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TERMS OF INCLUSION: UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this review essay, Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe explore the history of the culture wars in public education in the United States. Drawing on three books — David Tyack's *Seeking Common Ground*, Jonathan Zimmerman's *Whose America?* and Amy Binder's *Contentious Curricula*— Kantor and Lowe review the history of struggles over the content of history texts and over the place of religion and religious values in the classroom. They suggest that while these struggles have been partially successful in freeing public education from the racial and ethno-religious particularisms that informed its origins, the more inclusive curriculum that resulted from these efforts has been rendered largely symbolic by the persistence of segregation and the inequality of resources that accompanies it.

From *A Nation at Risk* (1983) to the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the controversies that law has spawned, policy talk in education has concentrated on standards, assessment, accountability, and the potential of education to contribute to the nation's economic competitiveness. For all the attention these issues have drawn, however, they have not been the only ones to trouble the educational waters over the last two decades. While national policy makers have focused on and argued about how to translate their belief in the school's potential to develop human capital into concrete educational policies, many state and local school districts have

wrestled with an equally, if not more, controversial set of issues having to do with the social and cultural purposes of public education. Foremost among these issues have been concerns about national identity, historical interpretation, and religious values. In fact, some of the most heated and intractable conflicts in recent years have had less to do with how to boost academic achievement than with whose version of the past should be taught to the nation's school children and with the appropriate place of evolution, prayer, and faith-based instruction in the school curriculum.

Conventional wisdom typically traces the origins of these culture wars to the social upheavals of the 1960s. Before then, according to this way of thinking, Americans generally agreed about the meaning of the nation's history as well as about religion's proper place in the school curriculum. In the 1960s, however, this apparent consensus began to fall apart. It was challenged on the left most prominently by people of color who resented, in David Hollinger's words, the "narrowness of the prevailing culture" and advocated a more culturally inclusive version of the nation's past,<sup>1</sup> and it was challenged on the right by Christian fundamentalists who wanted to restore prayer and Bible reading to a prominent place in the school day and to teach creationism in place of or alongside evolution in the classroom.<sup>2</sup>

Like much conventional wisdom, this way of thinking is not entirely wrong. The 1960s did constitute a cultural and educational turning point of sorts in recent American history. Nonetheless, claims about a time prior to the 1960s when Americans agreed about the purposes of history instruction in the schools or about the role of religious values in public education — what Joseph Moreau has called the "1960s-as-pivot theory" — are misleading, for the history of religious and historical conflict in American education begins long before then.<sup>3</sup> Though there was indeed a certain homogeneity to history textbooks in the 1950s, and Americans in the decades after the Scopes trial did appear to have reached a satisfactory compromise about the place of prayer and faith-based instruction in the schools, conflict about the appropriateness of religious expression in the classroom and about the purposes of history instruction are hardly unique to the past four decades. As those with at least a passing familiarity with the history of American education are aware, long before the social upheavals of the 1960s, Americans fought with one another about such things as the biases they believed permeated school history texts and which version of the Bible should be read in the classroom, or whether Bible reading should be permitted at all.

Until recently, historians of education have paid minimal attention to these cultural conflicts, focusing instead on topics such as the meaning of progressive education, the expansion of secondary schooling and the rise of vocational education, and the politics of school desegregation and community control. Examining past and present conflicts over the content of history instruction and the place of religion in the schools can tell us a great deal, however, about the broader politics of inclusion within public education and the role that different groups of Americans have expected public schools to play in determining who counts in defining the nation's social and cultural norms. It is a way, in short, of getting at the extent to which the identities and values of the diverse groups that make up American society have been included in what Hollinger has called the "circle of the we" — or, to put it slightly differently, where the boundaries defining the nation's cultural heritage have been drawn and who has had the power to draw them.<sup>4</sup> In overlapping ways, important recent studies by David Tyack, Jonathan Zimmerman, and Amy Binder advance this project.

## Common schools

Of these books, David Tyack's *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* casts the widest net.<sup>5</sup> Organized around the themes of unity, diversity, and democracy, the book ranges across the landscape of educational history. Among other things, it describes the quest for a common denominator of political and moral truths that informed the creation of the common schools; discusses the various ways in which educators have dealt with questions of social and educational diversity, focusing in particular on issues of race,

immigration and ethnicity, gender, and academic failure; and examines questions of educational governance, including an analysis of the struggle between democratic localism and bureaucratic centralism, as well as the history of private alternatives to public education with specific reference to current debates over vouchers and school choice. He looks at these in terms of two competing educational ideals: securing common values and respecting cultural differences, with an emphasis on how political leaders and school officials since the late eighteenth century have sought to use public education to create civic cohesion while recognizing the ethnic and religious differences of the various groups that have made up American society.

As Amy Gutmann has observed, this problem typically has evoked two kinds of responses.<sup>6</sup> One sets the civic mission of the schools against the diversifying tendencies of pluralism or multiculturalism; the other puts the claims of cultural diversity above the schools' civic aims. Tyack rejects both of these positions, arguing that the history of these competing aims in the public schools is better understood as a story of persistent contradictions and conflicts of values — what he sees as inevitable tensions — that need to be renegotiated from one generation to the next.

The foundation of the book is its first chapter on the republican charter for public education and the origins of the common school. Here, Tyack lays out the belief of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster that a uniform public education would integrate the polity, and he describes the efforts of Horace Mann, Calvin Stowe, and others to set up common schools where citizens from all backgrounds might come together to discover common civic values and, when they disagreed, to seek principled compromise. Though overshadowed in the twentieth century by the rise of vocationalism and, most recently, by our preoccupation with academic standards, assessment, and accountability, that vision still animates many today who continue to see public education as a unique civic space where citizens can negotiate a sense of shared purpose or find ways to discuss and accommodate their differences.

