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Anna Clark is a doctoral student at the University of Melbourne. This opinion piece is based on her thesis, 'The Politics and Pedagogy of History Education', which looks at debates about teaching Australian history in schools. With Stuart Macintyre she has recently co-authored the book, *The History Wars*, published by Melbourne University Press.

Whose History? teaching Australia's contested past

After a visit to Gallipoli in 2000 the prime minister of Australia, John Howard, expressed concern that history was not being taught as it should in Australia's schools. There was, he said, 'perhaps a little too much of an emphasis on issues rather than on exactly what happened' (cited Shanahan and Healy 2000). The location was significant for a number of reasons. The Gallipoli campaign in Turkey during World War One is the mythical birthplace of Australia. In spite of adverse conditions and imminent defeat, the story goes, Australian troops proudly held their own, establishing on a foreign frontier the legendary mateship and egalitarianism already known at home. Their noble defeat was enshrined in Anzac Day,¹ which remains a national holiday. Eighty-five years later the prime minister had returned to praise the Anzac 'diggers', ancestors of the modern Australian 'battler', another popular Howard emblem.

Howard's comments hinted at a struggle over school history, one that reflected a debate over Australia's past more broadly. A lively presence of young Australian backpackers had touched a sentimental chord with the prime minister. Howard revelled in their 'simple, uncluttered pride' (cited Shanahan and Healy 2000). If history teaching concentrated on the facts, he reasoned, more Australians would be able to take part in the national sense of belonging he witnessed at Gallipoli. Too much emphasis on 'issues' had obscured Australia's heritage from its rightful heirs.

The prime minister had also pointed to a mounting argument over Australian history that had become particularly visible after his government's election in 1996. Countering what he felt had been a left-wing domination of Australia's story under the former Labor government of Paul Keating, Howard loudly opposed the 'attempted re-writing of Australian political history by our political opponents' (Howard 1996). His historical imperative to teach the 'facts' is embedded in this wider debate over Australian history. Schoolchildren have been centrally cast as vital but vulnerable receptors of the national past.

These two strands of debate, the 'pedagogy' and 'politics' of school history, have come together with the conservative assertion that critical histories denigrate the nation. Holding that revisionist readings of the past are ideologically inseparable from the

progressive educational approaches through which they are taught, it is a view, furthermore, that insists such readings are naïvely negative, even dangerous. This paper examines Howard's Gallipoli visit as one point of convergence for these educational claims on Australia's history. While noting that anxiety over the past straddles the political spectrum, it has been an essentially conservative argument against 'political correctness' that has driven debate over school history in recent years. And it is a debate inseparable from discussions of Australian history more broadly.

Back to the facts

The prime minister had expressed concern over the apparent deterioration of history teaching, a dangerous move away from a more positive, national, and rigorous chronology of content. A plea couched in the rhetoric of educational standards, it remains essentially a political strategy—one that equates progressive teaching and historical approaches with poor outcomes. It is a strategy that characterises the rejection of critical histories: the use of 'invasion' to describe European colonisation in history syllabuses and textbooks is dismissed for its supposed political correctness and educational irrelevance; progressive teaching methods are labelled 'unscholarly' as well as 'unAustralian'.

At its core is a conservative polemic, as Peter Seixas has observed in this journal, where progressive pedagogies are conflated with increasingly critical and inclusive readings of the past. With an argument for cultural literacy, Seixas suggested, such critique has been strengthened by the proponents' ability to demonstrate empirically low levels of factual knowledge amongst US high school students (Seixas 1993). Studies such as Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn's Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature, What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?, as well as E. D. Hirsch's warning about America's cultural illiteracy, presented grave claims about the historical knowledge of 'America's children' (Ravitch and Finn 1987, Hirsch 1987). Their criticism insisted that history education was too thematically based (on issues of race, class and feminism, for instance); units of Social Studies did not rigorously engage with 'the facts' of history. As Seixas contended, these claims rejected increasingly progressive and inclusive elements of historical

scholarship in the name of pedagogy. Such surveys recur over and again in public discussion of the discipline: ‘36% [of Canadian students] couldn’t even name the century in which Confederation occurred’ (Gardner 1997); ‘The First World War is a mystery to two thirds of [British] secondary school children and some think Adolf Hitler was Britain’s Prime Minister in the Second World War’ (Lightfoot 2001). Utilising a rhetoric of educational standards, these critics implicitly attack not only progressive educational methodologies, but the historical content within such approaches.

