What's wrong with school history

Issue: 129
Posted on 4th January 2011
Andrew Stone

“The moment I understand history as possibility, I must also understand education in different way”.¹

The huge student protests over tuition fees and the Educational Maintenance Allowance beginning in November 2010 were an inspirational challenge to the coalition government’s far-reaching plans for marketising education. Alongside attempting to slash public funding, Tory education secretary Michael Gove has also attempted to undermine comprehensive education with unaccountable “free” schools and to profoundly alter the school curriculum.

Within weeks of the election Gove approached the right wing historian Niall Ferguson to take part in yet another reform of the school history curriculum.² Describing to an audience at the Hay Festival his intention that children be taught the “big story” of the last 500 years—“the rise of Western domination of the world”—he denounced critics in the audience who suggested a less nationalistic approach as “the militant tendency”. This article will attempt to put his project in historical context—as another stage in a long-running battle to shape the pedagogy, methods and content of school history—and argue that the militancy he disparages is precisely what is required in the face of his reactionary proposals.

A short history of school history

But what is the state of school history? Is Ferguson right at least to consider it in need of reform? To try to answer these questions adequately it is necessary to consider a brief history of school history in the UK.

School history was first introduced in the sixth form of Rugby School in the 1820s.³ This was a time when the best hope of education for most working class children (if the meagre, heavily gendered fare on offer could be described as such) was via the factory or the workhouse. School history took some time to become established, but when it did it was firmly within the Whig tradition, celebrating the progress of constitutional government. When elementary schooling was made compulsory in 1870, the central goal was to foster patriotic sentiment.⁴

The 1902 Education Act (passed under a Tory administration) created the very Local Education Authorities (LEAs) which the Tories are now doing their best to undermine with academies and “free” schools. Although more recently LEAs have sometimes been seen as a refuge from government edicts, they were originally created to facilitate greater central control of schooling than the patchwork of provision and curricula previously allowed. The history taught was dominated by what has often been described as the “Great Tradition”.⁵ In a school system consciously formed as a lever of social control, this tradition glorified hierarchy and empire. This was the top-down Great Man theory of history supposedly typified by the 1905 children’s book Our Island Story, recently re-released to gushing praise from Tory historians such as Andrew Roberts and Lady Antonia Fraser.⁶ John Slater memorably parodied the content of this style of history, which he said was “based largely on hidden assumptions, rarely identified, let alone publicly debated”, as:

Largely British, or rather Southern English; Celts looked in to starve, emigrate or rebel, the North to invent looms or work in mills; abroad was of interest once it was part of the Empire; foreigners were either, sensibly, allies, or, rightly, defeated. Skills—did we even use the word?—were mainly those of recalling accepted facts about famous dead Englishmen, and communicated in a very eccentric literary form, the examination-length essay.⁷
One such assumption, as indicated, was that this was overwhelmingly content-driven, to be taught didactically and obediently learnt, often by rote, eg as a call and response catechism.8

Slater has disparagingly dubbed this Great Tradition an “inherited consensus”.9 However, this is something of a misnomer as it was never entirely unchallenged. For example, mavericks such as MW Keatinge in 1910 outlined a rationale and method for the classroom use of historical evidence.10 In 1908 even the Board of Education made a series of proposals warning against written work merely “as a test of memory” and suggested a spiral curricular model where topics were returned to in greater detail, and even working in reverse chronological order. As the Historical Association notes, “many methods and approaches often criticised nowadays as ‘trendy’ or ‘novel’ have in fact a heritage almost as long as school history itself”.11 Nevertheless the depressingly staid approach of the Great Tradition would remain hegemonic, at least in the secondary sector, until the 1960s.

