Dominant Traditions in International Textbook Research and Revision

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History textbooks have been a ubiquitous feature of educational practice in schools systems across the world for many centuries. Textbooks, however, do not stand as neutral entities espousing agreed or accepted “historical truths”. To the contrary, textbooks appear as powerful cultural artefacts because they contain the ideas, values, and knowledge that influential elements in society expect students to know and embrace. As Apple (1993: 46) rightly acknowledges, “Textbooks are...conceived, designed and authored by real people with real interests” and as a result the selection of textbook knowledge is an intensely political activity often leading to tension, controversy and acrimonious debates in the struggle to define “what knowledge is of most worth”. Traditionally history education is regarded as the vehicle through which nations seek to disseminate and reinforce narratives that define conceptions of nationhood and national identity. Contained within history textbooks, therefore, are narratives and stories that nations choose to tell about themselves, their people, and their relationships with other nations. As a consequence, to study and interrogate the content of history textbooks and how they are authored, published, and employed is an illuminating and vitally important educational enterprise.

The study of history textbooks is, however, a highly complex and challenging undertaking, particularly in comparative and international perspective. For, as a number of critics have demonstrated, the production, selection, deployment, and status of history textbooks differs considerably in different countries (Hein and Selden 2000; Nicholls, 2006; Pingel 2010; Vickers and Jones 2005). For example, in many nations they are used to “cover” stipulated historical topics, to respond to curriculum needs, and to address the requirements of standardized tests. In other locations they are used more as a support mechanism and as a source of information for teachers, students, and parents. By contrast in some less than typical contexts they are used critically exemplifying one narrative account of a particular historical perspective among many. Understanding the impact of textbook content on student knowledge is further complicated when consideration is given to the possibility

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that what is “in” the textbook may not be taught and, even if it is taught, it may not be understood by students in the way desired by national governments, textbook authors, and teachers. Consequently, it erroneous to assume that textbook content directly mirrors what teachers teach, or, more importantly, what students learn (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991). The many ways in which students and teachers understand, negotiate, and transform their personal understandings of textual material is a complex process and rarely is textbook content simply accepted, absorbed, and then regurgitated by learners (see, for example, Apple, 1991; Barthes, 1976; Foster and Crawford, 2006a; Porat, 2004).

Despite these important cautions and considerations and despite the rapid advance of educational technologies, textbooks remain a major factor in determining how students learn history (Anyon, 1978; Anyon, 1979; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Foster 1999; Marsden, 2001). Unfortunately, however, notwithstanding the importance of the enterprise, relative to educational research in general, the field of textbook research is extremely limited. Marsden, for example, has referred to the “black hole of textbook research in England” and lamented that in a ten-year period from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, only three articles related to textbook research were published in a sample of twelve leading British educational journals (Marsden, 2001: 57). In a similar vein, U.S. professor of education, O.L. Davis, Jr., reflected that “the general paucity of research about textbooks constitutes an extremely serious, not just an unfortunate, dimension of studies about school curricula” (Davis, 2006: xiv). However, whilst it is true that the field of textbook research is not extensive, as illustrated in the special edition of this journal, a number of key individuals and agencies have focused on this important area for generations – the example of the work of the Georg Eckert Institute stands out in this regard. In many respects, therefore, the articles in this collection make a prominent contribution to this growing and important field of scholarship. Given the significant role that Nordic countries traditionally have played in the field of textbook revision and research it is perhaps fitting that the origins of this collection derive from an international workshop held in Sweden at Umeå University in May 2010. Entitled, “Researching History Textbooks and International Textbook Revision”, the seminar brought together a number of educators, graduate students and leading academics to discuss a broad range of scholarship which included: the historiography of textbook research, methodological and pedagogical approaches, history textbook “wars”, and the relationship between national identity and textbook research and revision. Orchestrated and organised by Professor Daniel Lindmark and closely affiliated with the “History Beyond Borders” project conducted in co-operation with the Georg Eckert Institute, the seminar and the associated papers offered in this journal serve as informative and insightful examples of key areas of study in the field of textbook research and revision.
The field of textbook research and revision

In broad terms it may be argued that historically textbook research and revision has typically fallen into two categories or “traditions” which are often interrelated and overlapping. The first “tradition” includes attempts by representatives of different nations to negotiate, through collaborative textbook studies and projects, how the past is presented. Often facilitated by international organisations this “tradition” in international history textbook research might be termed the conciliatory tradition. The second “tradition” is more generally associated with specific, critical and analytical textbook research often conducted by independent academics or institutions. These studies typically focus on specific aspects of portrayals in history textbooks and form what usefully may be termed the critical tradition. In the sections that follow a brief overview of these two “traditions” is offered before attention is turned to the ways in which these traditions are both maintained and critiqued by emerging scholarship.

