

#81 History Wars: How Politics Shape Textbooks

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire You know how I spend a lot of time thinking about other careers you might pursue when this thing about being an education historian runs out of steam?

Schneider I actually did not know that that's something that you do with your spare time.

Berkshire Well I've found a great one. Do you want to know what it is?

Schneider Crossword puzzles?

Berkshire It actually involves you going to a hotel into a hotel conference room and then basically spending weekends sitting around with others, pouring over history textbooks.

Schneider That that actually doesn't sound so terrible. I don't like hotels but this doesn't sound like a terrible idea.

Berkshire Do you get where this is going?

Schneider I think you are referring to the fact that we are going to have Dana Goldstein on the show and that she just did a pretty amazing piece of investigative reporting for the *New York Times*.

Berkshire Dana Goldstein in case you don't know, is an education reporter for the *New York Times*. And she's also the author of one of my favorite books of really like in recent memory called *Teacher Wars*.

Schneider One of Jennifer's favorite books after my books. She's got a shelf where they're rank ordered with mine on top.

Berkshire So Jack, this topic was actually your idea. About 30 seconds after Dana's piece broke, you contacted me and said "episode" question mark.

Schneider Yes. So I thought that it was a great piece that tapped into an issue that I've been following for a long time. Francis Fitzgerald actually for the *New Yorker* like 40 years ago did a great series on US history textbooks, how they are written and how they are adopted and what that means for how history ends up being taught. Dana did a project for the times where she looked at two states, California and Textbook.

Berkshire We're keeping that in.

Schneider Please don't. California and Textbook, the newest state of the union. California and Texas, and which are, you know, I think, you know, pretty sensible choices and we'll let Dana talk through why she chose those. And then looked at eight different textbooks and how they covered different sections of American history.

Berkshire Well, let's just jump right in then. We are so excited to have Dana Goldstein join us to talk about her deep dive into American history textbooks. Dana, welcome. And I want you to start out just by giving us a sense of the scale of this project. Five months, 40 textbooks all stacked up next to your desk at the new times. What was it like?

Dana Goldstein You know, I sit in a tiny little cubicle in a very busy newsroom and it's not the sort of library atmosphere that you might imagine would be ideal for a reading-based investigation like this. So I would sort of haul these books to a bigger table that was kind of off in a corner and I'd sort of spread them out. And that is where I would do the work for this project. Comparing the textbooks from California and Texas. There are the same additions. Um, they have the same author, same publisher, sometimes the same exact titles, but they've been customized for the students in the different states.

Berkshire Dana, you mentioned in the story that you actually got the idea for this piece while visiting a school in one of my favorite states. That would be Michigan. And no surprise, there's been a major battle brewing there about how history should be taught. Tell us more.

Goldstein Last year and early this year, I had covered a battle in Michigan over its social studies and civics standards and the rewriting of them, which was a really pitched, very partisan battle between progressives and conservatives. And one of the issues there was whether it's accurate to call the United States a democracy. And if you're interested in that, I'll refer you back to a piece which published earlier this year. So as part of that reporting, I visited a bunch of social studies classrooms in Michigan and I walked into a few and I saw that the teachers had their textbooks completely marked up. You know, there were underlined, highlighted pages, dog-eared pages, sticky notes all over the place. And these are not bad teachers to be clear. These were good teachers. But you know, you sometimes hear from sort of pathbreaking teachers and really innovative thinkers in the world of history education that the textbook does not matter anymore.

But that is not what I was seeing on the ground. I think the textbook, because it is customized to meet state standards in many cases, and those state standards are what's tested on exams that teachers are being judged by, the textbook does still matter. And it is still important, especially for those early career teachers as they, you know, bite off this incredible challenge, which is how to scope and sequence a class that may cover hundreds of years of world history or American history. So after that experience, I said, you know, I did this piece about standards, which is the state's role in writing them. But the next thing that happens after that is that the

standards end up in the hallways of a publishing company that then creates a book to match them. And I wanted to kind of follow this process to the textbooks that end up in our kids' hands.

Schneider Dana, you focus in the piece on two States, California and Texas. And I imagine that those were carefully chosen for a number of reasons. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the importance of states in the textbook creation process and the role that states play in influencing what gets into textbooks.