The tripartite system (of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools) introduced by the 1944 Butler Act reinforced history’s status as an “academic” subject, and therefore its shape remained the prerogative of independent and grammar schools. The growth of comprehensive schooling—driven by parental and teacher demand—throughout the 1960s and early 1970s and the delay of the school leaving age until 16 opened up the history O-level to large layers of working class students. This combined with wider societal pressures to challenge the dominance of the Great Tradition. This was also a period of expansion for higher education, resulting in more graduates from working class backgrounds becoming teachers. They did so at a time when the New Left was challenging established orthodoxies about class, nation and latterly gender. Chris Husbands cites the influence of EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Sheila Rowbotham along with the “reprographics revolution” (the ability to photocopy resources and thus reduce reliance on textbooks) in widening the content and conceptual fields available to teachers.12

Primary schooling was the first to innovate. As far back as 1931 the Board of Education’s Hadow Report had recommended that “the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored”.13 The formation of the Schools’ Council and the commissioning of the Plowden Report in 1963, finally reporting in 1967, fully established progressive methods in the sector, influenced by the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget was a developmental psychologist who theorised the gradual refinement of the child’s cognitive structure, primarily through a combination of interaction with the environment and biological maturation. Although his constructivist theories have rightly been criticised for their formulaic correlation of “ages and stages”, at the time his focus on child-centred learning was an important step away from teacher didacticism.14 More project-based group work was encouraged and students were encouraged to discover history rather than be told it.

However, change in secondary history was frustrated for several more years, until Mary Price’s 1968 essay “History in Danger” drew attention to the widespread attitude that school history was both boring and useless, and that there was a real prospect of it disappearing from the timetable as a discrete subject.15 It is probably no coincidence that this notorious “year of the students”, in which the film If… presented a violent insurrection at a public school, was the watershed which allowed a far more radical history pedagogy to emerge. This was formalised in the Humanities Curriculum Project, the Place, Time and Society Project and the Schools’ Council History Project (known on many a textbook since as SHP). Each of these advocated a profound shift away from the notion of history as a fixed (and essentially reactionary) body of knowledge towards a more contested framework in which evidential skills were nurtured.

As part of this re-evaluation, the pioneering studies of the Russian Marxist Lev Vygotsky were rediscovered and popularised. Vygotsky graduated from Moscow State University, appropriately enough, in 1917, and worked at the Institute of Psychology in the mid-1920s before his death from tuberculosis in 1934, by which time Stalinist orthodoxy had denounced his “idealist aberrations”. His diverse and groundbreaking work on developmental psychology and pedagogy deserves an article in its own right. To summarise, he built on the simple insight that we

the nature, origin and purpose of a historical source is much better prepared to question contemporary “spin”. It is no surprise that elites are so distrustful of such skills, or that they denigrate New History or subjects such as Media Studies and Citizenship when they help to decode and challenge myths, propaganda and stereotypes.

Most contentiously, New History also promoted historical empathy. While the Great Tradition had invariably emphasised a ruling class view of the world, New History allowed teachers and students to reflect on the experiences of the exploited and oppressed. Not all teachers or schools took full advantage of this opportunity, but in retrospect many have seen New History’s period of dominance in the late 1960s and the 1970s as a “golden age” of teacher autonomy.19

New history, new danger?

The conservative backlash was not long in coming. As with many of the attacks mounted under Margaret Thatcher, the preceding Labour administration paved the way. In 1976 the then Labour prime minister James Callaghan made a speech at Ruskin College arguing that parents, industry and government should have greater influence on the school curriculum.19 Initial caution in Thatcher’s first term gave way to arrogance once the wars in the Malvinas and against the miners were won. From the mid-1980s the New Right extended Callaghan’s rhetoric of public accountability, exploiting the growing distrust of authority figures to create a dichotomy between teachers as truculent “producers” and parents and businesses as “consumers”.20

As the government planned to impose the National Curriculum, New Right pressure groups (such as the Hillgate Group and the Centre for Policy Studies established by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher) launched a media campaign against “trendy teaching methods”, particularly in history, which Stephen Ball has described as a “discourse of derision”.21 They argued that historical methodology had squeezed out content, and that children were too immature to utilise these skills anyway; that British history was being ignored because of a random mix of topics; that empathy was a nebulous or “woolly” concept which was difficult to assess; and that history in general had been hijacked by the left, obsessed with class conflict and multiculturalism.

