in the name of 'reform'.

The national standards to be developed by these projects were never conceived or intended to become the law of the land. All parties to standards development invariably emphasised that the standards were to be *voluntary*, though often the word was used disingenuously. To head off critics, one congressional bill inserted the word 'voluntary' more than 70 times. Moreover, although a number of the projects used federal dollars, they were created independently of the federal government (as I can attest in the case of civics and government standards).

All concerned knew that Americans would never tolerate a national curriculum (as in France), written or supervised by Washington. But proponents foresaw, and opponents feared, that both moral suasion and federal dollars could be used as inducements to get state and local authorities to adopt versions of standards that would be close to the originals. Standards could then have the effect of elevating the quality of elementary and secondary education, especially where local quality control is unreliable.

The Fall of the Standards Movement

This movement has now been shattered as a result of the publication of *National Standards for United States History*. States are adopting new educational standards, but, according to a recent study by the American Federation of Teachers (1995), the great majority are too vague to mean much in the classroom. After the Republican victory at the congressional elections of November 1994, it is difficult to imagine that money will be appropriated in Washington to encourage school districts or states to use standards in any subject (with the possible exception of mathematics).

No sooner was *Standards* released than it was attacked as deeply biased, anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-white male, the very embodiment of political correctness in full flower. The first salvos were fired by Dr Lynne Cheney, chairman of the National Endowment for Humanities when *Standards* was funded, and wife of Dick Cheney, former Secretary of Defense under President Bush. Lynne Cheney vigorously attacked *Standards* in the *Wall Street Journal* of 20 October 1994. Yes, she had approved *Standards'* funding, but now she was appalled by the result. Soon she was on national television debating the merits of her case with UCLA historian Gary B. Nash, codirector of the project.

From the beginning, Nash, a former anti-Vietnam protester and political radical, was *Standards'* principal defender. He got off to a bad start, making a tactical blunder by appearing on the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* tieless and in shirtsleeves. Fortunately for him, few Americans watch the program. By the following morning, however, friends had prevailed on him to dress prudently for a wider audience on the CBS *Morning News*.

By the end of 1994, the Nash-Cheney debate was being splashed across the nation by the media. Wars of words appeared in the editorial pages of prominent American newspapers as well as in the education press. In December, Cheney launched a Committee to Review Standards, not just of history but also of other

subjects, such as geography and civics. To direct the project, Cheney appointed Dr John Fonte, historian and former education official in the Reagan-Bush era.

Fonte, an experienced campaigner against the rejection of Western culture by American education, soon became Nash's nemesis, appearing on radio and television programs, in print, and speaking to interested audiences around the country. On 6 November 1994, a Fonte column attacking *Standards'* anti-Western bias appeared in the *San Diego Union*; on June 9 1995 another piece, 'The Naive Romanticism of the History Standards', appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a prominent national education weekly, arguing that *Standards* offers 'a morality tale complete with saints and sinners, celebratory and condemnatory language, and a consistent hortatory message'.

The Fonte-Nash clash came to a climax in July when the two debated for two-and-a-half hours before an educational conference in Los Angeles. Nash admitted 'imperfections' in *Standards* but said they would soon be corrected. He argued further that the project was the work of hundreds of prominent historians and educators, reflecting the involvement of numerous education and history organisations. Fonte countered that Nash had to assume major responsibility for the outcome as project codirector and argued that *Standards* was beyond fixing. He repeatedly pointed to glaring bias in the content choice and descriptive language of the document.

Standards suffered a serious blow at the end of January 1995, when the US Senate condemned it by a vote of 99-1. Thereafter, no politician dared support it in public. But an independent attempt was made to save *Standards*. Influential educators such as Diane Ravitch, a faculty member at New York University and former Assistant Secretary of Education, seeing that the standards movement as a whole was floundering, argued that *Standards* could and should be fixed (Ravitch, 1995). In the Spring a group funded by liberal foundations was established to recommend changes. In October 1995, it reported that although *Standards* was biased, it should be revised and retained. The character of future revisions is unknown, but, whatever happens, the movement for high quality *national* educational standards has effectively stalled, with little hope of revival.