Tyack himself is partial to this vision. Like Jefferson and Mann, he believes that the nation's civic religion, institutionalized in its commitment to public education, is sufficiently capacious to accommodate its racial and ethnic diversity. But the history he recounts tells a more sobering story. A "partisan" of the public schools, but a "critical" one (*SCG*, 182), he points out that from the outset this ideal has not always been realized in practice — that racism, ethnocentrism, and religious intolerance have frequently eclipsed consensus and reasoned debate. Indeed, from this perspective, where Tyack sees tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas in the search for common ground, one less sympathetic to the public education enterprise might argue that the search for common ground has largely been a story of exclusion, coercion, and unequal treatment.

Part of the problem is that the search for common ground has often turned the school into what Tyack, following Willard Waller, calls "'a museum of virtue,' an institution disconnected from everyday life" (*SCG*, 36). This was most notably the case when Horace Mann advised that teachers should simply skip over politically controversial texts in order not to alienate any group from the public schools, though this is hardly the only instance where the search for a politically neutral common denominator threatened to water down the content of the curriculum to the point that it lacked any real substance or meaning. Drawing on Jonathan Zimmerman's work as well as his own, Tyack points out that various groups' efforts to challenge the content of history textbooks during the twentieth century has had much the same effect — resulting in a banal "Americans All" approach to the past that belies the kind of critically educated citizenry necessary for a democratic republic to thrive.

While maintaining his faith in the ideal of unity, Tyack recognizes that in practice this ideal has had other limits as well. One is simply that it often did not extend far enough. It stretched to include the assimilation of European immigrants, who were classified as white, but it typically excluded or segregated African Americans and, in many cases, Mexican Americans and Asian Americans. At the same time, however, Tyack points out that

inclusion by itself did not inevitably lead to respect for cultural differences, but often served the interests of the white, male, Protestant educational leaders who defined its meaning. This was the case with Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century who sought to have public funds channeled to the parochial schools they controlled because they considered Mann's ideology of nonsectarian virtue to be anti-Catholic. It was also the case with much of what passed in the early years of the twentieth century for Americanization, which, Tyack observes, not only justified the provision of much-needed social services to the poor and foreign-born but more often than not defined good citizenship to mean the acceptance of middle-class values and norms of behavior rather than participation in politics or other ways of exercising one's constitutional rights.

On the other hand, Tyack recognizes that the acknowledgment of diversity and difference did not always have positive consequences either. He argues that within the institutional structure of the school, the recognition of diversity frequently meant hierarchy and inequality rather than valuing difference. In a first-rate chapter on how schools have dealt with academic failure, for example, he shows that while differences in academic performance always have been a part of school life, the labels educators have used to identify those who have not succeeded academically have stigmatized individuals along with the immigrant groups and populations of color from which these students disproportionately came. Viewed as innately inadequate or culturally deprived in the twentieth century, struggling students found themselves in low tracks or compensatory education, generally receiving the worst opportunities for intellectual growth in an increasingly differentiated curriculum. Nonetheless, Tyack is skeptical of the recent movement for standards-based reform, and he points out that simply treating all students the same without first equalizing the resources they need to reach the levels expected of them is no guarantee of more just results.

Tyack argues that no single system of school governance has been able to resolve these contradictions and tensions. Administrative progressives in the early twentieth century thought a centralized, professionally run system of governance preferable to the decentralized system of lay control that was the building block of democratic school governance in the nineteenth century, largely because they equated lay control not with democracy but with corruption and incompetence. Centralization, however, also meant bureaucratic control at the expense of popular input, and in the 1960s it came under assault from African Americans, Latinos, and others disenfranchised by it. Some argued for radical decentralization instead, while others appealed to the courts and federal government to secure rights long denied them at the local level. But Tyack argues that neither strategy succeeded in creating a more democratic form of school governance. Rather, the result has been a more elaborate but less coordinated bureaucracy — what, following John Meyer, he calls a “fragmented form of centralization” — characterized more by the appearance than the reality of democratic control.

To what degree should school governance be centralized? Should professionals or lay people run the schools? In the end, Tyack argues that these questions admit of no easy answers but are as intractable as the other tensions between diversity and commonality he describes throughout his book. Whether control should be centralized or decentralized, whether decisions should be made by parents or professionally trained educators, he says, ultimately depends on the issue at hand. Some of the most important tasks of governance — such as enlisting parental involvement in schools — can best be done at the local level, but more centralized action has been necessary to protect civil rights and to remedy inequities in the resources available to states and local districts. All things being equal, however, his preferred form of governance is the kind of local control that characterized the nineteenth-century rural school where he says both adults and young people came together to deliberate “about common needs and values in a face-to-face-community” (SCG, 185).

Discomforted by these seemingly intractable tensions, some today argue that public schools — or what their critics sometimes refer to as “government schools” — have failed and that they should be replaced by an open market in which parents can choose either public or private education for their children. Tyack is somewhat sympathetic to parts of this argument. Although he rejects the metaphor of consumer choice that many voucher

advocates use, he acknowledges that Catholics and some conservative Protestant sects have long organized private schools around legitimate differences of culture and conscience. He also concedes that public school choice might provide a much needed “jolt” that would loosen the “bureaucratic gridlock” so characteristic of many urban schools today (SCG, 178). In the end, however, he argues that private school choice is neither a panacea nor an ideal. This is partly because he doubts that vouchers will lead to an improvement in academic quality, though that is not his main objection. More importantly, he argues that whether or not private schools do a better job of imparting academic skills, public schools have occupied a special place in American civic life and that transforming what historically has been a democratic forum for communities to make collective decisions about how to educate the next generation into matters of individual, private choice would greatly impoverish it.