Many of the proposals in the Hillgate Group’s 1986 Whose Schools? A Radical Manifesto—a national testing policy (SATs), grant maintained schools, “parent influence” and a national curriculum—were enacted in Thatcher’s third term.22 As education writer Ted Wragg argued in a pamphlet for the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in 1988, this programme represented a wholesale embrace of the market. Even the language reeked of it: “Instead of children being ‘taught’, a curriculum is ‘delivered’, fine for the morning papers, milk or next week’s groceries, but somewhat alien for the nurturing of human talent”.23 Terry Wrigley has commented that “the National Curriculum seemed a perfect solution for capitalism—technologically advanced but socially reactionary”.24

History was perhaps the most controversial of the subjects under review. The deliberations of the History Working Group (HWG), established by the secretary of state for education, Kenneth Baker, to make recommendations for English schools, prompted shrill media debate and interventions from cabinet ministers up to and including Margaret Thatcher. Given Baker’s terms of reference—that British history, in particular its political, constitutional and cultural heritage, should form the core of the curriculum—and that he appointed a retired naval officer and castle owner, Commander Michael Saunders-Watson, to chair it, the Final Report could have been much worse.25

British history was interpreted widely (see below) and a careful balance of knowledge, skills and concepts was advocated, with no precise syllabuses mandatory. Incensed that her cultural legacy was being watered down, Thatcher demanded that the report go out to further consultation, and the resulting “MacGregor” proposals increased the stress on historical knowledge and British history.26 After a further round of consultations, Baker’s successor, Kenneth Clarke, directly intervened to ensure that modern history should focus on “the first half of the 20th century…to draw some distinction between the study of history and the study of current affairs”.27 Here was a clear attempt to curtail the potentially radical conclusions to be drawn from well-taught school history.

The initial version of the curriculum, introduced in 1991, stipulated that political history should end at least 20 years before the present. It was overloaded with content (“Programmes of Study”) and assessment requirements, which when they proved unmanageable were slimmed down and simplified in revisions in 1995 and 1999.26 The prospect of changing required content back to indicative content (as originally envisaged by the HWG) led, among other overblown headlines, to the Sun screaming: “Britain’s glorious past banished from history lessons”.29

Localism, nationalism and multiculturalism

In fact, even ignoring optional GCSEs and A-levels, most students still learn about the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the growth of English exploration, the formation of “Great Britain”, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, the expansion of the British Empire, and Britain’s victories in the First and Second World Wars. But short of an entirely micromanaged curriculum—which would require an even more heavily policed education system than that enabled by Ofsted, league tables and performance-related pay—it’s very difficult for any government to dictate the precise values fostered in the process. Teachers, students and, in the best schools, parents too can ensure that the topics taught do not glorify capitalism and imperialism but criticise it, by listening to the voices of the oppressed, exploited and marginalised, both within and outside the British Isles.

The tensions in the characterisation of “Britishness” complicated the ideological counter-offensive by the New Right. Many would have
attempted). Otherwise the threat of Ofsted, with its increasingly reductionist results-driven criteria, will be there to punish.

(high-stakes tests under formal conditions) trumps holistic teacher “formative assessment” (where weaknesses are identified and remedies

be denied the opportunity to continue to learn history because they do not have the necessary formal exam skills. “Summative assessment”

astutely to class discussions and debates, or excel at making historically accurate models, or have a love for historical sites and artefacts, can

by high-stakes tests under formal conditions. The impact for history is that students who may love historical drama and fiction, or contribute

provided useful insights into education, have

impose “student pathways”, where students are directed into either academic or vocational subjects. When these pathways are being decided

vocational BTEC diplomas are counted as the equivalent of four GCSEs for the purposes of league tables, many schools have also begun to

of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, the new “gold standard” requires English and maths to be among them. Because

comprehensives and, up until now, academies) to increase hot-housing around English and maths.

survey also reflects a general pressure on schools, particularly those serving inner cities (where there is a greater proportion of state

combined skills from history, geography, religious education and citizenship and was allocated a generous six hours a week. However, the

academies reported that 11 and 12 year olds were spending less than one hour a week learning history. Furthermore, 48 percent of

The 1988 Education Reform Act briefly made history a compulsory subject between the ages of five and 16. However, policy reviews and

curriculum changes made it voluntary after 14 from 1991. This contrasts with much of Europe—including France, Germany, Italy, Spain and

Russia—where history is compulsory until the age of 16. New Labour’s 1998 literacy and numeracy strategies then squeezed time for history

within primary schools as part of a general narrowing of the curriculum. Without any change in legislation, some schools are also now

teaching a truncated Key Stage 3 curriculum (normally taught over three years between 11 and 14—the rationale is to have a whole three years working on GCSEs!), meaning many students now finish studying history at 13.