Goldstein So yes, those States were really obvious choices. There are three big states that do statewide textbook adoption that are probably the most influential states in terms of what all kids in the country read in their American history textbooks, and those states are California, Texas, and Florida. Now, in my review of the books and in my reporting with the textbook publishers, I found that there were other states who were also able to demand tweaks, changes. It's not true... I think some people have said to me, you know, California and Texas are the only states that matter. That's not true. There are other states that demand changes on the books and we can talk about that if you like. But California and Texas are the two probably biggest players. If you create a textbook and it is not adapted at the state level in California, in Texas, you may not have a successful product that is going to be profitable for you in the marketplace.

So at the writing stage of these books, the companies are very concerned with making sure that they are meeting standards for these particular states. And of course, California being kind of the quintessential blue state right now and Texas being the quintessential red state, both states have recently also updated their social studies standards and have implemented some changes in how American history is taught. So I thought this would allow us to really update our knowledge on how history of taught across the country.

Berkshire Dana, my favorite thing about this project is how you take us through these history textbooks, but you make sure that we never lose sight of the big historical questions that we're really battling over right now. And you described some of these questions as, for example, are immigrants a burden or a boon? How restricted should capitalism be? To what extent does the legacy of slavery continue to shape the U S today?

Goldstein When I dived into this project, I wasn't sure what I was going to find exactly. I knew that the books were going to be different between the two states, but some of my hypotheses about how they would differ were not true. So for example, slavery was not covered differently really in the two states. Noted, these are books that were all published within the last three years or so. Also, the civil war was not covered differently between the two states. In the past it was very common to sort of obscure the fact that slavery was the cause of the civil war. That was not a problem in the books that I reviewed either from California or Texas. You know, as I write in the piece, the brutality of slavery, the brutality of Native American displacement, they were presented in fairly vivid detail. So I want to give both states credit for moving forward significantly, even over the past five to 10 years, let alone 20 years ago when I was in high

school or um, you know, 40 years ago when my parents were in high school. So just something to think about.

You know, the economy is an interesting one. Texas has had a law on the books since 1995 declaring that it's important for students to learn, quote the benefits of the free enterprise system unquote. Whereas California's social sciences guidelines, the 842 page encyclopedic document, which was adopted several years ago in California, has this big emphasis on wealth inequality, earned income inequality as a defining feature of our time, not just within the United States, but globally. So you can't really imagine two states that are more divided on how they might like students to consider these questions.

Schneider So obviously there are political differences in California and Texas that ended up influencing what gets in the textbooks and the kinds of narratives that get told. But what is the actual apparatus? How does this work? Who are the players?

Goldstein So the most important players in both states are the state boards of education. But how those people come into power is very different in California than in Texas. Those people are appointed by the governor in California and then they in turn on that board appoint further appointees who end up reviewing textbook drafts and asking for changes from publishers. So in California, it is truly one party rule. It is completely dominated by Democrats. Every single person who was influential in this process for the books published in 2018 and 2019 that I reviewed as part of this project was in some way connected to Governor Jerry Brown. So Jerry Brown, Democrat, most important person in California for everything that I wrote about in the piece. Now when you go to Texas, they elect their school board. Every voter in Texas has a say. It's a divided school board traditionally with a Republican majority, but there's also plenty of Democrats on the board.

And there's a kind of give and take and you can look back at the transcripts of their meetings and you can see that these review panels are made up of a mix of people, some very conservative, like an outspoken Christian conservative pastor who later became a Republican politician who was influential on one of the textbook review panels. But there's also teachers and parents. In California, interestingly, there were only two types of people who were reviewing American history textbooks and that were teachers and college professors. There was no other type of person. So I would say you had a much more sort of process in California where the people making the decisions were either historians or teachers of history. In Texas, you have, you know, a broad group of members, members of the public who are able to weigh in.

Berkshire Dana, I think what's so fascinating and also troubling about this project is that you show us what those political differences end up looking like on the pages of history textbooks. And I want you to talk a little bit more about the sorts of differences you saw. Were there specific examples that really leapt out at you about things that say kids in Texas are being taught versus their peers in California or the other way around?