A recent controversy in Australia over a state’s new Studies of Society and Environment syllabus (or SOSE—Australia’s version of Social Studies) revealed a similar dynamic. In 2000 the Brisbane *Courier Mail* (a Murdoch broadsheet) exposed Queensland’s new SOSE syllabus for apparent political bias and educational inadequacy. ‘Captain Cook and [former Prime Minister] Sir Robert Menzies do not feature in a new Queensland schools syllabus booklet’,² wrote Martin Thomas, ‘but Eddie Mabo and Ho Chi Minh do’.³ Claims of political one-sidedness prompted the newspaper’s campaign. Opposition to the new syllabus, continued Thomas, objected to the way it advocated ‘environmental zealotry and communist heroes while dismissing white settlement as an invasion’ (Thomas 2000).

A number of correspondents and contributors complained that the selection of content in the syllabus was politically biased. Ted Wilson remonstrated that the syllabus misrepresented ‘our history’. ‘To omit people such as Captain Cook, Robert Menzies and many others from the teaching of history is ludicrous’, he considered. ‘We are trying to instil national pride and feelings of self-worth in our youth but are denying them the most important part of their heritage’ (Wilson 2000). The Melbourne journalist Andrew Bolt accused the Queensland state government’s ‘education experts’ of launching a ‘radical attempt in Australia to indoctrinate children in key Left-wing values’ (Bolt 2000).

As the debate wore on, an argument over educational standards came to the fore. In Australia, school education is state-based, with state curriculum development authorities and assessment criteria. In 1989 the states and territories agreed to the creation of a new national curriculum framework that would be defined by common standards in key learning areas. History, along with geography, literature, politics and other subjects in the humanities and

social sciences, was subsumed into a single key learning area called Studies of Society and Environment. While these standards could be taught through traditional disciplines, schools increasingly dropped such subjects in favour of integrated approaches called SOSE. The incorporation of history into SOSE by all states except New South Wales during the 1990s was criticised by a number of history educators and teacher associations for weakening the discipline. Enrolments in senior history had declined in most states and arguments were made that history was frequently being taught by teachers with no background or training in the discipline. Moreover, many teachers maintained that there were growing timetable pressures on the subject due to an increasingly crowded curriculum framework (for instance Taylor 2000, Ryan 1998).⁴

The Queensland debate was framed by a growing professional concern over the state of history within SOSE, and the *Courier Mail* used this educational anxiety to maintain political pressure against the syllabus. John Lidstone, an Associate Professor of Education at Queensland University of Technology, criticised SOSE for its tendency to deteriorate into studies of 'good causes', for having no internationally agreed standards of rigour, and therefore little potential for seeding a lifelong love of learning (Lidstone 2000). This idea of educational 'relevance' had been popularised during the 1960s and 70s with progressive teaching approaches such as Bruner's *Man: A Course of Study* and the British School Council's *History 13-16 Project* (both variously adopted in Australia) (Fitzgerald 1982, Shemilt 1980, Smith 1978, Symcox 2002: 19-23). Ideas of student-centred learning, of less content-oriented courses with a greater emphasis on making education more applicable for work and later life, were now being rejected for their perceived lack of focus and rigour. With a new conservative invocation, implicit in campaigns such as the *Courier Mail*'s, 'relevance' had come to constitute 'the facts' or getting 'back to basics'. It was also synonymous with the 'nation'. Promoting national histories, cultural literacy, and teaching more positive national stories were vital for 'our children'.

The politics of memory

During his Gallipoli visit Prime Minister Howard commended the continuing legacy of the Anzac heroes. 'We claim from them a heritage of personal courage and initiative', he maintained. 'We come to join with those that rest here in a shared love of our nation' (Howard 2000). His comments came only weeks after the federal government refused to acknowledge claims of compensation for the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families over the best part of two centuries, children who had come to be known as the 'Stolen Generations'. The case of the Stolen Generations is a central issue in the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. Beyond the material question of reparations for the injustice of child removal has been the request for an official apology from the Australian government. The Howard government has refused to apologise for the Stolen Generations, expressing concern 'that there is no reliable basis for what appears to be a generally accepted conclusion as to the supposed dimensions of the "stolen generation"'. While conceding 'that up to 10% of children were separated for a variety of reasons, both protective and otherwise, some forcibly and some not', the government argued that this 'does not constitute a "generation" of "stolen" children. The phrase "stolen generation" is rhetorical' (Herron 2000).

