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The Technocratic Politics of the Common Core State Standards in History

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THE TECHNOCRATIC POLITICS OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS IN
HISTORY

by

KATE DUGUID

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Kate Duguid

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This paper shows that the explicit aims of the American educational standards for public schools, the Common Core State Standards to teach history to create “college and career ready” students, marks a shift from preparing students for political participation to preparing them for market participation. I trace the intellectual and pedagogical origins of the Common Core’s pretense of technocratic apolitical values back through the previous two major American curricular reform efforts. In the first section I discuss the origins and development of the National History Standards and show how Cold War anxiety prompted a shift in evaluating students as potential workers. Section two, which examines alternative approaches to content-based standards from skills-based pedagogues shows how efforts to make high school history look more like the academic discipline were co-opted to discourage student considerations of the politics of history. The third section is a close reading of the Common Core State Standards for history to show how market orientation and an aversion to politics were translated into pedagogy. This thesis shows that the history classroom in public schools is inherently political, and the Common Core State Standards, like previous national curriculum legislation, cannot be apolitical. Furthermore, I show that the politics of the Common Core history standards reflects the technocratic interests at play in public policy today.

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards were designed to avoid political controversy. The metrics for U.S. public schools are voluntary by state and are not federally funded. They sidestep the hot-button curricular issues of history and sex education that roiled the country during the Culture Wars of the 1980s. But the education reform initiative, launched in 2011 by a small coalition of technocrats and immediately adopted by 46 states, soon became controversial at the state and local level. At the time of writing, backlash from across the political spectrum has led to a repeal of the legislation in four states and bills in 21 that would halt implementation. Pending legislation in more than 30 states would significantly impact the rollout (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015).

The Common Core has managed to generate resistance from both the right and the left. Conservative criticism has ranged from the obscene to the expected. Florida Representative Charles Van Zant claimed that the Common Core would “will promote double-mindedness in state education and attract every one of your children to become as homosexual as they possibly can.” (Van Zant 2014) Senator Rand Paul called the standards “anti-American propaganda, revisionist history that ignores the faith of our Founders” (Elkin 2015).¹ Objections to federal overreach from the grassroots had gained enough steam to make the Common Core a decisive issue in the 2016 presidential primary race.

As conservatives have rushed to defend local control of schools, some political progressives have taken issue with the ramped-up assessment required to implement a national curriculum. Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union said, “We also know that

¹ Elkin, Ali. “Rand Paul Lashes Out At Common Core, 2016 Rivals in Fundraising E-mail,” *Bloomberg*. January 29, 2015. <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-01-29/rand-paul-lashes-out-at-common-core-2016-rivals-in-fundraising-e-mail> (accessed December 29, 2016).

high-stakes standardized testing is designed to rank and sort our children and it contributes significantly to racial discrimination and the achievement gap among students in America's schools" (Chicago Teachers Union 2014). In 2015, thousands of parents in New York State chose to opt out their children from testing in protest. The effort to circumvent political controversy over the national standards failed.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide metrics for the primary subject areas taught in schools, with a particular focus on English language arts and mathematics. This paper is focused on the history and social studies standards for high school students in particular. What is taught in history and social studies classes, and how it is taught, has been a politically contentious matter since the Reconstruction era. Traditionally the coursework has served to impart to young people what it means to be an American citizen (Beard 1932; National Education Association 1894; Zimmerman 2002). I argue that the CCSS were positioned as apolitical to avoid controversy over the history standards, more than any other subject. David Coleman, the architect of the Common Core, and his small coalition of co-authors and private funders, had attempted to slip under the political radar to avoid rehashing the History Wars fought over the approval of a national set of history standards commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment of the Humanities in 1991 (Nash, Crabtree, and National Standards for History Taskforce 1996). The National History Standards (NHS), after facing public backlash from conservatives for promoting a critical approach to American history, were rejected by Congress. The Common Core standards avoided the NHS pitfalls: participation and funding was left up to the state, and the metrics themselves were based on skills rather than specific content.

The Common Core's history and social studies standards proffer the dominant pedagogical theory at work in American education today. The pedagogy comes out of the work of a stable of reformers, most notably Samuel Wineburg at Stanford University, who have advocated for skills-based instruction since the 1990s. Wineburg argues that better analytical skills, not mastery over a greater number of facts, are required to develop students' historical understanding (Wineburg 1991; 1997; 2001). The Common Core metrics test for the tools of historical inquiry, like the ability to analyze primary sources and corroborate claims, rather than the retention of specific content.

Skills-based pedagogy sidesteps the political fight over content. Metrics like the Common Core typically leave decisions about content up to the state, district or school. The focus on teaching critical thinking appeals both to progressives, as it requires post-structural analysis of primary sources, and to conservatives, since it appears to limit federal overreach into locally controlled schools. The Common Core does not require students to have learned any particular historical topics or to have read particular texts – as long as they satisfy a certain standard of complexity. The metric instead requires from students a disinterested, academic perspective that strives for objectivity. As the partisan responses have suggested, however, the Common Core cannot be called apolitical. I argue that both the implementation of the Common Core and the standards themselves reflect the politics of technocratic interests at work in U.S. public policy today.

High school history classes in the United States mirror the politics of the era in which they are taught. Crises of American civic identity, like the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, have played out in the history and social studies classroom since the widespread enrollment of teenagers in high school at the beginning of the 20th century (Bain 2000; Thornton 1994). This

makes sense: the aim of these courses is to impart what it means to be an American citizen. Outside the private sphere of the home, history courses in public schools “are the major site for the construction of collective memory in contemporary society” (Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg 2000, 2). The stakes of what is taught have been further heightened by questions about the political, economic and social interests of those who have recorded history and the system that determines whose stories are legitimate and worth teaching to the next generation.