Goldstein I think the one that was kind of most evocative for me or just my personal, you know, biggest concern between the two states maybe is the story of suburbanization in the 1950s. California explains clearly that this suburban dream was not accessible to many African Americans because of redlining, restrictive deeds and other forms of housing discrimination. You just will not read that in any Texas textbook. So that was really very striking to me. And the reason why is that California has written out social studies guidelines mention housing discrimination, something like 19 times. And it is not mentioned even once in Texas documents. So clearly you can see the publishers have created a new text and revisions to meet those standards in California. So you can see that very clearly.

The Harlem Renaissance example is another one that appeared in multiple books and was really shocking to people. You know, there are many cases like for example, rock and roll. Both States will mention the rise of rock and roll and how concerning it was to older people and parents thought it was indecent music and was corrupting to kids. So it's not that the Harlem Renaissance will be the only place that we hear about the potential quote, negatives or downsides of cultural change. But what was really interesting is that in two specific instances, which were the Chicano mural movement of the sixties and seventies and the Harlem Renaissance, there would be questions about whether the quality of the artwork was high enough or whether art that created cultural solidarity was very divisive to the public or to the general, I guess, White dominant public. And this would appear only in the Texas books. It would not appear on the California books. And that is because of this language that the Texas Board of Education insisted on, which was that every cultural movement be discussed in terms of quote, positives and negatives.

Berkshire So Jack, as we're listening to Dana, I can't help but take note that you just look sadder and sadder.

Schneider I'm channeling the feelings of our listeners who may be feeling really helpless here listening to what is really the educational equivalent of the deep state. Be laid out where we've got these entrenched standards, meeting private companies and then being shaped by these boards that operate behind closed doors. Uh, you know, it feels like there really isn't anything that can be done about this. It makes me want to throw all the history textbooks in the river.

Berkshire Well, I'll be very curious to hear Dana's take on this because I have to say that my reaction to her piece was very different. That, you know, in some ways we have this sort of sprawling, lunatic locally=determined system, but I find it less ominous than say the efforts of a Pearson to push everything in an algorithmic direction that's far more impervious to local resistance.

Goldstein Yes. I mean I think this project is in large part about how much your local and state level elections matter. There are upcoming elections for the Texas state board of education, so that matters enormously if you care about what children are learning in social studies class. Similarly in California, you know, I just want to point out, there are a lot of conservatives in

California and they are not happy about the changes that I report on in this piece. You know, they also would need to work through political avenues to have their voices heard. And the [progressive's in Texas. There are many, many, many progressives in Texas. You know, these, these groups within each state, you can only really work through the local electoral process to influence this.

Schneider I have another question about actors here. It's about who actually authors these books. So we know whose name is on the cover, but I'm curious about the extent to which the authors of the textbooks are actually the authors of the textbooks.

GoldsteinRight. So I interviewed quite a few textbook authors for the piece, only one of which is quoted. the rest of which were only willing to speak to me on background. Now Al Broussard who is a Texas A and M University historian of the African-American experience who I quoted in the piece, he's one of the named authors on the McGraw Hill American history textbooks for both eighth and 11th graders. He first coauthored the book many, many years ago, decades ago, really, and he has stayed active in updating the books. So he doesn't necessarily write new text but when consultants or in-house staff at McGraw Hill create new text, he does want them to send it over to him so he can take a look at it. So he's one person who stayed actively involved.

Now that is not typical. Many of the named authors on the books I reviewed are dead, so they have no say whatsoever in the revisions that we're talking about. Also some of the authors may have signed a contract with a publishing company that no longer exists. So one author who is still named on books for one publisher, that was part of my review, you know, when I got in contact with this author, they said, look, the company that I signed a contract with doesn't exist anymore. They were acquired and then merged and acquired again. And I've never heard about the way my text has been updated. And when I told this author some of the things that were in the book, I mean the author was disappointed with some of the changes. It wasn't something this author would have approved of. So you know, it's a process where some staff within the publishing house has a site and also they hire outside consultants to write some of this.

Berkshire: Dana, one thing that really comes across in your reporting is that warring textbook content is yet another example of our political polarization. Whether you live in a blue state versus a red state now determines things like Medicaid eligibility or how high the minimum wages and of course, how history is taught.