Tyack is not, of course, the only one to fear that the current movement to privatize public spaces like schools poses a threat to social solidarity and civic life. We, too, share this concern. At the same time, however, Tyack’s argument too easily slides over the tensions and contradictions that his book documents. He intends to show that tensions are an inevitable part of public education in a diverse society and that public schools constitute a unique space where those tensions can be debated and accommodated. In doing so, he hopes to dispel the notion that the civic purposes of public education are necessarily incompatible with a commitment to diversity. But eager to defend public education from the threat of privatization, he does not fully consider the degree to which the racism and ethnocentrism his book illustrates were not just incidental to the common school or an unfortunate lapse from its better impulses but were, in fact, integral to its origins and fundamental to its eventual success.

Nothing illustrates this better than Tyack’s account of Horace Mann’s rebuke to the principal of a teacher training school for taking his students to an abolitionist meeting. An abolitionist himself, Mann nonetheless justified this rebuke because he feared that anything so controversial might jeopardize popular support for the common school by driving away its (white) patrons. For Mann and other advocates of the common school who worried about its political future, this was undoubtedly a legitimate concern. But by honoring the prejudices of whites at the expense of Black equality, it reveals how much the success of the common school depended in practice precisely on the fact that African Americans and other people of color were either excluded from it or included but segregated within it.<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that Tyack’s belief in public education as an instrument of the common good is misplaced. He is surely right that the ideology of the common school has been used for democratic purposes, particularly to legitimate the claims of African Americans and other disenfranchised groups for inclusion in the nation’s civic and educational life, and that its loss would impoverish American democracy.<sup>8</sup> But the notion that the common school functioned as a place where people from all walks of life could come together to talk out their differences, or learn democracy by practicing it, is difficult to sustain once we recognize that in practice that ideal usually worked best in places where the circle of the we was drawn to include only those who shared the Anglo, Protestant, and capitalist values that motivated Mann and the other advocates of the common school in the first place — or, to put it differently, where those of different races or with different cultural or religious values were excluded from it.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, the question facing advocates of the public schools such as Tyack is not only whether a public system of education is preferable to a private one, but whether the search for common ground in education can be sufficiently dissociated from the ethno-religious particularisms that informed its origins and have long sustained it so that public education’s promise of equality and democracy for all citizens can be more fully realized.

## New voices/old stories

Jonathan Zimmerman's *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* addresses this question about the search for common ground in public education.<sup>10</sup> Like Tyack, he argues that conflict and disagreement are an inevitable part of public education in a diverse society. Zimmerman, however, offers a less sanguine assessment of what this search has produced. Framing his study not in terms of competing ideals, but in terms of competing interest groups, each trying to impose its view of the common good on the school curriculum, he argues that the outcome of these struggles has had significant consequences — that in the twentieth century the circle of the we in public education has proven to be more expansive than what Mann imagined — but even when these struggles stretched the boundaries of the common good to include more diverse voices, inclusion has seldom produced the kind of critical dialogue about different views that he thinks an education for living in a democratic society demands.

The book tells two stories: one about conflicts over patriotism and history texts, the other about conflicts over religion and religious values, specifically school prayer and sex education. Both of these stories speak to questions about the terms of inclusion in U.S. schools, but they diverge in important respects. The main argument of the book is that whereas the history wars have been chiefly about who gets included in the national story rather than whether another story is more appropriate, conflicts over religion have reflected fundamentally contrasting views of morality and the place of religious belief in public life. As a result, according to Zimmerman, these conflicts have not only been less amenable to resolution in what he calls “the additive come-one-come-all fashion” that characterized the nation’s history wars, but they have been more persistent and more contentious as well (WA, 6).

The first part of the book focuses on debates over patriotism and the content of school history texts. Some of the ground Zimmerman covers here is familiar, such as his account of the right-wing attack on the New Deal that led to the American Legion’s ultimately successful campaign to discredit Harold Rugg’s series of left-leaning social studies textbooks. Other episodes described in the book are less well known, though not entirely unfamiliar. These include chapters on the “history wars” of the 1920s, when various immigrant groups protested their depiction in history textbooks, and patriotic societies such as the Daughters of the American Revolution decried new texts that they believed slighted the nation’s Revolutionary War heroes; the conflict between southerners and northern textbook companies over the treatment of the South in history texts, as neo-Confederate groups contested what they claimed was the pro-Northern bias in textbook accounts of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; and the century-long campaign of African Americans to remove racist slurs from textbooks and to highlight the place of African Americans in U.S. history, focusing in one chapter on Carter G. Woodson’s efforts to add Black history courses to the school curriculum in the 1920s and in a later chapter on the demands of the Civil Rights Movement and Black student activists in the 1960s and the early 1970s for courses in African American history and literature.