A recent survey by the Historical Association suggests that the picture is continuing to worsen, with 35 percent of academies and 20 percent of

comprehensive and grammar schools reporting an overall decrease in teaching time for history at Key Stage 3. Furthermore, 48 percent of

academies reported that 11 and 12 year olds were spending less than one hour a week learning history. This may not always be a negative
development—at my previous school we taught an integrated humanities curriculum for students’ first year in secondary school. This
combined skills from history, geography, religious education and citizenship and was allocated a generous six hours a week. However, the
survey also reflects a general pressure on schools, particularly those serving inner cities (where there is a greater proportion of state
comprehensives and, up until now, academies) to increase hot-housing around English and maths.

This is one impact of the recent alteration of school league tables. Whereas previously schools were primarily competing over the percentage
of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, the new “gold standard” requires English and maths to be among them. Because
vocational BTEC diplomas are counted as the equivalent of four GCSEs for the purposes of league tables, many schools have also begun to
impose “student pathways”, where students are directed into either academic or vocational subjects. When these pathways are being decided
for students, often by senior managers who don’t personally teach them, they rely heavily on predicted grades extrapolated from student
performance in Key Stage 2 SATs (ie taken when they were 11). Phrases such as “educational apartheid” may seem hyperbolic, but when
colleagues describe being told to hand different coloured prospectuses to different 13 and 14 year olds at options evenings, who see their
“choices” essentially made for them, it certainly feels like that.

While theories of “assessment for learning”—where weaknesses are identified and remedied through the actual process of learning—have
provided useful insights into education, in practice they are always trumpted by the demands of “levelling” and “grading”, which are delivered
by high-stakes tests under formal conditions. The impact for history is that students who may love historical drama and fiction, or contribute
astutely to class discussions and debates, or excel at making historically accurate models, or have a love for historical sites and artefacts, can
be denied the opportunity to continue to learn history because they do not have the necessary formal exam skills. “Summative assessment”
(high-stakes tests under formal conditions) trumps holistic teacher “formative assessment” (where weaknesses are identified and remedies
attempted). Otherwise the threat of Ofsted, with its increasingly reductionist results-driven criteria, will be there to punish.
A recent survey showed that 69.8 percent of students found history “quite enjoyable” (compared to 41 percent in 1967) and that 69.3 percent thought it “quite useful”, up from only 29 percent when history was “in danger” because of the Great Tradition. Yet only 30 percent take history GCSE, a proportion likely to fall if current trends continue. This figure goes down to just 18 percent for students entitled to free school meals due to low parental income.

Niall Ferguson—a very Cameronite historian

If the brazenly jingoistic Andrew Roberts is the Norman Tebbit of history, then Niall Ferguson is the David Cameron. Both are aggressively pro-market, but whereas Cameron has a long family history in finance, Ferguson has spent much of his career writing about it, including his recent books The Ascent of Money (2008) and High Financier (2010). Both are keenly interested in media presentation—Cameron was director of corporate affairs at Carlton Communications for seven years while Ferguson is an adept documentary presenter. This has encouraged both men to make some rhetorical concessions to social liberalism in order to make their essential conservatism more palatable. Ferguson's 2003 book Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World is an interesting example of this. He revealingly admits that in 1982, “young and foolish”, he “rashly opposed” an Oxford Union motion regretting colonialism, which “prematurely ended [his] role as a student politician”. Given Cameron's Bullingdon Club exploits, perhaps he need not have worried so much. Nevertheless, he claims “the penny dropped” and he began to also consider empire's costs. As Chris Bambery wrote in a review article:

> While accepting “the ugly side of empire”, Ferguson argues that “in economic terms it was a positive force. It encouraged global free trade, investment in underdeveloped countries, labour migration and non-corrupt governments.” This is set within a contemporary context in which Ferguson sings the joys of capitalist globalisation.