Conciliatory Tradition

The principal aim of those who subscribe to the conciliatory tradition is to counter aggressive nationalism and to ensure that school textbooks offer a more “objective”, sensitive and thoughtful appreciation of how the past is depicted. In particular, the conciliatory tradition is underpinned by the desire to bring together educators, historians and authors from different nations to analyse history textbooks and ensure that they are produced so that they (a) are underpinned by common historical understandings of the past and (b) are more sensitive to the histories of other nations.

As detailed in several of the articles in this journal, these concerted attempts to ensure that school textbooks provide a means to promote greater understanding and mutual respect have historically been driven by major transnational and international organisations such as the League of Nations, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the Council of Europe. For example, in the post World War I era “the International Committee on Intellectual Co-Operation”, a key body within the League of Nations, suggested that all national commissions initiate “a reciprocal comparative analysis of textbooks in order to revise texts that were biased and flawed and which would thus help to avoid essential misunderstandings of other countries in the future” (Pingel 2010: 9). Similarly, in an attempt to promote the salutary role that history educators and textbook authors could play in improving international understanding, in 1932 “the International Committee” passed a resolution to develop a model for international consultation on textbooks. As a result, a series of ongoing activities including conferences, symposia, lectures and workshops were established to encourage open dialogue between teachers, curriculum planners and academics from different nations.

In a similar vein, in the years following World War II major international agencies such as UNESCO were responsible for a range of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, research projects, and international conferences specifically aimed at bringing scholars
and textbook authors together to improve how textbooks were written and employed (Luntinen, 1989; Marsden, 2001; Nicholls, 2006; Pingel, 2010, Slater, 1995; Stobart, 1999). Since its inception in 1949, the Council of Europe has also played a central role in promoting textbook revision and research. For example, between 1953 and 1958 the Council of Europe organised six prominent international conferences during which almost half of the 2000 history textbooks used in schools across fifteen European countries were examined by a range of educators and education specialists (Stobart, 1999). In subsequent decades the Council of Europe orchestrated a significant number of “Pan-European initiatives” for teachers and scholars of history, “as well as publishing guidebooks aimed at assisting textbook authors to avoid ‘bias and prejudice’ in their work” (Nicholls, 2006: 8). Since the 1990s attention to inter-European textbook projects have both proliferated and geographically expanded to include central, eastern, and southern Europe and the Balkans. In keeping with the conciliatory tradition the ultimate aim of these projects is to “harmonise the teaching of historical relations between neighbouring countries, normalise contentious histories, and bring about a rapprochement among former enemies” (Soysal, 2006: 118).

One of the most important international institutions in this area of textbook research and development is the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (GEI), situated in Braunschweig, Germany (www.gei.de). Formed in 1951 by the historian Georg Eckert, the Institute has contributed significantly to reconciliation and peace education by organising a series of bi-lateral and multilateral textbooks conferences for representatives of former enemy states. In this context important landmarks in the history of the organisation include the 1951 “Franco-German Agreement on Controversial Issues in European History”, the 1975 “Recommendations for History and Geography Textbooks in the Federal Republic of Germany and the People’s Republic of Poland”, and the agreements reached by German and Israeli scholars, in 1985, on the “German-Israeli Textbook Recommendations”. Today the GEI works in direct co-operation with UNESCO, the Council of Europe and other transnational organisations and is widely recognised as a world centre in the field of comparative textbook analysis and research. Major projects completed in recent years include a study of Textbook Controversies in South Asia (2004–2008), the Israeli-Palestinian Textbook Project (2002–2009), and a groundbreaking “Project for the Co-ordination of Textbook Research, Development and Comparison in South-East Europe” (2000–2009).