If this is not previously uncharted territory, Zimmerman offers some novel descriptions of the politics surrounding these episodes, documenting several examples of alliances that confound the typical divisions of left and right. Here, as he has elsewhere, Zimmerman highlights the position of several immigrant organizations that found themselves in strange territory when they joined with nativists to attack David Muzzey’s text, *An American History*, because they believed its portrayal of the American Revolution was biased toward England and therefore diminished their own special role in the founding of the republic.<sup>11</sup> In another case of unorthodox political company, the National Association of Manufacturers unsurprisingly joined with the American Legion in the late 1930s to excoriate Rugg’s *Building America* textbook series for undermining the principles of individualism and free enterprise. In the 1950s, however, it unexpectedly reversed its position and joined with the public school officials it had once scorned to thwart similar right-wing attacks on the schools out of concern that the association might suffer a negative backlash due to popular opposition to these attacks. In addition,

when some African Americans in the 1960s objected to texts that portrayed them as victims of poverty and racial oppression and demanded separate Black history courses that stressed the positive aspects of their cultural and racial heritage, they found themselves odd bedfellows with conservative whites who protested the inclusion of images of impoverished African Americans because they believed that dwelling on the negative effects of racism denigrated the nation's history.

No one who reads Zimmerman's account of these conflicts is likely to conclude that disagreements over portrayals of the nation's past are unique to our own time. But Zimmerman cautions that we should not mistake contentiousness for disagreement over fundamentals. To the contrary, he argues, the real issue in these disputes was seldom whether a different story was needed but whether all would feel included in the traditional one. Consequently, even though texts became more diverse, they seldom raised questions about the justice of American society or about the beliefs and behaviors of its traditional heroes. Rather, despite the warnings of those who feared that the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities would erode the nation's "majestic national narrative" (WA, 6), Zimmerman argues that the inclusion of more diverse voices in history textbooks almost always wound up reinforcing it — that far from disrupting the traditional story line, the infusion of diversity was in fact compatible with it.

This is a compelling and provocative story. It surely complicates our understanding of the history of the cultural politics of education. Largely absent from Zimmerman's account, however, is an acknowledgment of the ways race, class, and power influenced the expression of the diverse voices history texts have come to include. As a result, despite the care with which *Whose America?* details the viewpoints of different groups on the various curricular conflicts it describes, Zimmerman draws conclusions about them that do not always seem warranted.

This is especially evident in his treatment of immigrants and African Americans. His account of the role European immigrant groups played in the history wars in the 1920s, for example, makes plain that immigrants themselves seldom asked for a more critical rendering of the nation's history. In telling this story, however, nowhere does Zimmerman consider the ways in which war-time campaigns for "one hundred percent Americanism," passage of the 1921 and 1924 immigration restriction acts, and the government-backed suppression of syndicalist and other radical groups, not to mention the Progressive era rhetoric that promised the poor and foreign-born social and economic mobility, may have influenced how certain immigrant groups viewed the school curriculum or their capacity to influence it.<sup>12</sup> As a result, he seems to imply that the various positions they took exclusively reflected their willing consent to the language and logic of the nation's civic tradition. Yet given the historical context in which they operated, the fact that immigrant groups endorsed a nationalistic rendering of their role in American history is perhaps better seen not only as a product of their own volition but also as a reaction to more coercive measures that silenced radical immigrant voices and that narrowed the range of culturally and politically acceptable behaviors open to comparatively mainstream immigrant groups as well.<sup>13</sup>

A lack of context is also evident in Zimmerman's discussion of protests against traditional textbooks by African Americans, especially in his account of the battle over Black history in the 1960s. Though he is hardly unsympathetic to African American demands for curricular justice, his account is critical of Black students for pushing a separatist textbook agenda, since he believes this relieved pressure on the school system to integrate its regular history texts and fostered an uncritical, celebratory rendering of the Black role in American history. In this analysis, however, he does not think much about the way the long history of ill treatment in white schools shaped how Black students viewed the curricular choices they believed were open to them, including their doubts that white teachers could be trusted to teach Black history in a way that did not diminish or distort the role of African Americans in the nation's story.<sup>14</sup> Absent attention to these matters, his account seems to imply that the choices students made were chiefly a product of a misguided ideology when they might be better understood as a strategically thought out reaction to the historical and institutional context in which they found themselves.

The version of inclusion that characterized history texts was not simply shaped by broad contexts, however. It also traced significantly to direct opposition to curricular content that was not overtly celebratory. In fact, for all his efforts to complicate the political history of school history texts, much of Zimmerman's own evidence suggests that the terms of inclusion in the nation's master narrative reflected not only the preferences of workers, immigrants, and people of color themselves, but the wishes of more powerful whites, elites, and patriotic societies who rallied periodically to keep out the views they found most objectionable.

The most obvious example of this opposition is the campaign to eliminate Rugg's social studies texts. These texts not only articulated a broad view of American identity that welcomed cultural diversity, but they adopted an expansive definition of citizenship and a left-liberal view of the economy that praised the New Deal and questioned the sanctity of private property, all of which made them a target of conservatives in the Hearst press, various business associations, and patriotic societies like the American Legion. Led by the Legion, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Advertising Federation of America, these groups mounted a systematic campaign that stirred up popular opposition to the books' liberal point of view and effectively destroyed the market for them. Once used in more than 4,000 school systems, by the end of the 1940s they had been removed from public school classrooms altogether.