Even in his introduction to The Ascent of Money, when the impact of the debt crisis was first rippling through the world economy, Ferguson stressed the positive role of financial capital:

> Poverty is not the result of rapacious financiers exploiting the poor. It has much more to do with the lack of financial institutions, with the absence of banks, not their presence... This point applies not just to the poor countries of the world. It can also be said of the poorest neighbourhoods in supposedly developed countries—the “Africas within”—like the housing estates of my birthplace, Glasgow.

Of course, not many of those residents attended the private Glasgow Academy, as Ferguson did (though he was described by a gushing Michael Gove as coming “from a typical Scottish educational background”), or work as hedge fund consultants, as he does. But then a dubious form of philanthropy (providing credit) appears to be Ferguson's only suggestion for ameliorating the poverty endemic in the Darwinian financial system he describes with general approval in The Ascent of Money. This is not unlike Cameron's “big society” vision of replacing public services with Victorian charity.

In Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire (2004) Ferguson rejected the increasingly absurd denial of many American commentators that the US practises imperialism. However, he reiterated, “I am in favour of empire. Indeed, I believe that empire is more necessary in the 21st century than ever before”. What was important was whether it would be a liberal empire, “one that enhances its own security and prosperity precisely by providing the rest of the world with generally beneficial public goods”. Apparently this was what Britain was attempting to do after the Great Irish Famine and the Indian Mutiny made its old model unviable, though as usual Ferguson vastly overstates the “enlightened” part of this enlightened imperial self-interest.

Ferguson's vision for school history

In a 2006 blog singing Ferguson's praises, Michael Gove hinted at the paranoia that pervades much of the right about a liberal media Mafia, when he bemoaned how “those historians who are most prepared to tell our island story in a way that doesn't turn it into a chronicle of unredeemed oppression tend not to be academics”. He then went on to pontificate on how:

> Most of us who take an interest in our country’s past, who harbour a curiosity about our ancestors, who wish to discover what moved them and understand the conflicts of their times, are not searching for reasons to feel ashamed of our culture.

Furthermore:

> It is hugely unfashionable now to confess to a liking for the sort of history produced by Victorians such as Macaulay, who presented our national story in richly personal terms as one of progress, albeit troubled, and achievement, albeit compromised. But I defy anyone who picks up Macaulay now not to be engaged by his story and not to feel that his narrative speaks to our natural appetite for empathetic engagement with those who made us what we are.

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Yet there is a (small) section in Ferguson’s introduction to The War of the World (2006) which appears to bode well for his role as curriculum adviser. It recounts how his old school history books

> told the story of the 20th century as a kind of protracted, painful, but ultimately pleasing triumph of the West. The heroes (Western
between different subjects. Notwithstanding the regular compromises teachers necessarily grapple with to make complex topics accessible, the emphasis on both teachers and students actively evaluating interpretations is much stronger than in the days of the Great Tradition.

At the time of writing, Ferguson has made some curriculum suggestions but has not outlined a detailed set of proposals. However, he has said that “we need to use television. The reason I do TV is because I think it’s a more accessible way of teaching”. Leaving aside the suspicion that he wants all students to be forced to watch his shows, it’s certainly not true that teachers don’t currently use video stimuli. But unless used sparingly it can encourage student passivity, and though it may be more entertaining than teacher talk it is not necessarily pedagogically superior. Documentaries can have a role in providing an overview of a topic, but should always be approached critically as an interpretation.

Ferguson has also collaborated with a US software developer (no doubt providing its services for entirely altruistic motives) to create a Second World War computer game for classroom use. The aim of the game (called, coincidentally, The War of the World) is to explore imperial strategy through role-play. This ties in with Ferguson’s long-standing interest in counter-factual history. Although there is certainly a place for historical role-play, and in a recent survey it was the most popular activity among history students, his choice of protagonist is very ideological and encourages students to identify with national leaders and their imperial priorities. It also requires a good grasp of the actual course of events and the factors involved if it is to be meaningful, and unless carefully constructed and debriefed, risks exaggerating the role of individuals at the expense of wider economic and social forces.