The post-structural critique of the authority of knowledge and the texts that emerged in academia in the 1960s and 1970s created three major problems for teaching history. First, it challenged which and whose history should be taught. This in turn spurred a debate over teaching skills versus content. Second, it questioned the historian’s approach, and put into doubt the possibility of critical distance. This has raised questions about the difference between heritage and history, whereby heritage is a conception of the past used to support or oppose interests in the present (Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg 2000). Finally, related to the imposition of ahistorical values on the past, is the question of whether history courses should be taught to some political ends.

Since the emergence of post-structuralist theory in the American academy, heightened attention has been paid to the nature of historical knowledge inspired by the inclusion issue but also by the historiography, narrative theory and feminist, post-colonial and cultural studies. These developments have opened up conversations about the nature of historical knowledge but also who in society gets to decide what constitutes and is recorded as historical knowledge (Seixas [2004] 2012). The spread of post-structural critiques of history has raised these questions in high school history classrooms.

The Common Core may not explicitly dictate the contents of history classes, but the standards nevertheless aim to constrain historical inquiry to a set of conservative, academic skills that would privilege narratives recorded in a “legitimate,” verifiable manner. These tools of historical inquiry should be understood as an integral part of the Western canon. Their centrality to liberal education models shows these reforms to be fundamentally committed to the cultural reproduction of traditional academic values, most notably, objectivity, highly sophisticated literacy and the award of a privileged status to non-fiction texts.

The Common Core however, remains distinct from the work of Wineburg and other advocates of skill-based pedagogy, as it does not value the subject of history in and for itself. History, rather, is mined for a set of abstract analytical skills that prepare students for a career or college. The Common Core reforms history education to be first, apolitical, and second, market-oriented. Like the National History Standards, the CCSS are born out of economic anxiety: the curricular reform efforts aimed to prepare future American workers to better compete in the marketplace. The creators of the NHS nevertheless understood there to be a political purpose to history education in public high schools, namely to prepare students to be citizens. The CCSS history standards mark a break with that tradition.

In this paper, I will show that the Common Core’s explicit aim to teach history to create “college and career ready” students marks a shift from teaching history to prepare students for political participation to preparing them for market participation (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). In the first section I show how Cold War anxiety prompted the shift in evaluating students as potential workers. Section two shows how post-structural critiques of the production and dissemination of history prompted efforts to make high school history look more like the academic discipline. The third section is a close reading of the Common Core State

Standards for history and social studies, and an examination of David Coleman's educational theories, to show how market orientation and an aversion to politics were translated into pedagogy. The three sections also broadly follow three distinct waves of reform of history education. The first is concerned with the origins and development of the National History Standards in the 1980s and 1990s, whose creators I call the Reformists. The second follows the alternative approach to content-based standards like the NHS from skills-based pedagogues like Samuel Wineburg, who I call the Reconstructionists. Finally, the third section is concerned with the Common Core State Standards, which adopts the skills-based model of the Reconstructionists, but which explicitly assess students' grasp of the tools of historical inquiry to evaluate their potential success in the marketplace. I call the Common Core's creators and adherents the Technocrats. The table below labels each group and lists their characteristics.

Characteristics of the major movements in United States high school history pedagogy

	<i>Traditionalists</i>	<i>Reformists</i>	<i>Reconstructionists</i>	<i>Technocrats</i>
<i>Affiliated reform movement</i>	Conservative culture warriors	National History Standards	Cognitive revolution	Common Core
<i>Who's in it</i>	Diane Ravitch, Allan Bloom, Chester Finn, David Lowenthal	Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, Ross Dunn	Samuel Wineburg, Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, David Lowenthal, Linda Levstik	David Coleman, College Board, Gates Foundation, Obama administration
<i>Content vs. skills</i>	Content	Content	Skills	Skills
<i>Content type</i>	Western canon	Inclusive, multicultural	Diverse primary sources	Primary sources, 80% non-fiction
<i>Social studies vs. history</i>	History	History and social studies	History	History and social studies
<i>Pluralism vs. nationalism</i>	Nationalism	Pluralism	Pluralism	Pluralism
<i>Post-structural approach to knowledge</i>	Against	Mostly against	Mostly for	Mostly for
<i>Indoctrination vs. critical thought</i>	Indoctrination (nationalism, democracy)	Indoctrination (pluralism, equality) Critical thought (U.S. power)	Critical thought	Critical thought
<i>Heritage vs. history?</i>	History	Heritage	History	History

I. History Wars: Traditionalists vs. Reformists

On January 18, 1995, Senator Slade Gorton, a Republican from Washington, asked Congress, what is a “more important part of our Nation’s history for our children to study – George Washington or Bart Simpson?” (Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg 2000, 1) Senator Gorton’s question marked the final fight in the History Wars, which raged from 1994 until 1996 over the content of history curricula in U.S. public schools. This final battle was over a national history curriculum, the National History Standards, authored at the request of the Department of Education and the National Endowment of the Humanities in 1991.

The Bart Simpson question harkened back to the start of the History Wars, which were borne out of Cold War fears of the consequences of sub-par education, inspired by the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The 1983 report, released by the National Council on Excellence in Education (NCEE), argued that public schools were failing to prepare students to be successful in the global marketplace. The United States was at risk of losing the Cold War, and its international dominance, because of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in school children (National Council on Excellence in Education 1983). The NCEE’s demand was for higher standards for all students, which inspired a wave of assessments of students’ knowledge, like Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn’s 1987 survey of history students (Ravitch and Finn 1988). A conservative take on what students should know also emerged, and is characterized by Allan Bloom’s defense of the Western canon in the 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind* and E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s *Cultural Literacy* (Bloom [1987] 2012; Hirsch 1988). Bloom’s work argued that high school students were not prepared for success in the global market because curriculum in public schools failed to emphasize canonical Western texts, narratives, and methods.

