WHOSE AMERICA?
CULTURE WARS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN
Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools, Jonathan Zimmerman, Harvard University Press, 2005, 0674045440, 9780674045446, 307 pages. What do America's children learn about American history, American values, and human decency? Who decides? In this absorbing book, Jonathan Zimmerman tells the dramatic story of conflict, compromise, and more conflict over the teaching of history and morality in twentieth-century America. In history, whose stories are told, and how? As Zimmerman reveals, multiculturalism began long ago. Starting in the 1920s, various immigrant groups--the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, even the newly arrived Eastern European Jews--urged school systems and textbook publishers to include their stories in the teaching of American history. The civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s brought similar criticism of the white version of American history, and in the end, textbooks and curricula have offered a more inclusive account of American progress in freedom and justice. But moral and religious education, Zimmerman argues, will remain on much thornier ground. In battles over school prayer or sex education, each side argues from such deeply held beliefs that they rarely understand one another's reasoning, let alone find a middle ground for compromise. Here there have been no resolutions to calm the teaching of history. All the same, Zimmerman argues, the strong American tradition of pluralism has softened the edges of the most rigorous moral and religious absolutism..


Small Wonder The Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory, Jonathan Zimmerman, Jul 14, 2009, Education, 233 pages. This engaging book examines the history of the one-room school and how successive generations of Americans have remembered--and just as often misremembered--this powerful ....

Mom, they won't let us pray ..., Rita Warren, Dick Schneider, 1978, Religion, 199 pages. 


Judging School Discipline The Crisis of Moral Authority, Richard Arum, 2005, Education, 321 pages. Reprimand a class comic, restrain a bully, dismiss a student for brazen attire--and you may be facing a lawsuit, costly regardless of the result. This reality for today's ....

American education the colonial experience, 1607-1783, Lawrence Arthur Cremin, 1970, Education, 688 pages. Both an illumination of the history of education and a portrayal of the colonial, social, political, religious, and economic heritage of the nation..


In the Land of Mirrors Cuban Exile Politics in the United States, Marí­a de los Angeles Torres, 2001, Political Science, 235 pages. Reflects on changes in the politics of the Cuban exile community in the forty years since the Cuban revolution.

New guard, Volumes 9-10 , , 1969, Political Science, 

Beyond the Frontier The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing, David S. Brown, May 1, 2009, Biography & Autobiography, 227 pages. As the world went to war in 1941, Time magazine founder Henry Luce coined a term for what was rapidly becoming the establishment view of AmericaD°s role in the world: the ....


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Zimmerman, director of the History of Education Program at the Steinhardt School and Education Program, New York University, examines the culture wars that have been fought in America's schools since the Civil War and divides what is commonly held to be one battle into two distinct conflicts, each with its own unique beginnings. These two conflicts are fought over the teaching of history and religion and are aptly named Chicago and Dayton after their place of origin (the Chicago School Systems and Dayton, TN, respectively). The author chronicles the struggles by ethnic minority groups against the Anglo-Saxon majority to gain a place in the history texts and curriculum. Interestingly, these conflicts sometimes resulted in fundamentally opposed organizations landing on the same side of an issue. Zimmerman then turns his discerning eye to the tangled politics of religious instruction, prayer, and sex education in the schools. By placing these conflicts within their historical context, the author leads readers to a deeper understanding of the issues and how they have influenced and continue to influence public school instruction. This landmark piece of scholarship is recommended for academic and public libraries and education history collections.

Mark Alan Williams, Web Lib. & Document Storage Svcs., Chicago

Jonathan Zimmerman has written a terrific book. Beautifully written and deeply informed, Whose America? addresses issues in American education, politics and identity that are enormously important. It is the best study yet done of political battles about curriculum, how political horse-trading on all sides has shaped the nature and substance of textbook versions of history, and it has great relevance to debates currently raging about what is taught in schools, in matters of facts and values. On these inflammatory subjects, Zimmerman's even-handed treatment of all sides of these deeply divisive issues is one of the book's great strengths, and offers a lesson in itself to future historians.

Jonathan Zimmerman's provocative book reminds us that the passionately argued "culture wars" in American public schools have a long history in America's public schools. Whose America? illuminates those battles, old and new, with impressive scholarship and story-telling, and deep understanding of the combatants on all sides.

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Zimmerman argues that the educational wars over religion in the schools and the content of history and social studies courses are separate battles with different stakes, and that the former have been
more contentious than the latter. He offers histories of both since the 1920s to illustrate his point and concludes with suggestions about how the religious wars might be resolved. This is a thought-provoking and well-written book...[It] is essential reading for anyone concerned with these issues.