Academics at the Georg Eckert Institute recognise that producing a textbook that respects historical conventions, allows alternative interpretations, and is accepted as legitimate by neighbouring nations, is a hugely complex and challenging enterprise. Underpinning the work of the GEI, therefore, is the desire to provide a forum for scholars and historians from different nations to share understandings and misunderstandings. In this respect it conducts extremely important and beneficent work and shares some of the broader educational goals of the educational arm of the Council of
Europe. Indeed, in 1985, the Georg Eckert Institute was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education. Significantly, therefore, although the GEI has recently reconsidered its strategic mission to incorporate new approaches to textbook research, it remains apparent that the Institute’s core activity remains consistent with the conciliatory tradition of textbook revision and research.4

The Critical Tradition

The second broad category of research consists of a range of scholarship produced by academics or researchers typically based at independent universities or institutions across the world. For the most part these individuals do not explicitly seek to work with others to achieve commonalities in textbook writing across nations, but rather take a more critical and independent perspective on the content of history textbooks, nationally and internationally. The aim of this research is to analyse critically the perspectives, discourse, and content of textbooks in order to raise important questions about how historical knowledge is controlled and influenced by dominant socio-cultural and ideological forces. Scholarship within the critical tradition reveals the diverse and complex nature of the field. In broad terms, however, researchers are interested in exploring fundamental questions that include:

- Who selects school textbook knowledge and what are the ideological, economic and intellectual relationships between these different interest groups?
- Whose voices are heard in textbooks? Whose knowledge is included? Which group(s) receive(s) the most sustained attention? Whose story is being told?
- How and in what ways do cultural, political, geographical, and historical perspectives influence how particular national versions of the past are told?

In response to these key questions it may be argued that two principal areas of enquiry dominate. The first critically examines portrayals of race, ethnicity, class, gender and disability in history textbooks. The second examines more closely the relationship between ideology, national identity and history textbook content.

In relation to the first of these areas of enquiry, a key area of focus in national and international textbook research is centred on the way in which the histories of different social groups are portrayed. Particular attention is often given to analysing which groups are included and, perhaps more importantly, typically excluded in historical textbook narratives. In this vein a growing body of scholarship has critically examined portrayals of race, ethnicity, class, gender and disability in history textbooks. For example, as part of a broader collection of scholarly articles edited by Apple and Christian-Smith and entitled The Politics of the Textbook (1991), Sleeter and Grant (1991) systematically examined portrayals of “race, class, gender and disability” in US textbooks. Employing critical theory as a lens to explore the complex ways in which textbooks achieve legitimacy and dominance in educational settings, Sleeter
and Grant argued that narrow and selective interpretations of what constituted ‘legitimate’ and ‘worthwhile’ knowledge was underpinned by a powerful, reactionary, and deep-seated quest for social control. The work of Sleeter and Grant epitomised the approaches adopted by many other adherents to the critical tradition. In a related fashion, chapter seven of James Loewen’s provocative book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything your American history textbooks got wrong*, exposed the absence of any serious attention to issues related to social class, social stratification and social inequality in US history textbooks. First published in 1995, Loewen’s book caused a stir in US educational and political circles. Fundamentally, Loewen argued that US textbooks provided “an embarrassing amalgam of bland optimism, blind patriotism and misinformation pure and simple” (Loewen, 1995: 374). Dedicated to “all American history teachers who teach against their textbooks” (vi), Loewen’s book critically exposed the inadequacies of 12 of the best-selling US history textbooks. In particular, he harshly criticised US history textbooks for their misleading and unacceptable representations of Native Americans and African Americans.

Loewen’s attention to the marginalisation of certain groups in history textbooks is, of course, part of a long-standing theme in the tradition of critical textbook research. Indeed, the challenge of how textbooks should portray immigrant and ethnic groups in the unfolding narrative of national history is one of the burning issues faced by textbook authors across the globe. This issue is particularly acute in nations with high immigrant populations, because it exposes the underlying tension between diversity and cohesiveness in such societies. For example, there is, on the one hand, a desire to espouse multiple histories within a single nation and, on the other, the urge to promote a shared national story for reasons of social cohesion and collective identity. Not surprisingly, therefore, issues related to portrayals of immigrant and ethnic groups in history textbooks has inspired a rich array of national and international scholarship (e.g., Garcia 1993; Janjetovic, 2001; Ohliger, 2005).