On October 20, 1994, Lynne Cheney, who as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities was one of the primary funders of the NHS project, published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* that lambasted the as yet unpublished standards.² Taking up arguments made by Bloom, she contended that the curriculum was overly politically correct and its attempts to bring pluralism and multiculturalism to history class erased seminal moments of American history (Cheney 1994). By 1996, there was scant support from the public, the media and the government for the standards. Later that year Congress voted down, 99 to one, the proposed National History Standards.

Beyond the defeat of the history standards, the real victory of the Traditionalists was defining the terms of the debate. By focusing the conversation on the content of the standards, the need for a national curriculum and the validity of the concerns expressed in *A Nation at Risk* were never questioned. Subsequent attempts at liberal reform, that is, ameliorative efforts to reduce the severity of systemic inequality, have failed to render history curricula more inclusive and progressive because they continue to presume the need for national standards. This is because these standards are rooted in *A Nation at Risk's* Cold War paranoia, which is ultimately aimed at sorting students by potential success in the global market.

The promise of national standards is to systemize metrics to guarantee a certain quality of education across states and to provide students with equal access to tools they can use in the marketplace and to better understand themselves and their place in the world. Despite the egalitarian aim, there is disagreement among advocates of a progressive approach to education about national standards. Standards have been and continue to be used to assess students and teachers; those who fail to meet the standards are penalized. Under President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative, schools and districts that performed better were allocated more

² Cheney, Lynne. "The End of History," *The Wall Street Journal*. October 20, 1994.

federal resources. For the federal, and even state, government to have oversight over schools, evaluating performance against cross-district metrics requires student tests and teacher evaluations to be standardized. The rise of the former has led to the widely criticized method of pedagogy known as “teaching to the test,” which prepares students to pass tests without concern about the utility of the information, nor about their retention or engagement with the material. Longitudinal studies have shown that standardized testing does not improve levels of educational attainment nationally, and in particular, among disadvantaged populations with histories of lower educational attainment (Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Public Education 2011; Popham 1999; Welner and Mathis 2015). When resources are attached to performance on such assessments educationally disadvantaged populations become trapped in cycles of underperformance (Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie 2011).

A similar story can be told about teacher evaluations. There is a strong correlation between students’ educational performance and the number of years their teacher has spent in the classroom (Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger 2006). And the length of a teacher’s career is strongly correlated with unionization (Han 2015). The strong presence of teachers’ unions across the nation slowed the spread of teacher evaluations tied to student performance. At the time of writing, however, such evaluations have become nearly as commonplace as standardized testing for students (Goldstein 2014). Teacher evaluations tied to student performance therefore encourage teachers to seek out jobs in high-performing schools, which leaves under-performing schools with a shortage of experienced teachers, the ones most likely to effect change. Despite their liberal politics, the Reformists largely ignored both of these issues in the 1980s and 1990s. Gary Nash, a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles and head of the committee that authored the 1995 National History Standards, tells the story of history education

in the U.S. as the progression of an increasingly inclusive, multicultural and democratic account of the past. The conservative backlash to the National History Standards halted the progress that resulted from demands made in the 1960s and 1970s for the inclusion of the histories of minority groups and returned a narrower account of U.S. history to public classrooms. This is the argument made in *History on Trial*, which Nash co-authored with two colleagues from the original history standards committee (Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn 2000). Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn acknowledge that the History Wars of the 1980s and 1990s weren't the first History Wars (See also Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996).

History curriculum was in contention even before it was a required subject in schools. In 1860, pro-slavery, pro-southern magazine *De Bow's Review* published an article "Our School Books" which criticized the abolitionist stance of northern textbooks and argued their authors were insufficiently impartial. "If it be deemed desirable that our school books should assume a positive, instead of a neutral stand, on this momentous subject of slavery, by every consideration of reason and common sense, by every dictate of self-preservation, let us have sentiments expressed in them which will accord with our own" (Morgan 1860, 439). In the July issue of the same magazine, history textbooks are taken up again: "Our schools have long been groaning under the burden of text books, of questionable orthodoxy, and in some instances decided hostility to the institutions which her public instructors, of all others, may reasonably be expected to advocate and defend" (Herriott 1860, 219). The imposition of northern textbooks was hardly a widespread phenomenon. As of 1860, six states required U.S. history be taught in schools, only one of which, Virginia, was below the Mason-Dixon Line.³ But the antagonism on display in *Du*

³ In 1827, Massachusetts and Vermont became the first states to require U.S. history be taught in public schools. Virginia's legislation, passed in 1849, was notably the only one of the six that required teaching state, in addition to national, history.

Bow's speaks to the sensitivity towards History education, particularly in moments of national crisis.

The Civil War was a turning point for history education. As Bessie Pierce notes, the victory of the Union in 1865 put aside the debate over state's rights (Pierce 1926). The explicit aim of the Reconstructionist project was to piece together a fractious country and promote national unity. The Reconstruction policies of Presidents Lincoln and Jackson are largely understood to have failed at that project. But, the nationalist agenda changed the character of U.S. schools in ways that still resonate today. Schools were recognized as the primary public mechanism to disseminate what it meant to be an American and the behaviors and principles that entailed. Investment in public schools rose following the war and teaching U.S. history towards patriotic ends gained wide support (Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn 2000). In the 40 years after the war, 23 states passed legislation that required national history be added to the curriculum. Many states also required coursework on the Constitution, geography and political economy. The primary aim of U.S. schools in the 18th century and first half of the 19th was to cultivate good Christians. After 1865, it was to cultivate good citizens (Pierce 1926, 13).

