

Book Review: Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865-2000

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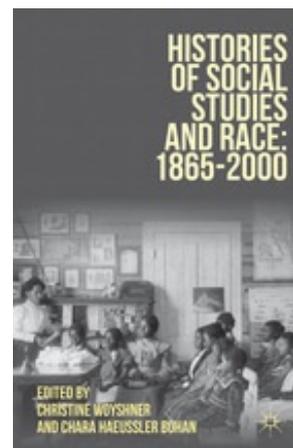
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*In **Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865-2000**, researchers investigate the interplay of race and the emerging social studies field from the time of the emancipation of enslaved peoples in the second half of the nineteenth century to the multicultural and Afrocentric education initiatives of the late-twentieth century.*

*Reviewed by **Eona Bell**.*

Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865-2000. Edited by Christine Woyshner and Chara Haeussler Bohan. Palgrave Macmillan.

Social studies, a multi-disciplinary area of the curriculum in schools and colleges in North America, has been defined by US National Council for the Social Studies as the “integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence”. This edited volume addresses the interplay between race and the social studies curriculum in US public schools from the emancipation of slaves until the end of the twentieth century. However, it addresses questions which are of much broader relevance, concerning not only the educational achievement gap between pupils from different ethnic groups in schools in Western societies, but also the attempts of educationalists to design curricula which both engage with those culturally diverse students, and turn children into loyal citizens who will grow up to contribute in a positive way to the societies they live in.



Questions of race and citizenship in schools are equally contentious in British schools. Since 2001 school students in England and Wales have followed a programme of citizenship education, as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, and there is ongoing debate around how history should be taught. A recent report by the Runnymede Trust, [Making British Histories](#), argues that proposals by the present UK government to shift the focus of school history lessons to “Kings, Queens and Wars”, risks marginalising the stories of ethnic minorities and women, among other ordinary people.

This book reveals how the specific historical circumstances of post-emancipation America shaped the US public schools’ social studies curriculum from the outset. Social studies was designed first of all as a programme for black students in the Southern states of the US, who were accessing formal education for the first time after emancipation in 1865. It was argued by white (mainly Northern) educationalists, that black students required specific training as they became fully integrated as US citizens, and prepared for their adult lives as manual workers.

In their introduction, editors [Christine Woyshner](#) and Chara Haeussler set out the purpose of the book as filling a gap in the history of social studies, in which there has hitherto been little attention drawn to race as a theme. They identify three key issues in relation to the history of social studies which are developed in the volume. Firstly, they stress the disciplinary fuzziness which meant that history was often taught as part of social studies, and was not replaced by it. Following that, they ask why race and Black history have been taught in schools, and whether educators’ aims have been accomplished. Lastly, they stress that race and Black history have been taught in different ways at different times and in different places. This is a complex story which requires attention to historically and locally situated cases.

The volume includes chapters from ten contributors who approach the topic from various directions, but combine to trace the development of ideas about curriculum and pedagogy concerning race. In chapter one,

[Ronald Butchart](#), historian of African-American education, presents strong historical evidence to challenge the present prevailing view that the achievement gap between children from different racial or ethnic groups may be, at least in part, due to the cultural mismatch between norms of behaviour and social interaction in school, and at home. It has frequently been argued that white, middle-class children do better in school in Western societies, because their home cultures and parenting practices inculcate behaviours which prepare them to behave appropriately in the school environment. According to this argument, African American children would fare less well because they would have to adapt to different cultural norms when they entered school, thus delaying the start of their formal, curriculum-based learning. The logical response is to develop curricula and pedagogical practices which are modified to match the perceived norms of the students' ethnic or cultural group. Against this view, Butchart argues that those African Americans who started school for the first time in the late 1860s and 70s, seized the new opportunities to learn, and in fact trebled their literacy rate in a decade. This was in spite of the fact that their teachers, and most of the teaching material they used, had been designed for teaching white, middle class children in the Northern states. The foreign curriculum was no barrier to the black students' achievement at that point.

Although persuasive in his argument concerning the enthusiastic uptake of schooling by newly emancipated people in the nineteenth century, Butchart's view cannot easily be applied to the very different historical and social conditions of black people in the US a century later. While those earlier students may have been inspired by the optimism of liberation, to pursue education as a route to a better life, a century on it has become obvious that racism persists as much in the workplace as in the school system, so that academic diligence is not always enough to enable the progression of black people in US society. Butchart fails to account for this experience of disenchantment in his analysis.

[Mindy Spearman](#) uncovers rhetoric on race contained in elementary geography textbooks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in South Carolina. As primary source evidence, these texts – from which a number of illustrations are reproduced in the book – reveal how the contemporary discourse of Social Darwinism was used to support nationalism, and a strong thread of American exceptionalism, while conveying an unambiguous message about the racial and cultural superiority of white people and thus the desirability of colonizing (“civilizing”) non-white peoples.

However, under the influence of African American leaders from the 1960s onwards, there were renewed attempts to design school curricula which would “liberate” African American children from the dominant Eurocentric worldview which prevailed in the US education system. In a chapter reviewing the effectiveness of African-Centred Education in the public schools of Detroit in the second half of the twentieth century, [Anne-Lise Halvorsen](#) concludes that although such programmes are viewed very favourably by communities, parents and those who have graduated from them, there is little empirical evidence for their success in terms of raising either educational attainment, or students' self-esteem. This chapter in particular raises points of relevance to educators internationally, including the UK where recent years have seen the emergence of tutorial schools and other educational projects aimed specifically at black children and young people. Often strict in discipline, based on somewhat fixed ideas about cultural and gender identities, these schools have attracted admiration and concern often in equal measure.

Overall, this book may well fill a gap in the knowledge of social studies curricula and pedagogy in the US, and is certainly rich in historical detail encompassing a very wide range of sources. Much of this is specific to the US and its particular history of race relations. While historians of education may be especially interested to read it, its relevance to the much broader issues of racialization and schooling would commend it to anyone interested in the institutional and everyday practices – including school curricula – through which ethnic identities and hierarchies are shaped.

Eona Bell has a PhD in social anthropology and an MSc in cognitive anthropology from the LSE. Her doctoral thesis was about multiculturalism, learning and ethnic group formation in Edinburgh's Hong Kong Chinese community. [Read more reviews by Eona.](#)

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