Another area of enquiry that falls within the critical tradition incorporates studies related to the relationship between gender and textbook knowledge. In the past four decades, for example, a small but growing body of literature has emerged in the USA and the UK in this regard. For example, based on a survey of literature written in the early 1970s, Trecker (1971) and Zimet (1976) exposed the limited attention given to women in history textbooks on both sides of the Atlantic. These findings were amplified by those of Adams (1983), Davies (1986) and Cairns and Inglis (1989) who separately argued that textbooks routinely belittled or ignored women’s experience in history. Davies, for example, concluded that women were largely reduced to “subservient and passive roles” and “the value of work, the contribution made to domestic economies, the economic and political functions that women performed” were “blatantly disregarded by textbooks” (Davies, 1986: 20).

Increased attention to social history and gender equality in subsequent decades did, according to some researchers, ensure that history textbooks generally were written
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with more sensitivity to gender-neutral language (Bourdillon, 1994) and, despite some limitations, more “opportunities for the inclusion of the history and experiences of women” were included in the history curriculum (Osler, 1995: 234). Nevertheless, criticisms remained. Osler, for example, noted that textbooks were commonly authored by males and dominated by the exploits of men while “narrow aspects of women’s experience [e.g., as carers, as monarchs, or in domestic roles] still predominated in a large proportion of cases” (Osler, 1995: 227). Osler also found that textbook narratives underrepresented the role of women while photographs of men outnumbered those of women by at least 26 to 1. Similarly, in the United States, Commeyras and Alvermann’s (1996) study of three world history textbooks exposed the many failings of recent publications with regard to gender balance. Their feminist analysis of the content and language of world history textbooks demonstrated the ways in which texts continued to “perpetuate biases and influence students’ interpretations of, and attitudes toward, women in general” (Commeyras and Alvermann, 1996: 33). Above all, the authors demonstrated how subtleties of language and unstated assumptions continued to “legitimate a patriarchal view of world history” and “typically undervalued and obfuscated the role of women in history” (Commeyras and Alvermann, 1996: 33). These studies, carried out on both sides of the Atlantic, are symptomatic of others within the critical tradition. They reveal certain common practices that continue to affect the way in which women’s history is portrayed in history textbooks and broadly they demonstrate that, despite some improvements, textbooks continue to portray a past controlled and dominated by men.

The second area of enquiry within the critical tradition examines more closely the relationship between ideology, national identity and the content of history textbooks. Research into this area of enquiry is increasing and more commonly the subject of a range of educational journals (e.g., Crawford, 2004; Foster, 1999; Janmaat, 2006; Marsden, 2000; Vural and Ozuyanik, 2008). In addition to this growing collection of academic articles, in recent years a range of books has emerged which looks closely at the relationship between textbooks, curricula and national identity. Two examples of prominent publications in this area written in the English language are The Nation, Europe and the World: textbooks and curricula in transition (2005), co-edited by Schissler and Soysal, and Censoring History: History, citizenship and memory in Japan, Germany and the United States (2000), co-edited by Hein and Selden. The former, edited by two prominent European scholars, examines differing and contested representations of Europe and the world. Incorporating perspectives from France, Germany, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Spain and Russia, the book examines current and shifting perspectives on history curricula and national identity. The second publication specifically focuses its 300-page contribution on textbook representations in Japan, Germany and the USA. More recently Crawford and Foster have co-edited and co-authored two books exploring the ways in which different nations convey selected histories to young people. The first book, What Shall We Tell the Children?
International perspectives on school history textbooks (2006), includes a range of perspectives from Europe, North America, South Africa, the Middle East, and South and East Asia. The second book, War, Nation, Memory: international perspectives on World War II in school history textbooks (2007), presents a ten-chapter critical analysis of how the Second World War is variously portrayed to school children in nations across the globe, including England, the USA, France, Germany, Japan and China.