National history, alongside the mish-mash of civics and social science, served to fulfill the new aims of Reconstruction era schools. Compulsory history education was a mechanism for meeting new educational aims, like Maryland's 1865 mission "to preserve the blessings of liberty, promote temporal happiness and advance the greatness of the American nation." In a diverse nation, a shared history is a uniting force that provides an incentive to engage civically with other Americans, though they may have radically different value systems.

While nationalism was being promoted in the classroom, the U.S. school system itself was nationalizing. The localism of the U.S. school system in 1860 belied the country's

longstanding commitment to widespread access to education. Before the Civil War, American rates of elementary school enrollment and literacy were far higher than in any other country, even though there was no federal regulation of schools (Pierce 1926). Reconstruction legislation allowed African-Americans access to the school system—though schools were inequitable and remained segregated—which further cemented the idea of public education as a national good.

The alignment of purpose immediately following the war didn't hold for long. School districts soon diverged on racial integration, teaching evolution, school prayer, sexual education and standardized history curriculum. Across the country, American schools differ radically in their character and in the equitability, thanks to the enduring structure of local control. The History Wars in the 1980s and 1990s and subsequent attempts to reform history education are rooted in these two tensions: the issue of local control and questions about the purpose of public education. Do we teach towards patriotism, towards democracy or—a newer strain of thinking that came out America's industrialization—do we teach towards the market?

There are those who might reject both options. These are advocates of a liberal arts approach, which takes education as a good in and of itself rather than a means to an end. Such pedagogues have in recent years come to support teaching history in schools in the place of social studies, a course originally designed with a very specific ends: to teach new immigrants American values and politics. In short, how to be a citizen. These pedagogues include Reconstructionists as well as some Traditionalists who double as Reconstructionists like David Lowenthal and the difficult-to-categorize Diane Ravitch.

As the assistant Secretary of Education under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Diane Ravitch endorsed national history standards, high-stakes testing and charter schools. In the mid-1990s Ravitch had a change of heart and has since written widely against

testing. Though she no longer supports high-stakes testing, she continues to endorse a standardized national curriculum (Ravitch and Viteritti [2001] 2003; Ravitch 2007). In “History’s Struggle to Survive in Schools,” Ravitch chronicles the development of high school history courses, lamenting the rise of vocational education and social studies courses that teach material that she likens to Michael Oakeshott’s “useful knowledge” (Ravitch 2007). Broadly, Ravitch rejects job training in schools and utilitarian courses like social studies. Despite this, on the whole she supports teaching the history of the United States by employing a narrative of progress that would encourage conscientious patriotism. In the introduction to *Making Good Citizens* she writes: “In the 1980s and 1990s many public schools embraced diversity as their mission at the cost of civic assimilation. In doing so, they taught children to identify with their own ancestral heritage rather than a common stock of American ideals” (Ravitch and Viteritti [2001] 2003, 5). Like Nash, who in “The “Convergence” Paradigm in Studying Early American History in the Schools” (2000) encourages educators to keep abreast of historical work being done in the academy, Ravitch claims that curricular standards should be open to revision (Ravitch 2000). And yet, as is implied by the quotation above Ravitch is fierce opponent of teaching students post-structural methodologies that encourage excessive relativism. History curricula should be adapted, but must preserve the narrative of progress in U.S. history.

Ravitch’s ire over the use of post-structural methodologies in the classroom was aimed at Marxist educational theorists like Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz and Michael Apple who advocated for a “critical pedagogy,” a concept they inherited from Paolo Freire, appropriated from the work of progressive education John Dewey (Apple 2009). Critical pedagogy aims to instill in students a post-structural approach to knowledge. In the classroom, students are presented with multiple perspectives on a topic, and are encouraged to question the source, the

veracity and production of the materials. Ravitch claims that this method teaches young people that “everything is relative, simply a matter of taste or preference, and that the truth is a social construct, existing only in the eye of the beholder” (Ravitch and Viteritti [2001] 2003, 6). By this measure, national standards are a way to combat moral relativism and impart the values, or “American ideals” Ravitch and Viteritti [2001] 2003, 5) necessary to be an informed, responsible participant in political and civic life.

In light of her rejection of post-structural pedagogical methods, Ravitch’s position on future revisions of history curriculum is incoherent. Any serious inclusion of the histories of disenfranchised communities, of immigrants in particular, would require moving beyond the governing narrative of the progressive development of the United States as a nation. An account of U.S. history that does not presume a progressive arc would create the same issues for Ravitch as post-structural historiography.

The responsibility of a school to turn children into citizens is at the heart of Ravitch’s theory of politics, as well as her project to combat systemic inequality in schools. In “The Educational Backgrounds of History Teachers,” Ravitch links the rise of social studies as a subject area (rather than history) to that of vocational programs as a way to dismiss both (Ravitch 2000). Ravitch locates the origins of social studies in vocational programs that presumed students were too “stupid” and “uninterested” to learn about historical events unless they were related to the present (Ravitch 2000, 150). Contemporary social studies classes link current work in the social sciences with historical narratives and by Ravitch’s estimation “[teach] children to identify with their own ancestral heritage rather than a common stock of American ideals” (Ravitch and Viteritti [2001] 2003, 6). The greatest sin of vocational education programs, by this

account, is that they fail to impart upon students the knowledge necessary to be informed citizens.

Vocational programs, which were primarily filled with poor students of color, failed to provide those enrolled with the academic training necessary to change careers later on in life, or the academic training necessary to be critical, informed participants in civic and political life. The disparities between curricula in vocational and academic high schools led to students who were tracked towards a particular social class, and consequently, reproduced the structure of economic inequality.