Ferguson’s appointment was followed by that of fellow US-based documentary maker Simon Schama as “narrative history tsar” (clearly coined by someone with a sense of historical irony). Michael Gove told the Tory party conference in October 2010 that “children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know—the history of our United Kingdom”. Therefore Schama is assigned to deliver these stories, though his superficial A History of Britain (2000) series was far inferior to Michael Wood’s Story of England (2010) both in novelty of research and depth of analysis. But perhaps the “inspiring stories” told by Wood—in which rebellion, protest and dissent were treated sympathetically—were not what Gove had in mind.

The exact contours of Simon Schama’s blueprint remain blurry, despite articles waxing lyrical about children’s receptiveness to “the epic of long time; the hunger for plenitude”. He advocates the virtues of chronology, though this is hardly innovative—most secondary schools still begin in the Middle Ages and end in the latter part of the 20th century. His allusions to the popularity of the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and His Dark Materials serials as models are problematic for a number of reasons—not least in that children generally choose to read them. Instead Schama apparently proposes the creation of a school history canon, which while advertising its multicultural credentials (look, we include Indians, Chinese and the Irish!) does so through the eyes of the British Empire. This has the potential to make the curriculum more prescriptive and even less responsive to the needs and interests of students.

Ferguson claims that his own grand narrative of the rise of the West is not intended to be triumphalist, and cites the geographical factors explored in Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs and Steel in support. Nevertheless there is a real likelihood of his approach essentialising national, regional and religious groups, as Colin Jones, the president of the Royal Historical Society, warns:

> The history that he has in mind has the risk of making the distinctions between different groups appear more real than they really are. It homogenises culture, so French culture is characterised by shrugging and having revolutions and the British by being phlegmatic and not having revolutions.

Short of having that revolution, what alternatives can socialists provide to Ferguson’s proposals?

There are many alternatives

Despite the many constraints, teachers can play an important role in inspiring students. My own history teacher conveyed a passionate interest in social justice through her teaching, which didn’t stop at the classroom door. When she spotted two National Front members leafleting at the school gate, she single-handedly chased them off. As Christopher Hill wrote, “History properly taught can help men [and women!—AS] to become critical and humane, just as wrongly taught it can turn them into bigots and fanatics.”

Clearly, depending on the commitment of individuals is insufficient. The Historical Association made some helpful recommendations in its 2005 curriculum development report. These included ending the determination of content and assessment by factors such as “the need for history departments to ‘sell’ the subject through the options system at 14+, commercial competition between awarding bodies and between publishers, the availability of resources in school and on the open market, and an understandable desire on the part of teachers to keep to what they are familiar with.” It also advised an end to the use of source work in exams—which it described as “dull, formulaic and divorced from the context of genuine historical investigation”—to be replaced by their use within the context of genuine enquiries. The subsequent GCSE specification shows some movement in this direction. The Historical Association also called for greater cross-curricular overlaps between different subjects.
This thematic approach is encouraged in the new Key Stage 3 specification. While positive in theory, in practice it is often seen as a burden, another imposed initiative requiring more planning for already overworked teachers (who on average work over 50 hours per week, and significantly more in many of the most challenging schools). One reason for the relative success of the integrated humanities initiative at my school was that in the term before it was implemented all the teaching staff involved were given a week off timetable to meet and plan the schemes of work. But in the three years since many teachers have reported a greater rigidity from school managers in allowing time for training and development, mainly resulting from New Labour’s failure to fund the reform that contracted teachers should “rarely cover” for absent colleagues.

Perhaps though we should go much further? As Michael Rosen rightly points out, the division of education into “subjects” largely corresponds to a mixture of medieval and Victorian ideas. He suggests therefore that ultimately we should aim to do away with subject boundaries altogether. The radically different basis of a socialist society might make this a real possibility. However, Bruner’s concerns about the “structures of subjects”—their particular skills, concepts and methodologies—would still need to be considered.