As Zimmerman points out, these attacks on Rugg's books were singularly successful. Subsequently, during the 1950s, when McCarthyism inspired a new round of attacks to stamp out any remnants of collectivism in history texts, this campaign seldom resonated except in the South. Even business repudiated it. But this hardly meant that businessmen abandoned their efforts to use the schools to build support for capitalism and the free enterprise system. Rather, as Elisabeth Fones-Wolf has shown, except for a few who argued that school officials were sympathetic to communism and endeavored to remove them, most businessmen now sought to dispel any lingering New Deal influence on the curriculum not by attacking the schools but by promoting curricula sympathetic to business and free enterprise instead.<sup>15</sup>

Equally important was the long history of white opposition to the Black demand for an honest confrontation with the role of race and racism in the nation's history. As Zimmerman points out, this opposition was most pronounced in the South, where southern white women in the United Daughters of the Confederacy policed an "unyielding sectional orthodoxy in southern white textbooks" (WA, 34), particularly around the portrayal of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. But white opposition was also widespread in the North, where for the first half of the twentieth century widely used texts like Muzzey's reflected the negotiated settlement of sectional differences in which the South acknowledged that secession was unconstitutional while the North muted its criticism of slavery and intensified its condemnation of Black misrule during Reconstruction.<sup>16</sup>

To the extent that the history wars were resolvable by reducing the complexity of the nation's past, then, it was not due simply to the fact that all groups wanted nothing more than to have their own heroes sung. Rather, it reflected the way in which historical and social constraints shaped how different groups viewed the schools and their capacity to influence them, on the one hand, and the power of patriotic societies, business leaders, and other conservative whites to establish the terms of inclusion acceptable to them, on the other. Indeed, viewed from this perspective, what is most interesting about the textbook wars is not that diversity has been more compatible with the ideological mainstream than is commonly supposed, but that the price of inclusion often was the exclusion or modification of views that implied anything else.

Yet if elites succeeded in eliminating the views most objectionable to them, they did not always get everything they wanted either. As Joseph Moreau has pointed out in his recent study of the evolution of school history texts and as Frances Fitzgerald noted in her earlier book, *America Revised*, not only have texts changed sufficiently to trouble those who value a unified national narrative, but these changes have in some instances been accompanied by shifts in perspective as well.<sup>17</sup> This is most notably the case in the way in which

Reconstruction has been represented, as the long-held negative view of this period was turned completely on its head. Such shifts in perspective have been less common the closer the texts come to the present — in particular, according to Moreau, even progressive texts remain uncertain about how to deal with questions of class and economic inequality and continue to obscure the sources of racial injustice and who benefited from it — but both Moreau and Fitzgerald leave little doubt that their inclusiveness significantly departs from the past. No one who reads them could conclude that immigrants, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have not been part of American history.

None of this means that Zimmerman is necessarily wrong in his conclusions. Not only did many of these changes only become evident in the 1970s and 1980s whereas Zimmerman's research essentially ends in the late 1960s, but neither Moreau nor Fitzgerald maintains that the inclusion of white immigrants in the 1930s and 1940s and the more recent inclusion of African Americans, as well as Latinos, Native Americans, and other historically marginalized groups, has produced a radically revised rendering of the nation's past. Nonetheless, this pattern of change without disrupting the status quo becomes more understandable if we see the struggles over texts not, as Zimmerman's analysis suggests, as a story of pluralist bargaining in which all groups got to have their heroes sung, but as a conflict-ridden struggle of resistance and accommodation in which immigrants, African Americans, and other marginalized groups tried to force their way into the nation's master narrative (sometimes altering parts of it) while those in power fought to set the terms of inclusion acceptable to them.

## Irreconcilable differences

However one evaluates the content of United States history texts, their increasing inclusiveness, according to Zimmerman, contrasts with the apparent incapacity of public education to include religious values. In the second part of *Whose America?* he turns to the political history of these conflicts, focusing on controversies about religious instruction, school prayer, and sex education from the 1940s to the 1960s and beyond. This part of the book begins by describing the system — widespread in the 1940s and 1950s — of release-time instruction, which made religious education available on an optional basis after school or in church-sponsored classes during the school day. Subsequently, it traces the controversy sparked by the Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 banning Bible reading and school prayer. Fearful of undermining the Court's authority on desegregation by opposing these decisions, many liberal Protestants subsequently ceded the arena of religious education to conservatives and fundamentalist Christians who not only continued to press their claims on the schools but revived the notion (alive and well today) of a Christian America in which schools, as well as other public institutions, should conduct their business in accordance with the biblical injunction to worship God. This section's final chapter on sex education explores the campaign of doctors, psychologists, and other self-proclaimed "sexperts" in groups such as the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) to add sex education to the school curriculum, and it documents the hostile reaction their efforts provoked from parent groups who believed that sex education constituted an unwarranted intrusion into the rights of the family and from religious conservatives who believed that sex education would encourage teenage sexual experimentation and thereby violate the biblical admonishment against sex outside marriage.

These battles over religion also produced their share of odd political alliances. One of the most unfamiliar political arrangements was the alliance between some segments of the African American community and conservative white Protestants in the South in opposition to the Court's rulings on Bible reading and school prayer. Zimmerman points to one protest in Jackson, Mississippi, for example, where Black and white students marched together — behind a Black principal — in support of their shared belief that "believers should be 'free' to pray" in school (WA, 219). Equally transgressive of familiar political alignments was the alliance formed between Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, long hostile to one another on school matters but united in

their opposition to the kind of ecumenical religious curriculum that some northern school districts sought to institute in the 1950s.

If these kinds of alliances made possible the resolution of disputes over the content of history texts, however, Zimmerman argues that this has seldom been the case with religion. There is some evidence, he acknowledges, that Christian evangelicals today have “donned the mantle of cultural pluralism,” asking not for the exclusion of other views but for “equal time” for theirs (WA, 223). This is particularly evident in battles over sex education, where Christian conservatives have shifted ground in recent years, asking that “abstinence” be taught in addition to “information” rather than in place of it. For the most part, however, this second story is not one of compromise and accommodation but one of irreconcilable differences. Zimmerman argues that in contrast to the history wars, in which all groups shared a commitment to the nation’s civic tradition, the religious wars have reflected Americans’ fundamentally contrasting views about morality and the place of religious faith in public life, making them singularly resistant to compromise.

