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FORUM

Manufactured Culture Wars

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Introduction

Several thoughts are swirling around in my head in reference to the AHA report, and in reference to the culture wars and our politically divided nation. They stem from the curiosity I had as an undergraduate student perusing the University of Washington library shelves where I saw alarmist headlines concerning the dangers of culture wars in higher education and how revisionist history and women's and ethnic studies, in their attack on Western civilization, were to blame for the demise of US society. Why were the great White male heroes under attack? What could they have possibly done to warrant such vitriol from the academic left? Surely these headlines were not new and, as history of education scholarship would reveal, a focus on culture wars has been an integral part of how our K-12 and higher education have (mal)functioned.

But, as an undergraduate student, I was left with questions. While I could not quite articulate it at the time, I am now in a "wiser" stage in life to formulate what was percolating then: Whose culture are we talking about? Who decided what culture would be promulgated and for whose benefit? Is there only one culture to be fought for in the culture wars? Such questions obviously continued well into my doctoral studies as individuals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Allan Bloom, and Dinesh D'Souza, among others, lambasted the ethnic tribalization of America because it had diverged from its Western civilization roots. They were against promoting multiculturalism. Scholars such as Ronald Takaki, K. Anthony Appiah, and Martha Nussbaum reinforced the import of a multicultural America rooted in democratic citizenship and a pluralism embedded in our nation's motto: *E pluribus unum* (from the many, one). The fear and anxieties over who would win the heart and soul of a nation has only heightened in this MAGA era. The AHA report and survey, while essentially confirming what has long been known about the teaching of history in secondary schools, still provides ways for us to extract larger meanings about education and ways for us to align our efforts as education researchers. It also brings to bear some of the burgeoning questions I had some thirty-five years ago as a first-generation Asian American college student trying to make sense of our racialized histories and how they should and can be taught.

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Whose Culture and a "Manufactured Crisis" in the Culture War?

I appreciate the finding from the AHA report that by and large, the culture war was not all that prevalent in the classroom. This is not to dismiss the real political battles that teachers and school boards face, considering the nonsensical censorship of books, anti-DEI/CRT movements, and pernicious conspiracy theories that abound. In fact, in the cases of several doctoral advisees of mine who reside in red states and whose dissertation studies focus on race, they felt compelled to change the language of their dissertation studies to more innocuous phrases such as a "sense of belonging" and "inclusion" for fear of being fired from their schools. For a good many, the fear is real. Yet I contend that this is not a result of culture wars but how public schooling has inherently been a political endeavor to maintain a system of Whiteness and assure that the curriculum reflects the status quo.

At the same time, I wonder the extent to which the amplification of the culture wars and the constant attention on them is a "manufactured crisis" in the same vein as what Berliner and Biddle observed during the "Nation at Risk" era.[1] There is a great deal of anxiety being fueled about what is at stake. But then I ask, what *is* really at stake: the search for the truth of our historical foundations and its roots in native land dispossession, global enslavement, and resistance to immigration from non-Western European countries? Is it about the great replacement theory, about the fear that Whites will eventually be in the numerical minority? The culture wars imply that there is one culture that should prevail and predominate: the White one. The existence of warring factions, some would argue, are thus the outcome of the minority groups seeking to upend the status quo—and ultimately, they should just accept their subordinate place in the system of cisgender, heteronormative Whiteness. Frankly, I think it's high time to retire this framing of the culture wars and move on. We are evolving, and it's okay.

What Teachers Need

One of the key findings and takeaways from the AHA report is actually something that many of us have known all along: teachers are busy and overwhelmed. They are on the front lines and blamed for everything that's wrong with schools and students. Yes, there have been and there still are bad teachers (just as there are bad faculty in higher education), but by and large, teachers mean well and want to do good by their students (or so I continue to want to believe). They also require assistance from folks like us to provide critical professional development training based in research. This would enhance their teaching knowledge and ultimately serve their students. The highly decentralized and localized structure of our public school system does not provide a cohesive mechanism for continuous learning and improvement. However, given that the need for effective professional development training was a major finding of this study, there are models from which we can draw to make incremental progress. Our expertise and knowledge as education researchers make us uniquely poised to be proactive in combating willful ignorance and the defiance of truth (and yes, I said "truth").

[1] David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on American's Public Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

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The AHA report highlights some of the curricular initiatives undertaken by states, such as Illinois, to improve learning outcomes. In the past few years, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has worked to increase its inclusive history and social studies mandates and create the Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards. I am a principal investigator on two ISBE-partnered grant projects to provide online professional development modules on the teaching of Asian American histories and Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards.[2] Asif Wilson, a curriculum and instruction colleague of mine and leader of the I3 initiative, has been leading the effort to train teachers and administrators statewide on the Inclusive, Inquiry-Based Social Studies for Illinois curriculum.[3] I mention these examples to offer a way forward on how we as historians of education can help steer statewide endeavors, especially in secondary history teaching. I suspect that many of us are already engaged in impactful research. Perhaps creating a resource database of our publicly engaged work would be a start. The teachers have asked for guidance and resources to enhance their teaching of history. We can certainly deliver.

[2]Illinois was the first state in the nation to mandate the inclusion of one unit in Asian American history through the TEAACH (Teaching Equitable Asian American Community History) Act. Through funding from The Asian American Foundation, Sharon Lee (co-principal investigator) and I developed online PD modules for educators to participate at no-cost (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, TEAACH, https://teaach.education.illinois.edu/). I was also able to secure grant funding from ISBE to create PD training for educational administrators on effectively implementing culturally responsive teaching and leading standards. The precarity of our political reality will be interesting to document as these two PD efforts continue.

[3]University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, "I3: Inclusive, Inquiry-Based Social Studies for Illinois," https://socialstudies.education.illinois.edu/projects/i3–inclusive–inquiry-based-social-studies-for-illinois.

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