Specifically examining the relationship between history education and national consciousness, History Education and National identity in East Asia (2005), co-edited by Vickers and Jones, has made another significant contribution to the field. In this book the geographic focus shifts to China, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. In so doing the contributors offer one of the few comparative studies of the politics of history textbooks and history curricula across East Asia. A further addition to the field is School History Textbooks Across Cultures: International debates and perspectives (2006). Edited by Nicholls, this eight-chapter book undertakes a critical analysis of contemporary history textbooks in the USA, Italy, Japan, Germany, Russia, England and France. More recently, jointly edited by Alayan, Dhouib and Rohde, Education Reforms in the Middle East (2010), offers rich insights into the role of the textbook in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular the book critically explores the complex issue of identity and history textbooks.

As these publications show, in countries across the world textbooks remain potent vehicles to render a particular, “official”, version of the nation’s past to young people. Nations rarely tell “the truth” about themselves, rather in history classroom and in history textbooks students often encounter narratives that dominant groups choose to select and remember as representations of the national story. Of course, selecting a national past also involves a de-selection process. Choosing to highlight and emphasise certain dimensions of the nation’s history while other aspects remain absent inevitably produces conflict as history is re-made by competing interest groups each seeking a dominant voice in constructing what counts as popular memory. This process is by its very nature ongoing and subject to negotiation and interpretation in order to comply with emergent contemporary issues and the wishes of ascendant and powerful interest groups. One outcome is that the history taught to children often is a watered-down, partial, sometimes distorted, and sometimes a fictional view of the national past based upon cultural, ideological and political selection. As Crawford and I have written:

In some nation states history teaching is used openly and unashamedly to promote specific ideologies and sets of political ideas. In other countries, under the guise of patriotism, the history of a nation served up for student consumption is what its leaders decide it is to be. In states which consider their existence to be under threat, or in states which are struggling to create an identity, or in those which are re-inventing themselves following a period of
colonial rule, teaching a nationalistic and mono-cultural form of history can prove to be the cement which binds people together. In its worst form the manufacture and teaching of such an official past can create, sponsor, maintain and justify xenophobic hatred, racism and the obscenity of ethnic cleansing (Foster and Crawford, 2006: 6–7).

In addition, in seeking to establish and to maintain a physical, political and cultural sense of belonging, nations place great store in articulating what has traditionally bound them together and what makes them different from their neighbours. Accordingly, a central and recurrent theme in critical textbook scholarship has been analysis of the “self” and “the other” in history textbooks. Research has shown that in many nations history textbooks are often used as one of the instruments to forge a shared sense of national identity by marginalising, or in extreme cases, demonising those groups not considered part of the constructed national narrative. In the People’s Republic of China, for example, the desire to assert a common identity has stimulated two developments. First, as Vickers (2006) has illustrated, despite the existence of complex and disputed “minority nationalities,” central authorities in the state-controlled Chinese education system use history education as a vehicle to reinforce the ‘One China’ message – an intensely state-centred and homogenising vision of Chinese national identity. Thus, in order to convey to young people a distinctively celebratory nationalist narrative, the histories of Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan and Hong Kong have been repeatedly distorted in textbook accounts in order to reinforce a nationalistic vision of a united China.

Second, in an effort to consolidate and secure the Chinese sense of a united “we” and “us” (the “self”), history textbooks enthusiastically vilify Japan as the nation’s traditional enemy (the “other”). A key feature of this “vilification” is the concentrated focus on an emotive issue in China’s past, “the Nanjing Massacre” (1937), a genocidal war crime committed by the invading Japanese army (Foster and Crawford, 2007). Long standing attention to the “Nanjing Massacre” in Chinese history classrooms aptly illustrates how - by demonising the Japanese - textbooks play an important role in presenting specific images of “the self” and “the other” to construct a shared national history and consciousness. The practice of presenting a common national identity while disparaging foreigners or “outsiders” is, of course, not particular to China. Indeed, critical research that looks at representations of the self and other have revealed a range of similar examples in other educational systems throughout the world (e.g., Cajani, 2008; Challand, 2009; Janmaat, 2007).