By (northern) Summer and Autumn, politics had further entered the debate. Bob Dole, front-running Republican Party candidate for president, condemned *Standards* in a campaign speech. But *Standards* would not become a campaign issue. Despite spirited defences of Nash's work from liberal forces, the Clinton Administration, sensing political poison, decisively distanced itself from the controversy when Secretary of Education Richard Riley issued a statement rejecting *Standards*.

Yet more than 20,000 copies of the document have been distributed at taxpayer expense, and perhaps 10,000 additional copies have been sold. However *Standards* might be revised, much damage has already been done. Nash has boasted of a *fait accompli*. *Standards* is already in use in school curriculum planning and classrooms throughout the country.

Postmodernist Preoccupations

So what is all the fuss about? The truth is that *National Standards for United States History* reflects the postmodernist preoccupations which predominate in American universities and filter down to classroom teachers through texts, summer institutes, and the *Zeitgeist* influences of educational fashion. Thus, the juggernaut of multiculturalism has nearly everywhere captured pre-tertiary public education.

Intent exclusively on servicing these preoccupations, *Standards* focuses from beginning to end on race, class, gender, and ethnicity. *Standards'* interest is principally in the 'victim' status of these groups. American history is presented largely as a dark and grisly tale of the slaughter, enslavement, denigration, and exploitation of Indians, Africans, Mexicans, Asians, women, and workers by white males. For example, the space lavished upon American Indians (almost invariably called 'Native Americans', as if only they are native Americans) can only be described as fantastic. In some 180 full pages, the term 'Native Americans' or its equivalent, individual Indians (however obscure) or their tribes are mentioned nearly 300 times.

Critics such as Cheney and Fonte, however, complain that if Speckled Snake, Red Eagle, and Tenskwatawa merit explicit attention, why don't Robert E. Lee, the Wright Brothers, and Thomas A. Edison? (Asked at a news conference last year who Red Eagle was, Secretary Riley admitted ignorance.) These are among throngs of white males absent from *Standards* but who are widely believed to be of some importance to American history. George Washington is mentioned but is not identified as the nation's first president.

Typical is *Standards'* opening illustration. Some may find it disconcerting to discover a map of Mexico City in 1557 illustrating the origins of the United States. Two pages further on, a second illustration, an etching labelled 'Native Americans Tilling the Soil' by the French artist Jacques Le Moyne¹ portrays a scene of tranquil innocence, as three Indian women plant seeds beside three Indian men. Although the legend refers to *Indi*, the title — *Culturæ & sationis ratio* ('method of tilling the ground and sowing seed') — has been rendered politically correct in translation. But the scene bears little relationship to reality. The artist portrays the romantic's vision of the supposed harmonious purity of the New World. The Europeanised bare-breasted Indian women, with their long, flowing, light-coloured hair, appear to have stepped directly out of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. All was idyllic, the pictorial suggests, until white men came ashore.

Opposite this illustration, *Standards* itself begins with a first era called 'Three Worlds Meet'. Rather than finding the origins of the United States in the ideas and practices of the ancient world of Western civilisation, where they in fact lie, the text begins: 'The study of American history properly begins with the first peopling of the Americas some 30,000 years ago' (p.39). It proceeds to place the origins of the

¹ Taken from *Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues: A Huguenot in France, Florida and England*, published for the Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1977.

United States in the confluence of three cultures: those of indigenous peoples, African slaves, and white European settlers.

The truth, of course, is that the collision between indigenous peoples and European civilisation resulted in a decisive victory for the colonists and that the cultural influence of the Africans and Indians on the foundations of the American nation was virtually nil. 'To deny the essentially European origins of American culture', writes the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, 'is to falsify history' (1991:81). But this could never be learned from *Standards*, whose purpose is to foster among youth a new vision of American history, one with predominantly New World roots, which puts white men and their civilisation in a subordinate place, and brands them as malevolent, latter-day interlopers.