In spite of her shift to the left, Ravitch's concerns about imparting the "common stock of American ideals," about post-structuralist perspectives and consequent moral weakness, and about courses that train for blue- and not white-collar jobs resonate with those expressed by Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Even though Nash and Ravitch formally rejected Bloom, their concerns are nevertheless grounded in the same panic spurred by *A Nation at Risk*. This matters because the next wave of history education reformers, Samuel Wineburg and the Reconstructionists, denounce both Bloom and the Reformers, with their fear of post-structuralism and efforts to cram evermore facts into the minds of students. The debate over the content of history standards and *The Closing of the American Mind* obviated all conversations about the actual need for standards. The Reconstructionists therefore do not take issue with *A Nation at Risk*, but instead with the first school and with Bloom.

I understand Reconstructionists to be aligned with the aims of liberal arts education and liberalism in the political theory sense. That is to say, that they are committed to providing an educational experience that furnishes each individual student with the tools and freedom needed to pursue their own self-enactment. In the classroom, this means that they are opposed

specifically to vocational instruction, which pursues a particular professional end. They are equally opposed to curriculum that aims to instill in students particular political beliefs, or conduct judged to proper and appropriate in the United States. For this reason, the Reconstructionists wish to abandon social studies courses, a mash-up of history and the social sciences aimed to impart American values, and move towards more traditional academic history curriculum.

II. Reconstructionists: The Cognitive Revolution

After Congress rejected the proposed National History Standards, a group of American academics and educators I call the Reconstructionists proposed an alternative path forward for history education. Samuel Wineburg at Stanford University, Peter Stearns at Carnegie Mellon University and Peter Seixas at the University of British Columbia—inspired in part by work done in Great Britain by education scholars and historians, notably Peter Lee and David Lowenthal—launched a self-described “cognitive revolution,” which shifted the focus of history-curriculum reform from content to pedagogy (Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg 2000). The Reconstructionists pick up John Dewey’s theory of student-centered instruction and insists on the importance of “the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (Dewey 1938, 67).

The skills-centric reform movement began when Samuel Wineburg took issue with the work of Nash and the liberal reformers on national standards, claiming that students needed to learn the skills of historical inquiry, and not a greater number of historical facts, to develop their historical understanding (Wineburg 1991; 1997; 2001). This was a move away from the mimetic model of citizenship instruction and teacher-centered classrooms that “gives a central place to

the transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to another through an essentially imitative process” (Jackson 1986, 117). Rather than relay the best story about historical events, students are guided to consider competing accounts and are asked to determine for themselves which is best. For the Reconstructionist school, the best answer is one that meets the standards of traditional, academic scholarship. It demonstrates close reading of primary sources, comparison of archival material and a distant, disinterested perspective that strives for “meticulous objectivity” (Lowenthal 2000, 64).

Knowing, Teaching & Learning History, a collection edited by Wineburg, Peter Stearns and Peter Seixas, includes theoretical texts from the major contributors to this school of pedagogical reform. Wineburg’s work *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001) and *Reading Like a Historian* (Wineburg, Martin, and Monte-Sano [2004] 2013) flesh out the instructional practices necessary to develop the tools for historical inquiry. These two works are used and known widely by high school history teachers and are among the most frequently cited pedagogical tools among history educators and pedagogues. Wineburg’s pedagogy is centered on exposing students to primary documents, rather than textbooks, a practice endorsed by his cognitivist colleagues.

There is a fair amount of agreement on desirable history thinking goals. In addition to effective writing and the capacity to develop arguments based on empirical evidence, students can profitably advance their capacities to assess and use various forms of primary materials; they can learn to weigh conflicting interpretations; they can formulate increasingly complex comparisons and comparisons’ close kin, assessments of change and continuity over time; they can explicitly identify causation issues; and finally, they can learn something about analogy (Stearns 2000, 472-73).

Educational psychologists have had very different views about the study of history. In the first decades of the twentieth century, education researchers overall agreed that learning history couldn't be reduced to answering factual questions. It is, however, an easy skill to test. It was only with the cognitive revolution that research began on the actual psychological processes, aside from memorization, that are involved in learning history (Wineburg 2001). These psychologists explored students' background knowledge—including popular culture, like historical films they had seen—in an attempt to uncover beliefs and conceptions that may have influenced their historical thinking (Wineburg et al. 2007; Wineburg and Monte-Sano 2008).

With the move away from teacher-centered classrooms, also came a move away from textbooks. The Reconstructionists' other major site of work was on how historians employed the tools of historical understanding when reading primary and secondary sources (Wineburg 2001). This research suggested that learning history involves becoming familiar with ideas and concepts that enable descriptions of the past, while also learning historiographical strategies to critically evaluate and interpret the past (Seixas 1993; 2001; [2004] 2012). Historical thinking also includes the operating principle of intellectual history—that peoples' own beliefs make sense to them, that they are rational. The historian's job is to make sense of those beliefs; the more foreign these are to the historian, the more they are responsible for accounting for the rationale behind these ideas.