Zimmerman does make a convincing argument. Examples of history textbooks published today substantiate his claim of a diversity coexisting with dullness. So, what exactly does Zimmerman's position mean for the classroom? This book calls for a reexamination of how U.S. history is taught?This call for presenting multiple perspectives in American history classrooms is a timely one.

Zimmerman has picked a topic here that is of immense significance. Children can be - and are - influenced for life by the way they are taught in school. He traces the disagreements about the school curriculum on such topics as history, alcohol abuse and sex education. The fact that schools now have an African-American History Week is the outcome of a long struggle. Who should decide what is taught - politicians, academics or parents? Public schools are paid for out of taxes and children have parents. So more than one point of view should be considered. In his introduction Zimmerman refers to "the critical dialogue that a healthy democracy demands". I would agree with that strongly so I offer this bit of critical dialogue: unfortunately Zimmerman is not a very reliable author. He has publicly claimed that the Nazis in World War 2 exterminated 100,000 homosexuals. More careful historians are content with a figure of 5-15,000 and even that is an estimate. Most of the homosexuals sent to prisons or concentration camps by the Nazis were sent there because they were Jewish, (like Gad Beck) or communist, or were actively resisting the regime. Most of those who were interned came out alive. Zimmerman's figure is unsupported by any convincing documentation or archive material. He just has not got the names, details and facts to back up his case. It is certainly a problem if children in state schools are taught that kind of fake history and it should not be on the curriculum. What they should be taught is to question what they are taught! Always compare a range of views and demand proof.


You know whoâ€™s having himself a moment is Norman Mailer. From a whopping new edition of selected essays to a whoppinger new biography, that â€œmost celebrated and most reviledâ€ of American writers is again in death commanding the attention he demanded in life. In this spirit of resurgence, weâ€™ve posted below a most Mailerish of excerpts from his â€œFirst Advertisement for Myself,â€ from his 1959 book full of them. Say what you willâ€”he certainly didnâ€™t but the man could write. ----- An authorâ€™s personality can help or hurt the attention readers give to his books, and it is sometimes fatal to oneâ€™s talent not to have a public with a clear public recognition of oneâ€™s size. The way...
In his award-winning book *Whose America?*, Jonathan Zimmerman tells the story of ever-widening circles of inclusiveness in the twentieth-century public school curricula of history and religion. Textbook publishers have grafted representations of historical actors from a variety of social groups onto the Anglo-Saxon story of national progress. Spiritual divisiveness has shifted away from the schoolhouse with the removal of most religious practices from public school routines. Indeed, it seems that in the twentieth century, a more inclusive curriculum has gone hand-in-hand with greater access to public schooling, as high school enrollments mushroomed and as governments rescinded de jure forms of ethnic exclusion. We can even say, without much hyperbole, that there has also been a convergence in the twentieth century on whom to blame for the shortcomings of public education--disrespectful students and the permissive adults who indulge them!

But observe this rosy picture of inclusiveness from a different angle, as Zimmerman has done, and consensus over the curriculum erodes into the product of struggles among an assortment of earnest, warring camps. Inclusiveness gives way to compromise and even stalemate among organizations all with their own truths about what is to be taught in the public schools. This is a book on the influence of "outsiders" and ordinary people on the curriculum, and I view it as a much-needed companion to Herbert Kliebard's wonderful analysis of the "inside" debates within the academic and public school leadership in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.[1] In Zimmerman's book, hereditary patriotic societies joust with various non-British immigrant supporters; African-American civil rights leaders struggle with groups dedicated to protecting the memory of the old Confederacy; main-line Protestant leaders quarrel with their Catholic and Jewish counterparts and all seek to distance themselves from activists with more fundamentalist roots; anti-Communist watchdog groups square off with leaders of the rising therapeutic professions; ordinary parents excoriate those who hold different views inside and outside of the schools. In each instance, Zimmerman captures well the passions of the debates among these outsiders and their differences with the leaders inside public education.

Zimmerman takes as his starting point Walter Lippmann's trenchant critique of two of the most notorious curricular spectacles of his day: the 1925 Scopes trial that kept the schools of Dayton, Tennessee, free of evolutionist taint, and Chicago Mayor William Thompson's 1927 election campaign that promised the removal of a school superintendent over pro-British textbooks. Lippmann argued in *American Inquisitors* that these controversies reflected a wider, single struggle for the direction of the country. On the side of modernism was "freedom of thought" and "scholarship"; on the side of tradition stood "popular faith" and "popular rule."[2] Zimmerman, by contrast, posits that Lippmann's populist defenders of tradition in patriotism and religion have "two separate histories" and, as with more recent conflicts over the public school curriculum, we should not lump the two matters into manifestations of the same culture war (p. 3). In controversies over patriotism, policy makers defused unrest by acceding to many demands for inclusion of new actors in the history textbooks, but this inclusiveness has not altered the grand narrative of a new society proceeding to put its democratic ideals into practice. In religious conflicts, however, no easy solutions exist: the growing inclusiveness of religious instruction to the early 1960s left many groups--religious and secular--profoundly dissatisfied, but when the Supreme Court reversed such policies and removed religious instruction and prayer from the formal curriculum, this too triggered deep-felt resentments, with the result that religious disputes over the public school curriculum are intractable.

