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S681 The Book

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### Final Project

I chose to expand upon a previous assignment in which I explored the evolution of textbooks in America through a timeline. As I wrote for my Apex 5, Textbooks are probably one of the first examples that come to mind when discussing the concept of “the book as knowledge.” For most of its history, the textbook has been considered to be the singular source of information for students. Textbooks are not necessarily just collections of objective information. In reality, textbooks impart much more than just information – textbooks are also cultural artifacts that represent the values of the time and society in which they were used. The business of writing and publishing in the Soviet Union was brought under government control. Soviet literature adhered to socialist realism where the virtues of collectivism and the struggle of the working class were extolled. Japanese history textbooks have been repeatedly accused of attempting to downplay or whitewash Japanese imperialist activities. There is still debate in certain areas of the United States about including evolution in scientific education. No matter the time or place, textbook selection (and the access to young minds) will continue to be a potentially explosive issue.

For my final project, I decided to see if I could identify certain themes from the known beginnings of textbook use in American (ie The New England Primer in the early 1600s) into the early to mid twentieth century. The last textbook on my timeline is from 1945 – a textbook from 1945 could have very easily been accessed by the parents and grandparents of my generation. I found that religious, moral and patriotic themes predominated. The very earliest textbooks emphasized Puritan theology. By the 1840s, religious themes were largely replaced by moralistic ones. Moral judgments about others (namely those who are not American and those who do not so-called “act American”) continued in the textbooks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I found that eugenics was a topic frequently covered in scientific textbooks. I personally considered eugenics to be the ultimate moral judgment.

Textbook bias has been extensively researched; however, I purposely chose this area because I am ultimately interested in the sheer power that books have, namely, the power of their potential influence. With this in mind, I think there is always a need for this type of work. Certain assumptions form early in the life of a child and the foundation for those assumptions can frequently be found in the primary means of formal instruction – the textbook.

To isolate these themes, my methodology was almost exclusively primary source analysis. I was lucky enough to find a wonderful easily searchable digital collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century schoolbooks sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh: <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/n/nietz/>. The other major resource I utilized was archive.org. The obvious drawback of this approach is that just these two collections are quite large and there is no way I could have conducted an absolutely comprehensive exploration. In other words, there are probably other similar textbooks that may not have been as

blatant or explosive as the texts I selected. I am sure there were more moderately-written textbooks from this time. This point also connects to what I felt was the biggest challenge of this project – reading primary sources can be time-consuming. However, I feel that the time I spent reading all these primary sources was worth it though because the quotes I selected largely speak for themselves. Of course, I have attempted some analysis and interpretation as well but there are several quotes from these texts that are quite shocking to today's reader.

My timeline can be found at: <http://www.dipity.com/nbbasu/Themes-in-American-Textbooks/>