By using primary sources as the principal texts of the history classroom, the Reconstructionists were able to respond to long-standing critiques that textbooks served primarily to transmit mainstream, uncritical stories of America's legacy. These often left out the histories of people without power (and therefore outside the production of "official" historical narratives) and dissident voices (Apple 2009). However, the Reconstructionists were less

hospitable to the inclusion of identity politics more generally in the classroom. Responding to a question about whether history has a uniquely important role to play in high school curriculum, Wineburg said:

Literary criticism? I mean, we're talking about stories that aren't true. History deals with true stories. History is the training ground for the kinds of stories that we tell each other in the daily news. A knowledge of history gives us the ability to wrestle truth from the noise created by the cacophony of voices in the world...Political science? There is obviously a lot of overlap, but history located events in place and time and sequence and teaches us about the Kantian dimensions of human life. History teaches things that no other subject in the curriculum has even the potential to teach – not to mention the humanistic qualities, which I think are the most powerful antidote to the identity politics that riddle this country today. History teaches us that we are part of the species, that the entire history of the species is our own. And so I take membership in the species by understanding that the past is much larger than the circumstances that placed me in this particular incarnation. (Wineburg 2008, 40)

David Lowenthal, a major figure in the British cognitive revolution, can be categorized as both a Reconstructionist and a Traditionalist. He supports the move away from textbooks and towards imposing the values of professional, academic historians in secondary and primary schools. However, he is also aligned with Bloom and the Traditionalists, and states explicitly his faith in the historical method. He is less-than-hospitable to post-structural critiques of the production and recording of history.

A major contribution is his distinction between *heritage* and *history*, whereby heritage is a conception of the past used to support or oppose interests in the present. It is not subject to

critique but is held as “a dogma or roots and origins that must be accepted on faith.” In contrast, history is a “disinterested universal,” to which no group of people necessarily bears claims to truth. (Lowenthal 2000, 66) Through rigorous historical inquiry (Lowenthal cites skills like familiarity, comparative judgment, awareness of manifold truths, appreciation of authority and hindsight), the use of archives, and by its subjection to public criticism history aims for “meticulous objectivity” (Lowenthal 2000, 64). “Dilemmas and Delights” is an overview of his book *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1999) that argues that high school history courses should engage in traditional, academic scholarship. For such scholarship to be possible, using historical knowledge for what Lowenthal calls “the identity project,” the explorations of heritage and the imposition of ahistorical values on the past, must be discouraged (Lowenthal 2000).

Within the second school of reformers, there is some variability in perspectives on the use of history in the service of the identity project. While Lowenthal understands learning history to be a matter of mastering the academic discipline, Linda Levstik celebrates her students’ use of vernacular language to describe historical events as well as their “intimacy with the past” (Levstik 2000). Both Levstik (2000) and Seixas (2000) come to reject a post-structuralist approach, which may encourage students to privilege their own historical perspective given that no unbiased, universal perspective is possible. Their proposed alternative is the pedagogy of the Reconstructionists, which involves teaching the tools of historical inquiry, but which nevertheless satisfies the post-structural desire to understand the relationship between historical texts and the interests of their authors. Seixas also suggests that this pedagogical method would allow students to present their particular heritage and historical perspectives in the classroom, but would require these views be subject to the same questioning that is applied to historical texts.

By subjecting their preferred narrative to rigorous inquiry, students would come to understand the limitations of that narrative.

And while the second school is open to discussions of students' heritage in the classroom, they maintain that students should not be taught to approach history in search of affirmations of personal or contemporary values. Much of the work done by the Reconstructionists therefore depends on research that demonstrates the ability of adolescents to understand multiple historical perspectives at once. The work of one such researcher, James Wertsch, is included in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History*.

Almost without exception, [the Estonians] asserted that the official accounts of the events of 1940 were false and the unofficial ones were true...The interviewees...tended to know the official account as well as, if not better than, the unofficial account. These interviewees demonstrated what might be called a pattern of "knowing but not believing" in the case of the official history and perhaps even "believing but not knowing" in the case of the unofficial history (Wertsch 2000, 39).⁴

The Reconstructionists emerged in response to Nash's content-based reform of history curriculum. But, they're not content agnostic. Rather, they intervened in the debate over history pedagogy to insist that curricular content and instruction could not be understood in isolation from one another (Thornton 1994). And while they have moved towards Dewey's model of

⁴ Wertsch's findings in Estonia are true the world over: in any nation, a percentage of the population will have two notions of a history: the official account, and one or more unofficial accounts. (Wertsch 2000) Wertsch cites Thomas Holt in *Thinking Historically*, who observed that minority students in the United States typically understand the official account of history they learn in schools to be made up of "someone else's facts." Wertsch explains this phenomenon by using the terms *mastery* and *appropriation*. *Mastery* is the ability to explain the causes and consequences of a particular event. The mastered narrative could be used as the foundation for further knowledge or as the basis of an argument. It is, however, distinct from *appropriation* as it does not involve believing or accepting the terms of that narrative. (Wertsch 2000)

There is some overlap between Wertsch's terms *mastery* and *appropriation* and Lowenthal's notions of *history* and *heritage*. If history should be understood as disinterested and universal, mastery would help achieve its aim of meticulous objectivity. Heritage on the other hand, is "a dogma of roots and origins that must be accepted on faith," would involve appropriation (Lowenthal 2000, 2).

student-centered learning, they are diverse—and sometimes silent—on their position on a standardized curriculum, which Dewey was explicitly against. In *Education and Experience*, Dewey says, “a single course of studies for all progressive schools is out of the question” (Dewey 1938, 78). Wineburg, Stearns and Seixas among many high-profile Reconstructionists, however, do not object to standards *tout court*. Specifically, they are in favor of skills-based standards that do not prescribe particular texts, but do assess suitability for passage into the next grade level by mastery of specific types and levels of text. The CCSS on history can be understood as an appropriation of the work of the Reconstructionists. The CCSS more generally—including the two primary content areas, English language arts and mathematics—can be said to have copied to the model of the Reconstructionists. The CCSS ought to be understood as an appropriation of the work of progressives like John Dewey around student-centered learning. However, like the Reconstructionists, the creators and backers of the CCSS eschew politics and therefore ignore the politics embedded in the skills-based reform project.