Goldstein: Yes. And that's why we wanted to do this piece and why we rolled it out in early 2020, right as we kick off the presidential election. I mean we see it as an education piece, but we also see it as the broader piece about politics in the United States today. You know, these questions about history are very fresh in our minds. They're very, very relevant to what we're arguing about politically. And even if it were true that children remember nothing that they learn in middle and high school history class, I don't believe that's true. But some people have suggested that. So even if you take it as a given that it doesn't matter because kids don't

remember. Um, and it doesn't shape them. Again, I don't believe that's true. But if you do, this is still a very vivid depiction of how the two political parties in two states that kind of epitomise the direction that the right is going and the direction that the left is going in, how they are interpreting American history in the contemporary context.

Berkshire That was Dana Goldstein, she's a national reporter at the New York times where she often writes about education and she's the author of teacher Wars, a history of America's most embattled profession. And Jack and I will be right back and I have a little surprise planned for him.

[Music]

Berkshire So as I was reading Dana's fabulous piece, I couldn't help but think of really the most contentious education debate that's playing out right now. And that's about private school choice. We're going to have an episode soon about a case before the Supreme Court. And you know, we tend to think of these issues as all separate, but I would really make the argument that a lot of the, a lot of the push behind private school choice has to do with the content of what kids learn. And we did an episode, a couple, I guess a year or so ago about what gets taught at voucher schools and how much of the curriculum really sides solidly on, you know, one part of the debate, whether it's about slavery or about economic freedom. And I think it's important to think of these big questions as all being related.

Schneider Absolutely. When we look at the history of private schools, which is mostly the history of religious schools, what we see is that curriculum was always at the center of it. And so if we look particularly at Catholic schools, which have always constituted the bulk of private schools, they are on the decline now, but historically, most private schools were Catholic schools because Catholics were consciously opting their kids out of schools where they were reading the King James Bible. It was the wrong Bible. And they were learning things associated with that that the Catholics considered to be wrong. So we can extend this outside of Catholicism and beyond religion even to talk about the ways that people really want to exert control over what their kids are learning. And I think this pushes on another theme that we talk about a lot on this show, which is the tension between public goods and private goods. The tension between, you know, doing something that you want for your own kid versus thinking about larger systems, thinking about larger communities.

Berkshire So Jack, I have a special treat for you today.

Schneider I am scared.

Berkshire Well, so you know how there are often things that you want to talk about? And then again and again, I shoot them down? I reject them as being boring or have no interest.

Schneider Yes, I'm very familiar with that.

Berkshire Well, I thought, you know, it's a new year. You've, you've really been...

Schneider I've been good!

Berkshire You've been great. So as a special treat, I'm going to let you talk at some length about the great battle that raged in the 1990s over history standards.

Schneider Oh my gosh, I love this. Yes. Great! So, as, as our listeners may recall, George H W Bush wanted to be the education president and in 1989, he brought the nation's governors together in Charlottesville, Virginia for a summit. And the goal was to create national standards that ultimately would be in service of an accountability system that George H. W. Bush was not elected again to pursue, which Bill Clinton drove forward, but which George H. W. Bush's son, George W. Bush famously passed into law via No Child Left Behind.

So this all began in Charlottesville in 1989 and one of the areas that this team was working on was history standards. It may come as a surprise to people because for instance, Common Core did not touch history, didn't want to come within a mile of what people after the 1990s recognized was just a total minefield. But before we learned that, there was a team led by historian Gary Nash at UCLA and with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. And that at the time was controlled by Lynn Cheney. And this team at UCLA engaged in a years-long, highly inclusive process that produced a set of standards around content. But really interesting to me is that it also included a framework for thinking about history, for thinking about chronology and comprehension, for thinking through what it means to think like a historian or to do historical research. The kinds of things that really would have changed the way the young people learn history in the schools.

And all of it ended up becoming just a complete lightning rod. Rush Limbaugh played a major role here in talking about how a secret team at UCLA was going to end up brainwashing America's youth. And Gary Nash ended up reflecting on this afterwards and I think being really heartbroken about the failure of an effort that was so promising and that so much work had gone into, and he ultimately saw it as a battle between people who on one side thought that learning anything negative about the United States, so, about the Klu Klux Klan or about McCarthyism, that if kids learned these things, they would end up not loving America.