This engaging book has many strengths. The breadth of Zimmerman's evidence is remarkable--his scholarship draws from archives across the United States, and his knowledge of history textbook publishing adds to our understanding of the sometimes troublesome relationship between the American historical profession and the general public. He complicates the notion of North-South rapprochement after the Spanish-American War by showing that there was no such unity in textbook narratives of the Civil War. (Or was it the War between the States?) He demonstrates that the extension of anti-Communist criticisms of textbooks to include the Civil Rights Movement was another facet of massive resistance. He suggests that the growth of Black Studies electives after the late 1960s had the unintended consequence of leaving much of the U.S. history curriculum undisturbed.
Turning to religion, Zimmerman brings to light a forgotten chapter in the history of public schooling, that of Weekly Religious Education which, in its heyday of the 1940s, enrolled students in thousands of school districts from the smallest towns to the largest cities. He suggests that the rise of religious holiday celebrations were responses to the Engel and Abington rulings that removed prayer and bible reading from the public school curriculum. He highlights as well the ambivalence of African-American religious and secular leaders over these rulings. He makes the case that since World War II the justifications for the promoters of public school prayer have changed, from helping bring peace and justice to the world to helping individuals achieve salvation. And in the religious responses to sex education, he demonstrates that there has been unstinting opposition from the beginnings in the Progressive era.

There are places where I wish Zimmerman had pushed his analysis further. The author relates that supporters of Negro History in the interwar period convinced southern, white school officials to adopt black-oriented texts, but he does not explain why these officials acquiesced and even greeted the texts, for black students, with enthusiasm. Relatedly, the author conceptualizes the inclusion of positive portrayals of new historical figures as a queue of growing inclusiveness from the 1920s to the 1960s, with European immigrant groups as just the first in the line of assimilation. But the process was more complicated than this, and Zimmerman even cites a 1938 study that concluded that anti-black slurs in textbooks "if anything ... were getting worse" (p. 48). Perhaps, following recent works by Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gary Gerstle, for descendants of European immigrants, the process of becoming American also included becoming white, which necessitated the enforcement of white-black boundaries in history texts.[3] An accomplishment of the post-World War II civil rights movements by and for African Americans and other groups deemed non-white, then, was the removal of U.S. history texts as a site for the enforcement of this racial boundary. In Whose America? the struggles of women's movements to influence history texts, by contrast, go largely unmentioned, and this is a missed opportunity, since conflicts over men's and women's roles bridge the topics of the national past and religion.

There are other avenues of inquiry that may yield modifications to Zimmerman's thesis. I do not pretend to have examined systematically U.S. history textbooks in the public schools. But given the segmented nature of the secondary school curriculum--by ability, electives, teacher autonomy, and region--I suspect that there might be more fractures in the inclusive-but-banal national narrative than the author indicates. And the inclusion of dissenting voices cannot help but alter the story to some degree. If the narrative remains the same, perhaps it is because too few accurate, contextualized, and multifaceted portrayals of activists and social movements make it into the textbooks. Returning to Lippmann's dichotomy of modernism versus tradition, maybe it still complements Zimmerman's metaphor of two separate roads, as there remains deep populist distrust of policies that are considered secular and expert. We see this in the efforts to reintroduce creationist interpretations of our origins, in the gulf between the debates within the historical profession and the content of K-12 textbooks, and in the growth of home-schooling and other movements to reduce secular and centralized authority in public education.

So here is a stimulating and well-researched book that is scrupulously impartial in its presentation of all factions and measured in its conclusion that we must continue to grapple with populist controversies in public education, even to the extent of presenting more than one historical narrative and conversing with company that we might deem unsavory. In this, Whose America? differs from Diane Ravitch's contemporary critique of the adoption of school textbooks and tests, where she suggests that screeners should stop giving in to the cacophony of special-interest groups.[4] Zimmerman's prescription is that in the hands of skillful teachers, the public schools and ultimately our nation will benefit from more democracy, not less.
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Chicago represents our progressive inclusion of more and more Americans in the grand national story. On this side a compromise was reached, by including more and more. But no one could challenge American ideals of progress towards more liberty. Local control also allowed freedom that satiated demands for inclusion.

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