Many history teachers will have winced, as I have, when non-specialist colleagues used a historical topic in a banal or inappropriate way—role-plays in what it was like in a death camp, or simplistic Martin Luther King = good, Malcolm X = bad dichotomies, for example. Likewise I’m sure my own teaching of geography and religious education themes within integrated humanities lacked rigour at times. One solution is much more time granted for continuing staff training and cooperation. The recent initiative to make newly-qualified teachers take a master’s degree might be helpful in this regard if they were not in the midst of one of the most intensive periods of work in their life. What is needed is more teachers, enabling smaller classes and more learning time for all concerned.

More fundamentally though, it would require a change in the relationship between education workers, students and parents. Teachers would need to feel freed from the constant policing of Ofsted, league tables and performance management to be more explorative, starting from students’ current interests, strengths and needs rather than predetermined assessment objectives and schemes of work. Only then could Vygotsky’s notion of “the zone of proximal development”—where the teacher acts as a guide between the child’s current and potential level of development—become a realistic prospect. It is not likely to happen while secondary history teachers see 200 or more students a week, and while that situation remains talk of “personalised learning” is just another unrealisable goal making teachers feel guilty and inadequate.

Terry Wrigley has researched a range of schools and systems worldwide that have instituted progressive reforms we could learn from and fight for in the short term. These include Danish schools being advised not to over-plan in advance as this could undermine negotiations with students about what and how to study, the Beutelsbach Consensus in Germany which encourages openness about the controversial nature of issues (the Historical Association has attempted something similar with its Teaching Emotive and Controversial History report, but it is often stymied in practice by low-trust management and surveillance), and Filton High School staff have organised week-long projects on topics such as the 2004 tsunami, Make Poverty History and climate change, where each subject teacher contributes from their own specialism.

The 10 and 24 November student walkouts, protests and occupations have revived hopes that such alternatives can carry mass support. Extending and generalising such struggles is the key task for anyone wishing to transform education. The NUT’s call for coordinated strike action over pensions holds great potential for enabling this. A more decisive strategy than seen previously in building a nationwide SATs boycott will also be important in weakening the deadening hand of assessment. The Tories’ scandalous cuts to Building Schools for the Future projects, along with its elitist academies and “free” schools proposals are also all very unpopular, with a poll taken even before the outbreak of the student protests showing that 42 percent of voters thought the government was doing a bad job in “reforming” schools, against only 23 percent who believed it was doing a good job. Among the unimpressed were many Liberal Democrat voters. They may remember that their education spokesman, David Laws, said in February 2010:

> The Tory position on the core curriculum is totally incoherent. On the one hand they are saying that all pupils should be learning British history, but then they propose to establish new schools in which there would be no requirement to have a basic knowledge of anything… The Conservative proposals are confused, ill thought-out and naive.

It seems that it is the Liberal Democrats who are now confused, and increasingly reviled for it. They will need to be educated by a mass movement that unites education workers, students and parents in the fight for genuine comprehensives. In the process we can create a liberatory curriculum where all students are entitled to a historical education that helps them to shape their future.

Notes

Edward Vallance argues that Our Island Story is in fact "a subtly subversive text" with pacifist and feminist sympathies—Vallance, 2009, p.5. His evidence does suggest that Marshall was less of a gung-ho imperialist than some of her admirers have painted her as, although I'm not convinced that this goes far beyond an essentially Whiggish appreciation of a constitutionally limited monarchy. Thanks though to Christian Høgsbjerg for pointing out this discussion.

Historical Association, 2005, p.12.
Husbands, 2003, p.10.
Lawton, 1980.
Wrigley, 2006, p.29.
Ball, 1990.
Reprinted in Wragg, 2005, p.204.
Wrigley, 2006, p.8.
Haydn and others, 2003, p.23.
Willis Bund, quoted in Haydn and others, 2003, p.18.
Historical Association, 2005, p.17.
Husbands, 2003, p.15.
Historical Association, 2009, pp.5-6.
Stone, 2009.
Harris and Haydn, 2008, pp.44-46.
Maddern, 2010.
Ferguson, 2004a, pxvii.
43: Gove, 2006. Gove also attended a private school.
51: Harris and Haydn, 2008, p45.
65: Wrigley, 2006, p100.