That was one side. And on the other side were historians who thought that if kids learned to sugarcoat history, they would end up cynical because they would grow up to find that this celebratory history was essentially a misrepresentation. So after this all blew up in the 90s, we saw that people really didn't want to get near national history standards. But it also meant that people didn't even want to get near history standards at the state level or even the local level except to maybe battle it out over curriculum. And I think all of this is to the detriment of kids in classrooms.

Berkshire Well, Jack, I'm so glad that I got to bring a little joy into your life today by letting you speak about a topic on which you are so passionate.

Schneider If listeners could only see the big smile on my face right now.

Berkshire Well, I have one last treat for you. Back at the end of the year, you came up with what I actually thought was a great idea.

Schneider Don't say "actually"!

Berkshire We so often deal with heavy stuff on this show. You thought, 'what if we ended each episode with a moment of sunshine?'

Schneider Not just a moment, like a whole minute, a minute of sunshine!

Berkshire And I have our first one ready to go. Are you ready to hear it?

Schneider I'm so excited.

Berkshire Our first moment of sunshine comes from Yolanda Guerra. She's an art teacher at San Jose high school in San Jose, California. And if this inspires you to submit your own idea for a moment of sunshine, you'll find all the info you need at HaveYouHeardBlog.com/sunshine Now, back to Yolanda. She wanted to tell us about a project she's been heading up at her school, which is an International Baccalaureate or IB school. For a year and a half, she and a group of students have been working on an ambitious mural project that captures what they call the IB profile in action, values like inquisitiveness, reflection, communication, and risk-taking. I asked Yolanda to take us on a virtual stroll down the hallway where she and the members of her past and present art club had been working so hard.

Yolanda Guerra: We have people such as Martin Luther King. Let's see, a graduate from San Jose High, Rigo Chacon, who was a newscaster. And then you walk down further. And the last mural is a group of people who are principled. And who we represented was Larry Itliong, who started the UFW. And along with that is Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez and other activists, who've done great things too, and two other members on there, Sophia Mendoza who is part of our community who, she passed away a while back, but she was, very much of an activist, supporting the people here in San Jose. And then Joyce Ellington who our library is named after her. And I had the privilege of knowing this woman when I was a child. So she volunteered as at the Grant Elementary School where I attended and just a really kind, kind women. And so that's pretty much it for these murals. And I think there is a total of, I don't know, probably 40 plus people, or actually more than 40, probably, I think it was probably about 80 people on these murals. It took about a year, year and a half to complete. And my art club really created these murals and were very dedicated to complete them. So I'm very proud. My name is Yolanda Guerra and this is 60 seconds of sunshine.

Berkshire Well Jack, we've reached that special time in the episode as our regular listeners know, we support the show through their generosity. We rely on Patreon. And if you go to Patreon and search for Have You Heard Pod, you'll find all of the cool extras you can get, just if you give a couple of dollars a month. You get things like reading lists and you get to join us in a special exclusive area that we call In the Weeds.

Schneider Yeah, you should all do that.

Berkshire So our topic today, hand picked by me, has to do with the debut of a new group called the National Parents Union. And I thought it'd be interesting to talk about what's going on with that and the changed political context in this sort of ongoing battle over whose voice should be loudest when it comes to shaping schools and education policy.

Schneider For those who can't do that or don't feel like today's the day for that, we also love when you share the show, when you send links to friends and family members who you think would enjoy listening to it or to a particular episode, when you go on and give us a rating, Jennifer and I actually sometimes go on and read those and we're like really inspired by some of them. It's, that's great. Thank you for doing that. And there's also a Twitter handle that you can engage with and we've gotten some ideas for shows out of that. And that's @HaveYouHeardPod?

Berkshire Thank you, Jack. That was really delivered with meaning.

Schneider Well, I will, I'll try to be this earnest for all episodes, Jennifer.

Berkshire That's it for us today. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm earnest Jack.

Jack

Berkshire

Schneider