Following this conception, Americans would adopt an identity quite different from that founded on the pride and confidence in the accomplishments of their nation that is commonplace among non-intellectuals. To be an American would be to find one's primary identity in ascriptive racial, gender, class, and ethnic groups, and to adopt a radical egalitarianism among separately conceived 'cultural' groups as society's fundamental project. Proportionalism would be practised with respect to race, gender, class, and ethnicity in the distribution of social goods among the American 'peoples' (a term Nash repeatedly uses). As the individual is replaced by ascriptive group membership, liberal democracy is replaced by 'cultural democracy'.

'In studying the beginnings of American history', the text continues, 'it is best for students to take a hemispheric approach' because it 'avoids provincialism and drives home the point that the English, as latecomers to the Americas, were deeply affected by what had already occurred in the vast regions of the hemisphere' (p.39). In other words, in the origins of American history, European culture was just one of three, indeed a 'latecomer', and should be viewed more as acted upon than as actor. That European culture was of any greater importance than African and Indian cultures in the foundation and character of the United States is never so much as hinted at.

Such a suggestion is anathema to the tenor of the standards. Its spirit is, however, in accord with the bitter national self-hatred of a term adopted by Gary Nash in his March 1995 presidential address to the Organisation of American Historians. There, Nash said that in colonising the New World, the English 'planted the seeds of racial binary thinking that became the basis for what has been called a white *herrenvolk* democracy'. That the English also planted the universal principles by reference to which racism has since come to be condemned and outlawed could never conceivably be recognised, let alone taught to the young. Nor could the reception of untold numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees — including most recently tens of thousands of Somalians — be acknowledged as a central chapter of the American story in which youth could take pride.

Moral Equivalence

I will conclude with two further illustrations of the mentality of *Standards*. In its treatment of the Cold War, *Standards* take a neutral stance in the struggle between

communism and liberal democracy, between the Soviet Union and the United States, and portray the two as moral equivalents. Thus, the conflict between the two superpowers is presented as a merely a duel: 'The swordplay of the Soviet Union and the United States rightfully claims attention because it led to the Korean and Vietnam Wars as well as the Berlin airlift' and other events (p.205). *Standards* asks: 'Was the Cold War inevitable? If not, how could it have been avoided? How did US support for "self-determination" conflict with the USSR's desire for security in Eastern Europe at the end of the war?' (p.215). To *Standards*, Stalin's enslavement of Eastern Europe is simply a 'desire for security'. And note that 'self-determination' is in inverted commas, as if it were somehow questionable. When the West, led by the United States, threatens to be cast as good guys, *Standards* runs for cover.

Thus, the Cold War remains morally uncharacterised. According to *Standards*, it is important because it led to wars, the Cuban missile crisis, 'a huge investment in scientific research, and environmental damage that will take generations to rectify' (p.205). The only 'moral and ethical issues' mentioned are those raised by anti-Vietnam war protesters.

The final example is *Standards'* treatment of McCarthyism. Although students are asked to examine the effects of the Hiss and Rosenberg cases on Joseph McCarthy's rise, they are never asked whether the accused were guilty. That they were guilty is a matter in which *Standards* takes no interest. Indeed, that this was a 'witch hunt' in which, unlike 17th-century Salem, there were actual 'witches', is an obscure and delicate refinement that cannot be expected of this document. We know, however, that a number of the 'witches' — spies such as the Rosenbergs — did tremendous damage to American and Western security.

Standards is, however, interested in the aftermath of McCarthyism: 'To what extent did McCarthy's anti-communist legacy continue after his fall from power?' (p.215) — suggesting that domestic opposition to communism was no more than McCarthy's 'legacy'. The idea is simply insulting. Might not love of liberty and a sense of lying in the crosshairs of an indecent regime have had something to do with it, quite apart from McCarthy's 'legacy'?

The ideology of postmodernism is strewn throughout a document that deserves to have been strangled in the cradle. An important opportunity to reform primary and secondary education has been killed instead.

References

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