Re-imagining and re-imaging the nation through the history curriculum.

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DOH08609
Refereed Paper presented in symposium: “Re-imagining the nation through the history curriculum and the professional learning of teachers”

ABSTRACT
Nationalism is not a naturally occurring sentiment, but rather needs to be carefully nurtured and sustained in the social imaginary through the production and circulation of unifying narratives that invoke the nation’s imagined community. The school curriculum is crucial in this process, legitimating and disseminating selected narratives while de-legitimating and marginalising other accounts and their voices.

Certain watershed events in nations’ histories have always posed political problems in history curricula (Cajani & Ross, 2007) – however the pressures and concerns of current times now suggest political solutions in history curricula. This paper briefly examines recent political debates in Australia to argue that the school history curriculum has become a site of increasing interest for the exercise of official forms of nationalism and the production of a nostalgic, celebratory national biography. The public debates around school history curriculum are theorised as nostalgic re-nationalising efforts in response to the march of cultural globalisation and its attendant uncertainties.

Introduction

Certain watershed events in nations’ histories have always posed political problems in history curricula (Cajani & Ross, 2007). In contrast, this paper is interested in how the pressures and concerns of current times have lead governments to seek political solutions through the manipulation of school history curricula. While early globalisation theory predicted the demise of the nation-state, more recent work has acknowledged the contradictory tensions between globalisation’s centripetal and centrifugal forces and the reactive counter-effort to re-energise and re-affirm national boundaries and sentiments, (Beck, 2004; Robertson, 2001). This paper highlights how the school curriculum, in particular the history curriculum in government schools, has become a crucial site for
such re-nationalisation work, moulding the collective identity and the narratives that sustain it (see for example Letourneau, Aronoff, & Scott, 2004; Mao, 1997). History curricula selections and omissions are making political news in a number of nation-states and their alignments (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Cajani, 2007; Simpson & Halse, 2007; Taylor, 2007) and it is this broader social phenomena which I seek to understand through a worked example of such curriculum politics in Australia.

Beck (2004) argues that ‘processes of renationalization’ (p.150) need to be understood through the lens of a cosmopolitan methodology which disputes the inherited matrix of nations as stable objective facts of life:

> In the cosmopolitan turn, it becomes suddenly obvious that it is neither possible to clearly distinguish between the national and the international, nor, in a similar way, to convincingly contrast homogeneous units. National spaces have become denationalised, so that the national is no longer national, just as the international is no longer international. The state is not collapsing but changing, and new actors, a new global power game and new realities are arising, as are new mappings of space and time and new co-ordinates for the social and the political, co-ordinates which have to be theoretically and empirically researched and elaborated. (Beck, 2004, p.165)

The school history curriculum is one such set of ‘social coordinates’ which attempt to re-make, re-plot and re-fix national identity in the face of the significant social changes of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and the melting of ascribed collective identities. In these conditions, how each nation’s history is told and re-presented to its future citizens should be understood as a highly symbolic and formative political enterprise which is no longer to be left to educators and historians.

The paper will review different types of nationalism and their possible expression in the school curriculum and then use aspects of this theory as a lens to understand recent interventions in Australian history curricula as a politics of national identity. The argument is built in three sections. The first briefly outlines the theoretical approach to the concept of curriculum and its inherent politics. The second section reviews a variety of sociological literature to derive a typology of nationalisms of different origin and character and discusses how they might produce different expressions and effects in the school curriculum. The final section reviews the nature of political debates over the school history curriculum in Australia in terms of its nostalgic nature.

1. Understanding the politics of curriculum

Though it is common to talk about ‘the’ school curriculum as if it is a singular document that is unproblematically knowable, curriculum theory analytically articulates a variety of dimensions within any curriculum and the ideological work it performs (Apple, 2004). Any school curriculum is thus understood to be complex and multidimensional, involving:

- both the selection/legitimation of certain knowledges as stated in syllabus documents and de-selection/de-legitimation of what constitutes the null curriculum (in the history curriculum these become what we are to remember as a nation, and what is to be forgotten);
both the overt objectives declared and institutionalised in the formal syllabus, and
the covert or hidden curriculum of other learning that happens through unexamined institutional practices;
slippage between the idealised planned program and the enacted curriculum
which is what knowledge actually gets transmitted in the interactions of schooling.

These dimensions produce both complexity and richness when it comes to analysing what knowledges are ultimately produced or transmitted in school settings. The discussion will particularly focus on the formal, declared, overt and legitimated knowledges selected and reified in syllabus documents, however this does not discount the possibility for such an ‘official’ curriculum to be altered later in its multidimensional enactment/consumption.

Bernstein’s theory of the pedagogic device (2000) allows this complexity to be further unpacked in terms of the processes and parties involved in curricular control, design and enactment – its ‘social grammar’ (2000, p.25). This paper relies on his distinction (Bernstein, 2000, p.33) between the ‘official recontextualising field’, being the world of politicians, educational bureaucrats and similar who exert the power to scope and delimit the syllabus by stipulating certain inputs or outputs, and the ‘pedagogic recontextualising field’, being the world of teachers who work to interpret these directives and bring knowledge to life in the classroom in ways that are accessible to the students. Bernstein points out that there are spaces of freedom as a curriculum moves from one field to another. Thus, while this discussion focuses on the work of the official recontextualising field, it fully acknowledges that this field of relations will never completely control teachers’ work in the classroom.

