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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75f5g4m9>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 3(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

1979-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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Book Reviews

Ethnocentrism and History: Africa, Asia and Indian America in Western Textbooks. By Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot. New York: NOK Publishers Intl., 1978. 324 pp. \$18.50

It is not trite to state that the overarching purpose of historical investigation is to illuminate our own life situation as it is set within the context of all history. That is, thoughtful investigation of past cultures and civilizations should aid in clarifying the societal consciousness of the present epoch, and by so doing, reveal just how and where we now stand in the mainstream of human existence.

Fundamental, however, to achieving this ambition is the realization that history ipso facto personifies a process in continual transition; one in which ideas and attitudes change with the times, and concomitantly, appraisal and assessment of value-laden notions are susceptible to interpretation and, of course, re-interpretation. As a result, historical biases of the past may become accepted attitudes of the present, and prejudices of today may evolve into approbations of the future. Yet, particularly respective to ethnocentrism, such an attitudinal metamorphosis in the evolution of history does not seem to occur easily or willingly, and this realization underscores the primary aim of *Ethnocentrism and History*: To expose the ethnocentric character of selected Western history textbooks by scrutinizing their authors' methodological organization, stereotypical analyses, and over-selectivity in content presentation.

The authors of this volume, Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot, are both professors at the Graduate Institute of International Studies at the University of Geneva. They assert at the outset that their study was motivated by an intriguing query concerning "what values and what kinds of knowledge are prevalent when the actors on the international scene (heads of state, diplomats, pressure groups, directors of multinational corporations, technical experts) come into contact with different cultures" (p. xi). It followed then that policy responses to international stimuli would be conditioned by how decisionmakers perceived the global milieu—

an intellectual ability patently affected by cultural influences and ethnocentric biases. As a consequence, because political socialization is essentially a learning process, one primary source for fostering ethnocentrism in cultures might well be biased history textbooks employed at the high school and college levels. The bulk of the subsequent analysis is therefore devoted to exploring the merits and bounds of this hypothesis, particularly regarding the treatment of Asian, African, and American Indian cultures by Western historians.

As generally portrayed in this work, conceptualization of ethnocentrism encompasses the intellectual attitudes of all human groups who oppose other groups because of the latter's racial affiliation, cultural identity, national origin, religious choice, or caste identification. Suffice it to say, ethnocentric stereotypes die hard, and in fact, they usually manifest an astonishing proclivity to persist, as well as often to become reincarnated in multiple forms throughout a social order. Hence, according to the authors, "valorization", or assigning positive or negative values to some object, lies at the heart of ethnocentrism's tendency to persevere. In short, we generally know that which we want to know, or that which we are comfortable in accepting. Thus, as the psychogenesis of an individual's knowledge is carried out within its social context, opportunities arise for ethnocentric orientations to influence his scheme of societal valorization. This possibility, the authors argue, may be enhanced through several mechanisms, including intense identification with a group, projection and evaluation of other people based on biased personalized criteria, rationalization of a project's purpose, or displacement of attitudes towards a surrogate subject. Regrettably, evidence cited by the authors suggests that such mechanisms consciously or unconsciously have been employed in the writing of Western history texts, thereby perpetuating fallacious ethnocentric images of Asian, African and American Indian peoples and cultures.

Also deserving mention is the authors' observation that an ambiguity exists between supposedly objective facts and subjective values. "Today it is admitted," they posit, "that there is no History, but there are histories; that these are interwoven with values and that the facts are permeated by these values—when they are not just reified values" (p. 121). In this connection, the "ideal culture" implicitedly inculcated in Western textbooks inevitably is that of "Europeanization", and consequently, the primary values presented are largely those which extol the benefits of Westernized cultures

(viz., the unity of a nation; law and order; monotheism; democracy; and advanced industrialization). Other cultures expectantly are treated in the texts as being inferior.

In this reviewer's estimation, the chief strength of *Ethnocentrism and History* is its last third, wherein an examination is undertaken of the means used to portray ethnocentrism in Western texts. As gleaned from the authors' perusal, among the more intriguing techniques employed by Western textbook writers are the following: 1) reinforcement of stereotypical characteristics in the historical narrative; 2) the use of "value-loaded terminology" to describe and interpret historical occurrences; 3) self-centered selection or omission of "important" dates and events in history; 4) oversimplification, leading to factual errors; 5) use of popular, stereotypical illustrations; and 6) biased references to non-white peoples' race, bloodline, and color. To bolster these assertions, Preiswerk and Perrot supply more than three hundred and fifty case examples extrapolated from their sample universe of more than forty textbooks. The resultant study provides a very interesting, multifaceted and insightful analysis.

Yet, for any scholar seriously interested in research pertaining specifically to the American Indian in the United States, this work is likely to be disappointing. First, there is a grave problem with the sample selection chosen for content analysis: textbooks have been collected from Francophone Africa, Germany, France, Great Britain, Nigeria, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union. Respective to "Western" societies, neither Nigeria nor the Soviet Union can justifiably be qualified as being Western. Second, more glaring than this, obviously is the absence of even one text from the United States. Hence, using "Indian America" in the subtitle of this study appears to be somewhat of a misleading misnomer.

Third, as indicated in the index, twenty-seven references are cited as relating to "Indians." Nonetheless, nearly all of these are made in passing, with little or no substantial assessment. The most substantively analytical treatment given the American Indian is that devoted to the Aztec, Mayan and Inca civilizations as discussed in a little known Nigerian text. Finally, it must be realized that references to "American Indians" also included (in this volume) Eskimos, Brazilian Indians, and for some mysterious reason, "Pygmies." Unfortunately, there was not a single case example drawn from the North American Indian's historical experience, and not surprisingly therefore, no mention was ever made of these tribal cultures, nor of any relevant ethnocentric accounts likely to

be found in texts written by United States historians.

In conclusion, *Ethnocentrism and History* is a work better suited for cultural anthropology generalists than North American Indian specialists. Even so, the purpose of the study—to reveal ethnocentric prejudice in history textbooks—remains an endeavor worthy of greater contemplation and further scrutiny. Admittedly, this volume makes a bold beginning in challenging traditional stereotypes, misinformation, and distorted opinions about non-white cultures in the world today. To this end, it is hoped that the Preiswerk-Perrot research will foster a spate of additional studies aimed at the same objective, for only through enlightened understanding and educated tolerance can ethnocentrism ever hope to be ameliorated.

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