The authors of all the publications outlined above offer a broad range of perspectives, issues and approaches to textbook research and history textbook knowledge. However, a feature of most of these works is the insistence that throughout the world textbooks are seen as powerful instruments with which to present a particular version of the nation’s past. At the heart of all critical research is the fundamental realisation that all textbooks offer a selected version of the past. No book offers neutral knowledge. No textbook offers content that is objective and value-free. The authors of his-
tory textbooks deliberately include some information and exclude others. Very often these choices are made for ideological reasons and typically they reflect the values, beliefs, and attitudes of powerful groups with long traditions of dominance in society. As a result, therefore, textbooks have long been a major site for the construction and contestation of national, regional, and international identities and are, understandably, the constant subject of critical study by international scholars.

**Continuing the research traditions**

Academics and educators who have contributed to both the conciliatory and critical traditions have done so with worthy and notable cause. Essentially, both of these “traditions” share the common overarching purpose of critiquing textbooks in order to improve the ways in which young people appreciate and understand the past. Undoubtedly, therefore, textbook studies that provide intelligent and illuminating insight into the field of textbook research and revision and its important relationship to classroom practice are invaluable. In this vein the five articles that follow offer different but important windows into this vital and expanding area of scholarship. The first article, written by Romain Faure explores the interactions and interrelations between the textbook revision activities of UNESCO, the World Movement of Trade-Unions, the international historian conferences in Speyer and two Franco-German cooperation projects in the period between 1947 and 1952. Rather than focus on the activities of textbook revision agencies in isolation, Faure’s contribution examines the ways in which, and the extent to which, the work of these organisations was connected and interwoven. Faure also shows how, during this vital post-war period of intensive activity, the field of textbook revision -- in keeping with the conciliatory tradition -- was broadly concerned with the promotion of greater international understanding and mutual respect among peoples. By paying attention to the goals and activities of each organisation, the roles played by key actors (e.g., Édouard Bruley, Georg Eckert) and the common context in which their work was undertaken, Faure skilfully demonstrates how these key revision forums often were interconnected, interrelated and to some extent constituted a coherently organised transnational field.

The activities and influence of such key transnational organisations as the Council of Europe and UNESCO in the field of textbook revision is also a focus of the work of Thomas Nygren. In his article Nygren thoughtfully examines the relationship between the guidelines of these two international organisations and history education in Sweden between 1960 and 2002. In overview, by closely mapping the guidelines, policies and recommendations of UNESCO and the Council of Europe across four decades, Nygren undertakes the bold and ambitious goal of examining the extent to which they appear to have influenced or correlated with trends in history education in Sweden. To examine the Swedish context the study uses Goodlad’s (1979) distinctions between “formal”, “perceived” and “experien-
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tial” curriculum as a theoretical lens. Of note, by drawing on an analysis of history syllabi in Sweden from 1960s onwards (the “formal curriculum”), interviews with experienced history teachers and debates in leading history education journals (the “perceived curriculum”), and examination of the contents of 145 individual history projects undertaken between 1969 and 2002 (the “experiential curriculum”), Nygren demonstrates a close relationship between international guidelines and history education practice in Sweden. Broadly, the author concludes that, from the 1960s onwards, in line with the “conciliatory” goals of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, the teaching of history in Sweden increasingly became concerned with promoting greater international understanding, “unity in diversity,” and a respect for human rights and democracy.

The context of history education in Sweden remains the focus for the third article in this collection. Attention, however, shifts from the influence of major international and transnational organisations on Swedish education to an examination of the ways in which conceptions of “Europe” changed in history textbooks published between 1910 and 2008. In his qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content of ten leading Swedish history textbooks published during this period, Henrik Åström Elmersjö intelligently demonstrates how the concept of Europe has shifted its meaning over time. He also reveals how reference and attention to Europe in Swedish textbooks significantly increased during the latter part of the twentieth century. This is not to say that national history is ignored in textbooks published in the past forty years but, rather that their contents appear more likely to emphasise Europe’s impact on Sweden than Sweden’s impact on Europe. Fundamentally, therefore, Åström Elmersjö argues that as the twentieth century has progressed, consistent with the concomitant “Europeanisation” of Swedish historical identity, the emphasis in textbook content shifts from a focus on national history to one more inclined towards presenting Europe as an entity with an increasingly common culture, economy, political context and history. At the heart of Åström Elmersjö’s intriguing study is the critical recognition that established or perceived identities (national or transnational) are not fixed identities. Instead they appear as conscious social constructions (or “myths” as Elmersjö contends) often subject to change, negotiation, controversy and division.