References


Black, Paul, and Dylan Wiliam, 2001, Working Inside the Black Box, King’s College London School of Education, www.collegenet.co.uk/admin/download/inside%20the%20black%20box_23_doc.pdf


Clark, Tom, 2010, “Coalition cracks could start to show over schools reforms, poll suggests”, Guardian (18 August), www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/aug/18/coalition-cracks-education-reforms-poll


Diamond, Jared, 1998, Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years (Vintage).

Ferguson, Niall, 1999, Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals (Basic Books).

Ferguson, Niall, 2004a, Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World (Penguin).

Ferguson, Niall, 2004b, Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire (Allen Lane).


Gove, Michael, 2006, “There’s Only One Fergie in the History Game” (14 June), www.michaelgove.com/content/theres-only-one-fergie-history-game


Wrigley, Terry, 2006, *Another School is Possible* (Bookmarks).


New Resources

For more click on the ‘Resources’ tab above

Now online: Sheila McGregor's article on social reproduction theory has now been translated into German - thanks to Rosemarie Nünning

Now online: Brazil: how big a defeat? Interview with Valério Arcary

Now online: Brexit blues: analysis from our January 2019 issue

Now online: Rosemarie Nünning on the history of abortion law in Germany - Between “birth strike” and “race treason”: The history of Paragraph 219a of the German Criminal Code

New to our translations page: Lise Vogel und die Politik der Frauenbefreiung (Nicola Ginsburgh on Lise Vogel and the politics of women’s liberation in German)

Now online: Syrian revolutionary socialist Ghayath Naisse interviewed on the brutalisation of Syria, the goals of those intervening and the prospects for socialists in the region.

Online only "How to stop the tanks" by Ron Margulies on the attempted coup in Turkey

Egyptian Revolution timeline
International Socialism has covered events in Egypt from the strike waves that led up to the revolution, the events of 2011 themselves and the situation since: here is a timeline of key articles

Now online, Ellen Meiksins Wood (1942-2016) writing in International Socialism in 1987

Black history, police racism, Islamophobia and contemporary debates on oppression- Articles and book reviews for black history month

Videos of the International Socialism conference on Marxism and nature featuring Ted Benton and Ian Angus

Videos and transcript of the International Socialism debate on Syriza and Socialist Strategy with Stathis Kouvelakis and Alex Callinicos

Online only: Vincent Sung analyses the roots of Hong Kong’s umbrella movement protests here

Online only: Bob Light remembers the 1974-5 Portuguese revolution

Videos from the International Socialism event on ‘Work, Class and Resistance’ with Jane Hardy, Kevin Doogan, Lucia Pradella and Jim Wolfreys

Videos from the International Socialism event on ‘Marxism and Revolution Today’ with Alex Callinicos, Claire Ceruti, Neil Davidson and others

Video: International Socialism seminar on “Egypt, Tunisia and revolution in the 21st century” with Gilbert Achcar and Anne Alexander
Read this essay on What's Wrong with School Systems Today?. Come browse our large digital warehouse of free sample essays. Get the knowledge you need in order to pass your classes and more. Only at TermPaperWarehouse.com”. FMS for Maryhill High School will serve administrators with reports about students’ fees collection. It will also provide parents and guardians with reports about students’ invoices, payments and balances through E-mail and mobile messages. Background Maryhill High School is located at Nyanitanga hill, Mbarara district. What is wrong with American high schools? Is there anything wrong with America? If so, what is it? What is the root cause? How is it adversely affecting us? What could feasibly eradicate What is wrong with the current education system in the US? What's wrong with public schools? Lawrence Kurnarsky, director, writer - doctorscreenplay.com. Answered Jul 25, 2012 · Author has 161 answers and 573k answer views. There is something wrong with the society and the teachers. Do not tell me that poverty is the issue. There are plenty of poor kids in China who can do way better than the American poor. Listen to the Inspirational Living podcast: What's Wrong with Schools & Education in America. Adapted from the work of William George Jordan. Today’s reading has been edited and adapted from the essay “What's the Matter with Education” by William George Jordan, published in 1923. SOME TIME in the years of the future, we shall look back on the education system of the 20th and early 21st century with the same feeling of revulsion as we now regard the superstitions of the Middle Ages. These are hard words, but they are calmly and deliberately chosen. Such words would be insanely foolish and wantonly unjust if not substantiated by proof.