Back in Gallipoli, less than 10 per cent of the Australian population enlisted in World War One, yet Howard praised the 'remarkable legacy' of that 'great-hearted generation', the Anzacs (Howard 2000). While the unsavoury aspects of Australian history could be quietly forgotten, the inheritance from its founding heroes was unbroken. It was this history, these so-called 'facts', that formed the core of the subject that Howard advocated for Australian schools.

Howard's Gallipoli speech marked a growing contest over Australia's past. Critical histories have challenged the public and peaceful narratives of colonisation and nation-building. Yet they have been rejected by historians such as Geoffrey Blainey, John Hirst and Patrick O'Farrell, as well as figures such as Howard, for an apparent political one-sidedness and for judging the past with the values of the present (Hirst 1988/89, Blainey 1993, cited

Uhlman 1997). While revisionist histories enjoy considerable public space in the media, they have been criticised by traditionalists for overemphasising colonial violence. Radio personalities and journalists such as Phillip Adams (who has a weekly column in the Weekend Australian) have commented extensively on Aboriginal land rights and issues of social justice. Historians such as Henry Reynolds have also written frequently in newspapers about conflict and dispossession (for instance Reynolds 1994). The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), too, has often reported Aboriginal historical perspectives, and contributed significant space to the ensuing debate over historical revision (ABC 1996a, b, 1997).

The increasing awareness and acceptance of critical historical approaches provoked considerable reaction. After his election in 1996 John Howard publicly criticised Australia's 'endless navel-gazing', and insisted that while 'Australian history should never be a source of smug delusions or comfortable superiority', nor should it be 'a basis for obsessive and consuming national guilt and shame' (Howard 1996). Geoffrey Blainey suggested that the recent historical swing had 'run wild' and was 'noticeable on the TV news, ABC radio, and the highbrow dailies' (Blainey 1997).

Blainey had already popularised a metaphor to illustrate the apparent emotional darkness of these critical readings of the past. Using a vivid emblem of mourning, he suggested these historians were wearing 'Black Armbands'. Their work expressed an overly negative reading of the past, he considered, an Australian history of apology, rather than celebration (Blainey 1993). With this label, Blainey provided the historiographic discussion with a persuasive image and new impetus. The so-called 'Black Armband' history contains a bleak bias, its critics maintain; by failing to duly acknowledge the aspects of our past of which we should be proud, it misrepresents 'our history'. Some historians such as Reynolds accepted the term defiantly, saying that Australian history was filled with shameful episodes, that its historians should wear black armbands (Reynolds 1998. Also: McCalman 1998, Manne 1998). Meanwhile, the articulation of this debate has reinforced the widespread perception of historical opposition, where readings of Australian history are divided along lines of black and white: in the political arena, contrasting approaches are separated into left

and right; in the contested site of school history, the lines are drawn between either 'invasion' or 'settlement'. I am not particularly comfortable with the 'Black Armband' label or the more common American term, 'History Wars', for their tendency to divide approaches to the past and thus set up an explicit polarity of historical interpretation.

This increasingly politicised historical contest framed Howard's Gallipoli comments on schools. He has not been alone in his concern. In 1993 Blainey cautioned that the 'Black Armband' history was spreading beyond the confines of the academy. 'Now schoolchildren are often the target for these views', he noted (Blainey 1993). Others, too, have warned of an apparent political bias behind the inclusion of revisionist historical perspectives in syllabuses and textbooks. They argue that the inclusion of such perspectives, this 'rewriting' of history, fosters guilt and destabilises the nation (for instance Donnelly 1997, Editorial 1994, Partington 1987). A wider anxiety over how Australia should remember and acknowledge its past lies at the core of this concern over school history. How to teach 'our history' to 'our children' is one site of a contested battle over national memory that periodically erupts over shrines of remembrance, museum exhibits, treaty commissions, history texts and so forth.

A wider trend

The politics of memory are debated widely. And we see in these outbreaks similar patterns behind the conservative rejection of critical historical approaches. In the US, discord over the Smithsonian's exhibition of the Hiroshima bomber, the *Enola Gay*, provoked a protracted public debate. The exhibition was to showcase the plane that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima to end the Second World War. It was to provide a space where veterans' beliefs that the bomb had necessarily ended the war, preventing further loss of life, would be juxtaposed alongside terrifying and tragic images from the city itself. Yet before the exhibition was even opened opposition mounted amidst charges of the 'political correctness' and 'unAmerican' politics that lay behind its inception. A struggle developed between those who wanted to display the competing narratives of war in the Pacific, and the memories of the veterans, who felt the museum was abandoning their commemoration.