The last two articles in this collection further extend the important and critical examination of how history education often is used to promote certain ideological and cultural agendas. In this respect Janne Holmén’s article provides rich insights into how national, Pan-African and tribal identities are presented in upper secondary school textbooks in Kenya. Holmén’s study is particularly informative because it represents one of the few critical analyses of the content of African history textbooks (outside of South Africa) in the field. An important dimension of the article is an exploration of the acute difficulty of promoting “national unity” as the official goal of Kenyan education in an ethnically fragmented country without a common pre-
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colonial history. Drawing on the work of Anderson (1983) and Smith (1986, 1981) to
develop his argument, Holmén shows how a prominent upper secondary textbook
(The Evolving World) presents a “nation building narrative” by variously attending
to selected aspects of Kenyan history post independence, opposition to the legacies
of colonial rule and, more broadly, to the common and unifying features of Pan-
Africanism. Holmén concludes his analysis with the provocative and ironic claim that
although national unity is the stated goal of education in Kenya, enough evidence
exists to suggest that school textbooks may do more to strengthen tribal identities
than to promote a national one.

By focusing on the “Macedonian Crisis” and events in Greece, the final article in
this collection critically illuminates how competing efforts to control representations
of the past erupted into impassioned and ugly “history wars” in recent decades. In
setting the historical context for the current “history wars”, the author, Erik Sjöberg,
carefully notes that because Greek history textbooks are state controlled and thereby
heavily influenced by prevailing ideological forces, vehement debate and controversy
over textbook content has increasingly become common since the 1980s. As, Sjöberg
demonstrates, in general clashes over history education occurred between those who,
on the one hand, wished to preserve a conservative, ethnocentric and traditional nar-
rative of the state. And, those, who on the other hand, advocated a less rigid, more
transnational, and interpretive approach to the past. In a vein similar to experiences
in other countries, battles over school history often became more intense when at-
ttempts were allegedly made to separate history education from the promotion of
traditional national narratives. In the dispute of Macedonia, Sjöberg demonstrates
how individuals and academics prominent in Greek society perceived the nation to
be imperilled by external forces and the shifting tide of events. He also uses Gieryn’s
concept of “boundary work” to illustrate how critics and commentators variously
reacted to and interpreted the ongoing crisis.

Above all, the events portrayed in the article illustrate how passionate debates over
history textbooks and history education reflect broader and ongoing fractures in con-
temporary society. History matters. It matters because history typically is expected to
define deep-seated identities in the present. In this context burning questions remain,
including who owns history? Who is entitled to shape, control and talk with legitimacy
about it? And, who should prescribe and determine what history young people should
study at school? The difficulty of answering these complex and challenging questions
explains why controversies over public representations of history will continue to
emerge and re-emerge in the cultural landscape of nations across the world.

As I am sure the reader of the articles in this collection will discover, each one
makes a distinctive contribution to the field. The articles also advance our knowledge
and understanding of the traditions that underpin textbook research and revision.
Fundamentally, they help us to appreciate more clearly both the history that has hith-
erto been promoted in schools in different contexts and the role that school textbooks
have played in this process. As important, however, these studies also provide us with broader perspectives on the present and future and help us address vital questions such as: what kind of history should be promoted in schools? And, what should be the function of the school history textbook in pursuing these aims?
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Endnotes

1 The phrase often is attributed to British philosopher and sociologist, Herbert Spencer (1859).
2 These differences are graphically illustrated in Foster and Crawford (2006), which outlines how textbooks enjoy different authority and status in various nations in East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the USA, and South Asia.
3 The research project “History Beyond Borders: The International History Textbook Revision, 1919–2009” is funded by the Swedish Research Council and directed by Professor Daniel Lindmark, Umeå University, Sweden. The continental branch of the project is co-ordinated by Professor Eckhardt Fuchs at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Braunschweig, Germany.
4 Although it is argued that the “core” activity of the Institute remains within the conciliatory tradition, it is, of course, important to recognise that many scholars associated with the GEI also contribute to the critical tradition of textbook research.