III. Technocrats: The Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards came about when, in 2008, David Coleman met with Bill Gates, the Microsoft founder and his wife, Melinda Gates, the head of the Gates Foundation. Soon after the Gates Foundation awarded more than \$150 million to the CCSS initiative. The project won support among legislators, including then-Senator Barack Obama, and Student Achievement Partners, Coleman’s CCSS vehicle, officially took on the project (Strauss 2013).⁵ The standards were primarily written in-house and drew minimal input from academics or educators. The people assigned to the design committee came either from the world of academic

⁵ Strauss, Valerie. “Gates gives \$150 million in grants for Common Core Standards.” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2013. <http://wapo.st/2itWtY7> (Accessed July 12, 2016)

testing or from business. There were representatives from testing providers ACT, Pearson and College Board and from non-profits Students Achievement Partners and Achieve (Neem 2015). Comparatively, the 1996 National History Standards were created by a coalition of academics, teachers, school district administrators, union leaders and representatives from Washington.

The standards, however, are rooted in the same anxiety about student performance that produced the National History Standards. Like the NHS, the CCSS are intended as a national curriculum and represent an effort increase the academic rigor of American classrooms.

President George W. Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind policy tied academic performance to federal funding of schools. The initiative tested students on standards designed at the state level. The results collected by National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that states set dramatically different standards, and student performance, as a result, was uneven (Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Public Education 2011). The Common Core State Standards were developed as a solution to that problem: in 2009, David Coleman and his Common Core were hired by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association.

There are two primary sets of standards—those for the English language arts (ELA), and those for mathematics. Other subjects, like history and science, fall under those categories. The ELA and math standards can roughly be understood to mirror the testing categories on the SAT—math and reading. (It bears repeating that Coleman is now the president of the College Board, the operator and owner of the SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) tests.) The ELA standards, under which history falls, aim to impart the skills needed for analytical reading and non-fiction writing. The subject areas that fall under the ELA standards, such as history, are not clearly distinguished within the text of the standards, and aim broadly to impart those same skills. History as a

Common Core subject is intently focused on teaching students to read non-fiction texts, without focusing on the particular historical context. Students are taught that everything they need to know is within the text, an approach that is not just ahistorical but antipathetic to the discipline.

The skills tested by the CCSS are ostensibly general enough to benefit all students. But the existence of both the Common Core and the Advanced Placement U.S. history curriculum suggests otherwise.⁶ The A.P. tests are preparation for college work. They are more rigorous and prestigious than the Common Core and are taken by a small group of elite students. The Common Core elevates subject-specific knowledge to the college-bound elite and sticks the general student body with training in generic analysis.

The Common Core teaches some of the basic tools of historical inquiry, but sheds much of the subject's traditional civic aims. The explicit purpose of the standards is to prepare students for "college and career readiness." The standards do mention this democratic tradition, but it is ancillary and appears only at the end of the introduction: "[Students] reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic" (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 3).

In the classroom, the primary aim of the Common Core is to get students to engage seriously with texts. However, Coleman's insistence these texts primarily be non-fiction has raised hackles even among supporters. When he talks about preparing students, he means preparing them for work in the marketplace. In a speech to teachers he explained his approach saying:

The only problem, forgive me for saying this so bluntly, the only, problem with those two forms of writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a shit

⁶ A recent attempt to update the Advanced Placement U.S. History exam by College Board President David Coleman embroiled it in a mini-History War of its own.

about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is rare in a working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood." That is rare. It is equally rare in college by the way (Coleman 2011).

For students, history—the humanities and sciences too—offer tools to make sense of the world. But this aim is secondary to market-oriented skills in the CCSS.

The CCSS take from the Reconstructionists the concept of skills-based education. The pedagogy of Wineburg, Seixas, and others, however, allows room for students to grapple with the questions about the political motives and undercurrents of the discipline. The *Reading Like a Historian* movement is also grounded in the academic discipline of history. Students are encouraged to learn the specific skills professional historians use: providing evidence with sources; employing historical knowledge to contextualize primary sources; and understanding and correctly applying concepts like causation. While the Reconstructionist school of pedagogues encouraged educators to replace textbooks with primary sources in the classroom, they did not seek to foster a singular focus on the text at hand. The CCSS refer to attending to "the norms and conventions of the discipline in which [students] are writing," leaving the teacher to decide what disciplinary knowledge to impart (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 45). Given the lack of specificity in the CCSS, this means both disciplinary content and skills. While there is a single page of the standards devoted to reading skills in history and social students, the writing standards are not subject specific. Even when the standards discuss history and social studies explicitly, the instructions are not subject specific:

Reading is critical to building knowledge in history/social studies as well as in science and technical subjects. College and career ready reading in these fields requires an appreciation of the norms and conventions of each discipline, such as the kinds of evidence used in history and science; an understanding of domain-specific words and phrases; an attention to precise details; and the capacity to evaluate intricate arguments, synthesize complex information, and follow detailed descriptions of events and concepts. In history/social studies, for example, students need to be able to analyze, evaluate, and differentiate primary and secondary sources... Students must be able to read complex informational texts in these fields with independence and confidence because the vast majority of reading in college and workforce training programs will be sophisticated nonfiction. Students must be able to read complex informational texts in these fields with independence and confidence because the vast majority of reading in college and workforce training programs will be sophisticated nonfiction. (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 60)

Here, we see plainly that the skills-based approach the standards employ is in service of market-oriented aims: “college and career readiness.” Though the burden here is on the teacher to supply the subject-specific expertise, the standards themselves don’t require it. This could imply that teachers do not in fact need disciplinary expertise—a set of critical reading skills and access to the internet will do—or, that those with such expertise ought not be compensated for it. Teachers need no specific training to implement the Common Core.

