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MYTH AND REALITY IN HISTORY TEXT-BOOKS

Popular myths harboured by school children are that textbooks are essential aids to learning and that they condense all the available historical knowledge applicable to any given section of the syllabus. The reality is that textbooks are limiting. They are unable to explore the exciting possibilities of each section. They restrict the development of independent thought because pupils treat them as though they contained ultimate truths. Unfortunately this impression is reinforced by matriculation examiners who are often inclined to regard the final examination as one which should test the candidates knowledge of the official text. This encourages pupils to commit to memory topics they barely understand, and persuades teachers that the production and distribution of 'model' essays is essential, if their charges are to obtain good results. The scenario becomes yet gloomier if teachers of non-matriculation pupils adopt the same stultifying strategies. The best thing all but teachers of pupils in their final school year can do, is to avoid and restrict text-book usage. The golden rule is not to use one at all. But for many teachers abandoning the text-book would be impractical. It is therefore essential that they constantly remind themselves that pupils have no defence against the bias contained in many texts and that they need to develop strategies which assist pupils to recognize and overcome the problem.

Everyone who writes or studies history has a favourite topic, personality or period. Everyone has some philosophical approach. Even the commendable determination to write a book which contains no bias, betrays an attitude steeped in

liberal philosophy. In itself this type of bias need present no problems. Enthusiasms and points of view are what make history exciting. What betrays history are lies, prejudice, and deliberate attempts to obscure the truth by suppressing evidence and presenting a one-dimensional picture of reality.

Why are text-books the first targets of attention after a change of government? A study of texts reveals that modes of political organization and the dominant ideology of a period determine the form and content of education. All texts must be approached in the knowledge that they are likely to support the *status quo* and reflect the ideology of the ruling elite. Any apologist text has negative social and educational effects upon those who use it because history is about the real world of actions and decisions. A distorted picture of the world and of the cause and results of important trends and events closes options, limits thinking and gives credibility to stereotypes.

Many South African text-books have encouraged ill-founded superiority on the part of white students, have reduced their potential for empathy and restricted their view of possible relationships within the major social structures. Blacks are most often portrayed as 'problems', 'savage attackers' or 'objects of policy'. This creates a climate of fear and resentment which has extremely negative political and social results.

When using a text-book how does one know whether it contains the bias of enthusiasm or doctrinaire prejudice? Teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that a great deal of the prejudice is conveyed as a result of one-sided selection of facts or topics for inclusion in text. A good example of this is the South African history section taught

to Standard Ten pupils. This is not the history of South Africa. It is the history of the rise and a study of the policy of the National Party. Now this is a perfectly legitimate study of great importance to our understanding of what our country is and has been - but it is only part of the history of the country and its peoples during the years 1910-1970. Such a narrow focus obscures social and political realities. History thus presented fails to confront the complexities of the society into which the young person needs to integrate and become a thoughtful citizen and prudent decision-maker. It merely serves to make the real rational. Therefore, every attempt should be made to present a more balanced view by making pupils aware of the policies and ambitions of all the historical actors during the period under review.

Many South African texts present history as though it were an immutable body of knowledge. When they do so they subscribe to another insidious form of distortion. No questions about the motives or alternative strategies of the historical actors can be posed and no sense of the debate surrounding important issues is conveyed. Some interpretations support the notion that historical events are the revelation of a Divine Plan. Things happened as ordained and human choice did little or nothing to determine action. Truth and history become interwoven and essence precedes existence. Ironically, this determinist aproach reflects more elements of Marxist thinking than its protagonists would care to admit.

The extremes of bias, which we call prejudice, occur when stereotypes are accepted as truly representative, and value-loaded terminology is used when describing people or events. A biased selection of information chosen for inclusion or

omission in the narrative, even if the circumscribed facts given are accurate, will severely distort the possible interpretation of events by the reader. In such instances faulty historical practices have the same effect as blatant untruth - which at least has the merit of being easier to detect and combat than are cleverly disguised prejudices.

Distortions in text-books are usually the result of one, or all, of the following faults:

i) *Making unfounded generalizations* by using particular instances as a basis for general assumptions. To guard against this it is advisable to doubt any "All X are Y" type propositions. In the realm of human action and interaction such rules seldom apply.

ii) Attempts to *rationalize a policy* (political, economic or religious) leads zealous adherents into the realms of wishful thinking. Many histories have been written 'backwards' in attempts to use the past to justify the present. The emphases reflect contemporary political thinking but are based on dubious historical analysis. These 'histories' use particular instances, confined to one time and place, to justify general policies.

iii) Many texts are *under-researched.* Writers are not familiar with the latest debate on all the topics contained in a very wide syllabus. They write from a position of ignorance and have not collected sufficient evidence or given adequate consideration to the published research available. As a consequence they fall back on stereotypes and prejudices, or at the very least their interpretations are dated. The above mentioned inadequacies result in authors allowing supposition to replace fact and accept myths as reality.

A good text-book should make the world intelligible to the child and approximate the truth as far as possible. Children must be made aware that sometimes it may be more important to pose the question than give the answer. A text which uses the evidential approach and stresses that history is a mode of enquiry will be the best choice as it will help children to search for answers, to look at evidence, weigh possiblities and arrive at logical conclusions. Children should be taught in such a way as to accustom them to habits of investigation and evaluation. It should be stressed that new evidence might provide new insights and that all conclusions are therefore tentative.

The dangers of using even the most prejudiced text-book can be overcome by the teacher who prepares lessons from many sources and encourages pupils to consult a number of references and compare several texts. Encouragement must be given to pupils to think critically, to question the apparently obvious and to challenge glib generalizations. They should always be required to substantiate their opinions with an appeal to the evidence and to assess the logical development of any argument. That important historical question, 'why?', should always be stressed. No *one* text should be the sole source of information. A comparison of texts can generate the type of provocative discussion which will help pupils to formulate their own questions. They must be put in a position to answer these questions for themselves. Instead of being given answers they should be required to scrutinize varied source materials supplied by the teacher. The development of understanding is the objective of history teaching. A good history teacher acts as a catalyst between question and answer and neither supplies, nor expects the texts

to supply all the answers.

Pupils can be made aware of negative bias and disguised prejudice by the teacher willing to develop critical, questioning minds. If the history text-book becomes one of many aids in the classroom, it has a useful function. If it dominates classroom discourse it becomes the most unfortunate of tyrants - one which closes the mind to alternatives and robs the student using it of the only worthwhile product of education, the ability to pose questions and a knowledge of the techniques appropriate to finding the answers.