After heated opposition, the exhibition was eventually replaced by a simpler display of the Enola Gay itself (Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996: Introduction)

Following the exhibit turnaround, the Republican Leader of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, upheld the resistance of the veterans. ‘The Enola Gay was a fight,’ he maintained, ‘over the reassertion by most Americans that they’re sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country’ (cited Wallace: 187). It was a fight closely paralleling the release of the National History Standards for schools. As the dispute over Enola Gay grew, critics dismissed the Standards for promoting ideological one-sidedness, for pursuing a ‘multicultural’ agenda, and for their ‘political correctness’. The document ‘honors the nation’s diversities, but largely ignores the nation’s commonalities’, argued educationalist Diane Ravitch (Ravitch 1994). Lynne Cheney, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which had helped finance the development of the Standards, angrily agreed: ‘We are a better people than the National Standards indicate,’ she insisted, ‘and our children deserve better’ (Cheney 1994). Conservative assessment of the Standards mirrored the critique of progressive historical approaches such as the proposed Smithsonian exhibit. Rush Limbaugh had earlier decried a ‘primitive type of historical revisionism’ dominating US academic circles (cited Wallace 1996: 175). Republican presidential candidate, Bob Dole, noted a movement of ‘government and intellectual elites who seem embarrassed by America’ (cited Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996:3-4). Overwhelmingly, criticism of the school History Standards was understood in the politicised terms of a wider debate over America’s past.

Concern over history education in Canada has also been framed in these populist terms. Cries of a declining national literacy amongst its youth dominate public discourse of history education. In 1997 the Dominion Institute published the findings of a survey it completed into the levels of historical understanding of Canadian young people. On average, it concluded, ‘Canadian youth—aged 18-24—have “failed” their Canada Day History Survey’ (Dominion Institute 1997). Newspaper headlines sounded the alarm: ‘Canada’s history is being lost’, read one (Editorial 1997). ‘Canada’s lost history’ and ‘Canada’s rich history left untaught’, warned others (Gardner 1997; Urquhart 1997).

Similar contests over what ‘our children’ should know has been played out over and over again in state departments and in public fora around the world. Debates over history teaching generate considerable public and political interest. The production of history syllabuses is an explicitly political act, a matter of public scrutiny and more contested than ever. Particular moments starkly illustrate the convergence of the politics and pedagogy of history education. Howard’s Gallipoli comments or the Standards dispute in the US illustrate how vital school history has become as a site in the increasingly polarised contest over the national past. They also reveal a conservative dominance in the rhetorical formation of this historical debate.

Conclusion

In her analysis of post-Soviet histories in Eastern Europe in *JCS*, Sirkka Ahonen noted the process of *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (facing up to the past) in the former GDR (Ahonen 2001: 186-7). With the paradigm she observed we may also examine contrasting approaches to contested histories. The diverging ways in which Germany and Japan consider their own roles in World War Two are particularly apt examples here, pointing to very different understandings of the role of history, and how it should be remembered and commemorated. The changing histories of settler societies such as Canada, the US or Australia are equally relevant, and also reveal shifts in reading the past that need to be recognised as part of the process of revision. Far from the sense of reaction and opposition that characterises this debate over the past, this process is a complex one, unsuited to such simplistic historical division. The conservative appeals to educational standards, a golden age of traditional classrooms and textbooks, a golden age of history even, have been fundamentally disrupted by progressive approaches to reading and teaching the past. But it seems we have become trapped by a debate that values polarity above process. The forms of this discussion have been narrowed by the strategic dismissal of critical historical approaches and progressive pedagogies as politically biased and educationally unsound. A more self-conscious understanding of what it means to face up to the past would enable a more sympathetic approach to how it should be taught in schools.

Notes

¹ Australian and New Zealand troops formed the ANZACs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps).

² Captain James Cook (1728-79) led a series of exploratory and scientific journeys to the Pacific in the eighteenth century. The first, on the *Endeavour*, included mapping the east coast of Australia and the north and south islands of New Zealand. On 20 August 1770 Cook claimed possession of the east coast of Australia for King George III. He is frequently cited as the 'discoverer' of Australia.

³ Eddie Mabo (1936-93) was a traditional owner of land in the Torres Strait Islands off Australia. His land rights claim helped overturn the legacy of *terra nullius* in 1992—that Australia was deemed unoccupied before European colonisation. As a result, Aboriginal people who can claim a continuous link to crown land are able to apply for title to that land through the Native Title Act.

⁴ See also the responses to Ryan's article in the *AHA Bulletin*, vols 88-89, 1998-99.

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