The specific reading standards for literacy in history and social studies, which is the only part of the standards devoted specifically to the subject, are not, for the most part, history-specific skills. Standard five for students in grades nine through ten reads “Analyze how a text

uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.” Standard eight for the same age group reads “Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 61). Even standards that relate specifically to history or social studies often mutate into non-specific standards in later years. For students in grades nine through 10, standard one reads “Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.” The corollary for students in grades 11 through 12 removes the mention of date and origin, and therefore of historical analysis. It reads: “Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 61). Even among more technical standards, such as “Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text,” it is unclear whether or why those skills are necessary to understand historical content (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010, 61).

In a teacher training session on how to teach Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Coleman insists students shouldn’t use historical context or attempt to frame the text. The idea is to empower students to engage analytically with what is in front of them, to read the text closely and well. For Coleman, reading King is important because it develops college and career skills, not because of King’s insight into history; the content is arbitrary. This presumes that historical skills have no politics—only content does—when in fact both do, as does the whole project of the Common Core.

There are some similarities between Coleman’s approach and those of the American progressive education movement. Its champions, like John Dewey, wanted to teach material

relevant to a diverse student body. For some, this meant a focus on vocational education, but for others, like Dewey, the primary purpose was empowering students to be engaged citizens and participate in the democratic process (Dewey [1902] 1990; [1916] 1997). In its effort to avoid the hot topics of the Culture Wars, the CCSS has instead embraced education that serves the interests of the marketplace.

The CCSS is at odds with the student-centered approach it affects because it is strictly aligned with high-stakes testing. The standards were rolled out two years prior to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, a new set of standardized tests that evaluate progress according to the CCSS. Like No Child Left Behind, current federal policy allocates access to resources based on performance on these sorts of assessments.

True student-centered learning, according to Dewey, is open-ended. Students, in the progressive model, are taught to think for themselves, seek out resources independently and assess information and texts critically. This approach allows for the possibility of different outcomes for different students. There is inherent tension then between that model and a national set of standards, even if they are skills-based. Such a model is almost certainly incompatible with high-stakes standardized testing.

IV. Conclusion

The Common Core history and social studies standards were created to avoid political controversy. This thesis shows that the history classroom in public schools is inherently political, and the Common Core State Standards, like previous national curriculum legislation, cannot be apolitical. Furthermore, in this paper I show that the Common Core history standards have a

politics that is distinctly market-oriented, and reflects the technocratic interests at play in public policy today.

This thesis began with the story of the fight between the Traditionalists, the defenders of the Western canon and the Reformists, the authors of the National History Standards. It then followed the alternative path out of that fight offered by the Reconstructionists, who co-opted the language of the Reformists, as well as that of post-structuralists, while adhering to some of the values and politics of the Traditionalists. Finally, it examined how the Technocrats, the creators of the Common Core State Standards, co-opted the language and theory of the Reconstructionists, and divorced their pedagogy from its aims to advance the study of history for its own sake in the high school classroom and to engage students in nuanced dialogue about the political issues at stake in the discipline. These three reform movements co-opted and adapted, and at moments defined themselves in opposition to one another, yet all advanced at base the same political agenda. While I have argued that the Common Core's explicit aim to teach history to create “college and career ready” students marked a shift away from teaching history for civic or academic purposes, the methods of instruction remained the same: high-stakes testing and assessment. Beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, public education came to be managed like a business. With its discipline-agnostic skills and laissez-faire approach to teachers, it is the Common Core that has made instructional content explicitly and primarily market-oriented. However, the methods of instruction have, since the Reformists, been imported from the private sphere. Since the Cold War, American education has meant the assessment of the recipients of public funds—including students, teachers, schools, and states. Economic anxiety over the next generation's ability to compete in the global marketplace—coupled with growing distrust in government—allowed for the development of a public education system that translated

the measures of marketplace outcomes into public policy. This continued after the Cold War, with President George W. Bush's "Management Agenda" for government, and the outsourcing of the work of public policy to private institutions like David Coleman's Student Achievement Partners.

By tracing the forces that shaped the Common Core to be first apolitical, and second market-oriented in its content, methodology, and implementation, I have shown that the aim of these standards is not to benefit students, but to bolster the United State's economic standing in the global marketplace. This is the primary consequence of the Common Core reform effort, however, the paper also raises several other issues that would bear further study. First, that teaching historical skills like verifiability by working on primary documents risks eliminating the minority narratives and critiques of American power. Even if curricular documents have been updated to include disparate historical narratives, students are nevertheless asked to choose the "best story." The tools of historical inquiry employed by students will encourage them to trust narratives that are widely cited, widely published, and reference other accounts with which they aligns. Historical narratives have always been produced by the dominant classes. Those in power have also suppressed narratives created by less powerful groups. Unlike professional historians, high school students do not have the skills or resources to unearth buried histories. Second, the insistence on historical distance could alienate students whose political perspectives are a consequence of historical reality. As meticulous objectivity has long been upheld as the standard of academic history, there has been a limited amount of work done to understand how students' heritage, family and community history, and beliefs about the past affect their understanding of the present. History is necessarily political; shaping public memory is an expression of power. It follows that the sites in which that public, collective memory is disseminated are political ones.

The history classroom—more than museums or monuments—is the primary public space in which that happens. Efforts to avoid teaching to a political end, whether jingoistic or counter-cultural, do not allow students and teachers of history to avoid politics. For the body chosen to determine the nature of history education at a national level to attempt to sidestep politics suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of history and an attempt to obfuscate the political nature of the program from the public.

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