Zimmerman is not entirely certain what to make of the culture wars, as he frankly acknowledges. On the one hand, he is dismayed by the kind of uncritical, banal texts that have resulted from the system of pluralist bargaining that has characterized the nation’s history wars. At the same time, however, he is troubled by the very lack of such accommodation in the nation’s religious conflicts. To resolve this dilemma, he argues for a more dialogical approach in American classrooms that practices greater tolerance of religion and religious difference so that schools might seriously examine different religious perspectives but that rejects “the daily catechism in the virtues of America and its diverse groups,” including school prayer, since by its very nature prayer commits students to a certain worldview (WA, 224). But if religious commitment is necessarily uncompromisable, it is not clear why his proposal will appeal to evangelicals today any more than he says it did in the past, or why the inclusion of different religious views would not lead, at best, to the same kind of outcome that the inclusion of diverse voices did in the history curriculum, which he deplors.

The source of this uncertainty is understandable. Today’s disputes over school prayer and Bible reading in the classroom do indeed seem especially contentious and irresolvable. Nonetheless, he perhaps overstates the differences between the history wars and the religious wars by inadequately considering, to borrow John Rury’s phrase, “the ebb and flow of conflict over time.”<sup>18</sup> As his own account shows, for three decades after the Scopes trial, the tradition of local control, institutionalized in the system of release-time instruction, diminished these kinds of conflicts by accommodating the desire of those individuals and communities who wanted religious instruction in school without forcing it on others who did not. Rather than attribute our present situation to the inherently uncompromisable nature of religious belief, therefore, we might more appropriately ask what changed so that past arrangements such as the system of release-time were no longer able to satisfy them.

No doubt part of the answer lies with the Supreme Court decisions in *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schemp* (1963) banning school prayer and Bible reading. As Zimmerman and others point out, these decisions not only provoked an immediate outcry, they also provided a rallying point that mobilized evangelicals and contributed to the rise of the new Christian Right.<sup>19</sup> But adverse Court decisions have not always produced such a reaction. In 1948, for example, the Court sought to circumscribe the system of release-time instruction, but it continued to grow despite the Court’s decision. What else, then, had changed by 1960s? In particular, if so many people still supported some form of religious instruction in the schools, why did school districts and state boards of education now seek to enforce the Court’s edicts rather than ignore or side-step them, as they had done before? Did their position reflect broader trends in the secularization and nationalization of American life, or did it perhaps represent a shift in the balance of power away from the proponents of religious instruction? Indeed, one of the most striking differences between the history wars and the religious wars is not that the former are inherently amenable to compromise while the latter are not, but that, in contrast to the history wars, those most aggrieved in the religious wars tend to come not from the most marginal but from the more advantaged

sectors of American society. How and why did this happen? The answers to these questions are hardly simple, but absent more attention to them it is difficult to understand why the religious wars seem to have eclipsed the history wars in the cultural politics of education today without essentializing the differences between them.

## Terms of exclusion

Like *Whose America?* Amy Binder's *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools* is interested in the efforts of activists to shape the school curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Yet, unlike Zimmerman, who focuses on the political struggles between different interest groups and the ideologies that motivated them, Binder focuses most of her book on the relation between these groups and the institutional context in which these conflicts took place. In doing so, she not only directs our attention to an aspect of the politics of cultural conflict in the schools that Zimmerman generally neglects — namely, the organizational structure of the schools and the professional commitments of educators themselves — but she also offers a different account of the forces that have shaped the schools' search for common ground amid ethno-religious diversity. From Binder's perspective, that search has been shaped not merely by competing ideals or by the struggle between different interest groups battling with each other to impose their preferences on the curriculum, but by the way institutional and professional norms shaped educators' response to groups who challenged them.

Based on seven case studies of controversies that took place between 1980 and 2000, Binder examines the fate of two challenges to the school system from groups at different ends of the political and cultural spectrum: three cases where Afrocentrists sought to rewrite the history and social studies curriculum to center the experience of Africans and African Americans, and four cases where conservative Christians sought to have creationism taught alongside evolution in the study of human origins in science classrooms. Ostensibly different, Binder argues that both groups actually had much in common. Both criticized the school system for imposing its values on their children, both used the "emotive force of their children's welfare" to make their case for curriculum change, and both insisted that "their corrective to the education establishment's monopoly on the curriculum was to provide pluralism in the classroom" (CC, 3–4). The most important similarity between them, however, was that both ultimately failed. In the end, neither had a lasting or widespread effect on the content of the curriculum or on students' classroom learning. In the three Afrocentric cases — which occurred in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and New York state — Afrocentrism disappeared into the minimalist version of multiculturalism that has become an institutionalized "given" in the nation's urban classrooms (CC, 23), while in the four creationist cases — in Louisiana, California, Kansas, and Vista, California — creationism was rejected altogether.

Binder's book is devoted to understanding the reasons for these failures. She builds her argument on social movement theory, which stresses the efforts of protest groups, particularly their capacity to mobilize financial and ideological resources. For two reasons, however, she argues that social movement theory is inadequate to account for the outcome of the challenges she studied. One is that these challenges did not break down neatly into "organizational insiders" and "challenging outsiders," as social movement theory postulates. Rather, in some cases, protestors found allies inside the educational system, as happened in Atlanta when a newly appointed superintendent made common cause with a local parent group to pressure others in the school system to adopt an Afrocentric curriculum. The second is that access to political power — the key variable in social movement research — did not guarantee success. In Vista, California, and Kansas, for example, pro-creationist majorities were elected to the school board, while in Louisiana both houses of the state legislature approved a resolution mandating "equal time" for creationism and evolution, but those victories had little impact on what students were taught in school.

What accounts for these failures? Binder maintains that in order to understand them, we must look beyond the efforts of protest groups themselves. Rather, she argues that it is more important to look at the organizational

dynamics, structures, and beliefs these groups confronted when they made their claims on the schools. Among other things, these include the fragmented organization of the schools, which limited the opportunities for unified decision making, and, even more importantly, the institutional norms and values — what she calls the “institutional scripts” (CC, 22) — of local educators and the larger education profession of which they are a part, particularly their beliefs about what constitutes “reasonable instruction” (CC, 237). Lacking a unitary form of decision making and wedded to these beliefs, she argues, educators in all seven cases fought to preserve their core instructional practices, eventually rebuffing those challenging these practices, even where Afrocentrists were able to win the support of some organizational insiders and where creationists won a measure of political power. In Binder’s view, in short, more than any shortcomings of social activists and their strategies, it is the institutional culture of schooling itself and professional educators’ institutional power that sets the terms of inclusion and exclusion, and unless we take these things into account we cannot begin to understand why neither group was able to make “lasting, concerted change in the school systems they challenged” (CC, 6).

This is not Binder’s entire story, however. She argues that for institutional reasons educators also relied on different strategies to fend off each challenge. Most school officials were threatened by both movements and wished that they had never been formed. But because of its focus on the poor treatment African American children have typically received in public schools and its use of the rhetoric of discrimination and racial injustice, Afrocentrism resonated more with the established culture of the schools than creationism, since the latter had to overcome the objection that it was unconstitutional as well as the belief that historically Christians had been treated fairly by the educational system. Thus, despite their suspicions of it, educators considered Afrocentric demands a legitimate subject for discussion and allowed Afrocentric proposals for revised curricula on their official agenda — even temporarily making changes to their social studies curricula — only to water them down and ultimately reject them later. By contrast, when confronted by creationists, they made no initial accommodation at all, but rallied organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Academy of Sciences to resist them from the start.

Binder’s argument about the importance of organizational dynamics and institutional power reorients social movement theory, which has traditionally focused primarily on the balance of power between protest movements and the state. But her argument about the power of institutions to deflect outside challenges will not be especially surprising to students of educational reform. Among others, Tyack and Larry Cuban, as she notes, have long pointed to the capacity of the schools to absorb challenges while protecting their core functions.<sup>21</sup>

What is more interesting is Binder’s argument that educators used a different set of institutional strategies to minimize each challenge, since it relates more specifically to questions raised by Zimmerman and Tyack about the search for commonality in public education and how the culture of the schools has shaped it. In particular, by highlighting the school’s common yet different strategies in responding to these challenges, Binder reinforces Zimmerman’s argument about how conflicts over history and religion have defined what constitutes common ground. At the same time, however, she points us in a different direction in the quest to explain the pattern Zimmerman describes. Instead of focusing on interest groups and the accommodations they made or examining the strategies and rhetoric of protest groups, she suggests that we look instead to the professional norms of educators and what they think is acceptable and what is not. Binder does not, however, show us how those norms developed or how and why they may have shifted over time. That, of course, is not the purpose of her book. But absent attention to these questions, it is difficult to know how or why points of view that once seemed objectionable are now accepted or, conversely, why policies that were once widespread now seem objectionable — or, to put this in Tyack’s terms, how the tensions between unity and diversity have been renegotiated over time.

Consider, for example, Binder's claim that educators in the schools she studied were at least willing to give Afrocentrism a hearing because its advocates' arguments about Black underachievement and the persistence of white racism were validated by the established culture of the school. Today, these concerns do indeed seem to be institutional "givens," as Binder points out. But, prior to the 1960s, that was hardly the case, at least not among white educators. To the contrary, Zimmerman's account of the textbook wars makes clear that before then mainstream history texts used in most schools not only remained filled with racial slurs but apparently evoked no objections from the white teachers who used them, not just in the South but in the North as well. How, then, did the culture Binder describes become so established that few educators today question it? How, in short, were the boundaries of the circle of the we stretched to include these new concerns? We suspect that social movements had more to do with this than Binder's institutional perspective allows. It would be hard to understand this shift in norms, for example, without considering the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in general and Black school movements in particular. But, whatever their relative impact, the main point here is that, in light of the way race historically has circumscribed the definition of the common good in public education, we need to know more about how educators were stretched to accommodate modest change while protecting the status quo.

In the end, however, the most interesting aspect of Binder's book may be what the contrast between Afrocentrism and creationism implies about the place of religious expression in the public schools and the boundaries of the nation's civic culture. From the beginning, the common school was a religious institution. Though Catholics objected to Horace Mann's notion of what Tyack has called "nonsectarian virtue," neither Mann nor the other advocates of the common school were opposed to the expression of religious values in the schools. They surely did not think they were expelling God from the classroom. In fact, as James Fraser has recently pointed out, the idea of the common school was in its origins inseparable from a commitment to pan-Protestant values.<sup>22</sup> Yet the cases Binder describes demonstrate vividly how firmly educators today subscribe to the notion that religious expression — especially when it influences the core curriculum — has no legitimate place in the public schools. In the cases Binder studied, even many educators who were devout Protestants and otherwise voted for right-wing political candidates were adamant in their belief that creationism violated the principle of the separation of church and state — that including it in the curriculum would narrow the definition of common ground. Indeed, though it is not the ostensible subject of her book, the great paradox at the heart of her study is that an institution, which in its origins equated the common good in education with respect for Protestant principles and the exclusion of African Americans, seems to be less responsive to the values of evangelical Christians today than to the concerns of African Americans and other people of color who historically were excluded from it.

## Symbolic integration

As far as we are aware, no historian of education has investigated this paradox. But from a historical perspective on curriculum development, it has important implications for the questions Tyack has posed about the capaciousness of public schooling to accommodate the nation's ethnic and religious diversity. One implication is that students who are not Protestant are no longer subjected to Protestant religious values in public schools. Another is that religion no longer puts constraints on the teaching of science. Indeed, from the perspective of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, Binder's case studies of creationist debates in the late twentieth century help us see that the current disputes about prayer, Bible reading, and evolution are not, as many on the religious right would have it, about the religious intolerance of public education. Rather, they are about the efforts of evangelical Protestants — unsuccessful to date — to tighten the circle of the we by restoring its boundaries to where they were prior to the push to broaden them through guaranteeing that no particular set of religious values would be favored in schools.

In contrast to the religious right, people of color have sought not to circumscribe the circle of the we but to expand it. Both Zimmerman and Binder have documented the long history of opposition to these groups and the limited effects of their efforts. Yet, if the changes introduced in textbooks and the history curriculum have failed to sufficiently portray the depth of racial injustice or to jettison entirely a celebrationist rendering of the nation's past, their accounts suggest that these changes have not been trivial. To the contrary, the increasing integration of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans into history texts and the rejection of the most blatant racist biases in them indicate considerable success — nearly a sea change, despite their limitations, in relation to the racist and exclusionary pre-1960s books. The continuing protests of multiculturalists in the 1990s suggest that the shortcomings of history texts today have less to do with the absence of people of color in them than with their failure to decenter fully the experience of whites and elites.<sup>23</sup>

This symbolic integration, however, does not mirror the social relations of schools. As texts have become more inclusive, schools, with judicial support, have become more segregated in recent years. The inequality of resources that accompanies segregation raises questions about the ability of schools that serve low-income students to afford the newer, costly history texts or, for that matter, to hire science teachers properly trained to teach evolution.<sup>24</sup> And it suggests that perhaps the real victors in the culture wars are upper-middle-class whites who have superior access to a desegregated curriculum without facing any pressure to desegregate their schools or their resources.<sup>25</sup>

## Footnotes

1 David Hollinger, *Postethnic America, Beyond Multiculturalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 2.

2 For an example of this way of thinking, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

3 Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts Over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 24.

4 Hollinger, David, "How Wide the Circle of the 'We'? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos since World War II," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (1993): 317–137. On this idea, also see Hollinger, David, "Authority, Solidarity, and the Political Economy of Identity: The Case of the United States," *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999): 116–127.

5 David Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003). This work will be cited as *SCG* in the text for all subsequent references.

6 Amy Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," in *Education in a Multicultural Society: Policy, Theory, Critique*, ed. Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 156–179.

7 For a more detailed account of this incident, see Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 369–371; and Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (1935; repr. Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams, 1971), 130–131. On racial exclusion and the origins of the common school more generally, see Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle Over Northern School Segregation, 1865–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 2.

8 Perhaps the most obvious example is in *Brown v. Board of Education* where the Supreme Court legitimated its decision prohibiting racial segregation in public education with reference to "the importance of education to our democratic society," calling it the "very foundation of good citizenship" and arguing that the opportunity for an

education “where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” For the full text of this decision, see <http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html>.

9 The ideology of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism that informed the mid-nineteenth century movement for common schooling is described in David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), part 1; Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), chap. 5; and William Reese, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), chap. 1.

10 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002). This work will be cited as *WA* in the text for all subsequent references.

11 Zimmerman, Jonathan, “‘Each Race Could Have Its Heroes Sung’: Ethnicity and the History Wars in the 1920s,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000): 92–111.

12 John Rury makes a similar point in his review of Zimmerman’s *Whose America?* in *American Journal of Education* 110 (February 2004): 196–200.

13 On this point about the relation between immigration and assimilation, nationalism, and coercion, see Gerstle, Gary, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 524–558.

14 Nor does Zimmerman acknowledge that even the most enlightened United States history text, given the challenge of integrating diverse groups, could not treat African Americans with the thoroughness or perspective that books devoted specifically to the African American past potentially could afford.

15 Elisabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 204–211. On the post–World War II business campaign to publicize the virtues of free enterprise, also see Robert Griffith, “Forging America’s Postwar Order: Domestic Politics and Political Economy in the Age of Truman,” in *The Truman Presidency*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 84–85.

16 On this sectional reconciliation, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

17 See Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*; and Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979). Whereas Zimmerman focuses on the history of the politics of history textbooks, both of these studies focus on the content of the texts themselves.

18 Rury, review of *Whose America?* 200.

19 On the role of the Supreme Court’s school prayer decisions in mobilizing the religious right, also see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 2.

20 Amy Binder, *Contentious Curricula: Afrocentrism and Creationism in American Public Schools* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). This work will be cited as *CC* in the text for all subsequent references.

21 David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

22 James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), chap. 2.

23 Catherine Cornbleth and Dexter Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird: Multicultural Politics and Education Policymaking* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); and Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

24 New U.S. history texts often cost more than \$100 each.

25 Our understanding of this contrast between symbolic integration and the persistence of material deprivation and inequality has been aided greatly by Carby, Hazel, "The Multicultural Wars," *Radical History Review* 54, no. 7 (1992): 7–18.

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