Any curriculum also needs to be understood as a complex temporal nexus involving the past, the present and the future. The past is represented in pedagogic traditions and the legacy of high culture canons that powerfully compete for curricular space and legitimacy against the urgent more instrumental claims of the future - what students will need to participate in the economy/workplace of the future. Debates around these competing priorities however are carried out in the social conditions and political contingencies of the present tense, that is, what discourses are dominant now, and what is politically strategic and palatable in today’s conditions. Debates around the school history curriculum make these competing priorities clearly evident. For example, Letourneau et al. (2004, p.55) simply ask the question, ‘What history for the future of Canada?’ to highlight how the teaching of history is not only about the past but equally about preparing today’s children for their future citizenship.

Bernstein (2000) offers a typology of different curricular orientations to address how the competition between the past/present/future is expressed in curriculum design and ultimately in the type of citizen identity the curriculum produces. A ‘retrospective’ orientation is intent on reproducing the past in the present, so dignifies traditions and prioritizes continuity with strict control over inputs. A ‘prospective’ orientation looks to the future and is accountable to emerging skill sets and economic imperatives. It seeks to control both the inputs and outputs of educational processes. Bernstein considers these two orientations ‘centred’ because they can converge and focus on certain principles for the selection of knowledge. In contrast, he considers the ‘market’ orientation ‘de-centred’ (p. 205), responding just to the short-term, present tense demands of consumers in order to prosper in market contingencies. This market orientation will respond quickly and
opportunistically in any direction according to shifts in consumer taste. His fourth ‘therapeutic’ orientation is used to describe progressive child-centred reforms that focus on nurturing the individual. The points he makes regarding the typology are that the orientation of the curriculum will shape the teacher and student identities made possible; and that a curriculum can be an incoherent combination of such orientations in different aspects of its design.

School as an institution has long been recognised as intimately involved in the production of the nation. Green and Reid (2002) for example historically analyse the English curriculum and the recruitment of teachers as moral, nation-building work. In regard to the school history curriculum in particular, Barton and Levstik (2004) suggest that school history curricula invite students to adopt a variety of ‘stances’, by which they mean a combination of purposes and practices for engaging with historical knowledge. They outline four such stances that are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

First, students are asked to identify: they are asked to embrace connections between themselves and the people and events of the past. This is one of the most common uses of history, and it is found, for example, when students learn about the exploration, settlement, and development of ‘our country’. Second, students are expected to analyze: they are asked to establish causal linkages in history. Third, students are expected to respond morally: they are asked to remember, admire, and condemn people and events in the past. Finally, students are expected to display: They are asked to exhibit information about the past. (p.7)

This paper is particularly concerned with the identification stance, and how this potential within the history curricula has been recognised by political interest groups who seek to shape curricular selection and thus the ‘identity’ outcomes. Within this stance, Barton and Lebstik further distinguish identification with family history, identification with national history and identification of the present with the past then consider how each of these differently prepare students for citizenship in a pluralist democracy. Identification with the nation is in their opinion a necessary condition for a participatory, pluralist democracy: ‘when our identity is grounded in the nation's history, we have incentives for shared action and public responsibility that would be lacking of we lived only in the present’ (p.60). However they acknowledge the attendant risks of promulgating ethnocentric, mythic patriotism and ‘national chauvinism’ when the stories legitimated are overly celebratory and sanitised.

With this thicker description of curriculum design, dimensions, processes, and political tensions, the paper now turns to consider different forms of nationalism and how they might be expressed in ‘the’ curriculum.

2. Nationalisms and their curricular expression

Nationalism is a protean concept that has eluded waves of theorisation and debate (Lawrence, 2005), and needs to be revisited and reinterpreted as its conditions and fortunes change in shifting nation-state configurations:

The relationship between states and nations is everywhere an embattled one. It is possible to say that in many societies, the nation and the state have become one another's projects. That is, while nations (or more properly groups with ideas
about nation-hood) seek to capture or co-opt states and state power, states simultaneously seek to capture and monopolise ideas about nationhood. … States … are everywhere seeking to monopolize the moral resources of community … states and nation are at each other's throats, and the hyphen that links them is now less an icon of conjuncture than an index of disjuncture. (Appadurai, 1990)

Following Anderson (1991), the nation will be understood as an ‘an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (Anderson, 1991, p.6). Anderson’s work has been criticised for focusing only on cultural production of the nation, overlooking other historical, political and linguistic realities that help forge national sentiment (Lawrence, 2005). However, our interest here is exactly on such cultural and symbolic work undertaken in schools to boost the collective sentiment of nationalism, in particular how it is achieved and sustained despite social change, through the social technologies of curricular selection and regulation. The following discussion draws on a variety of literature to describe four types of nationalism – popular, official, banal and paranoid – with examples of how they might be practiced through school curriculum.

Anderson distinguishes between bottom up ‘popular nationalism’, and top down, strategic ‘official nationalism’ which invests institutional power in the cultivation of such a shared identity: ‘Such official nationalisms were conservative, not to say reactionary, policies, adapted from the model of the largely spontaneous popular nationalisms that preceded them’ (Anderson, 1991, p.110). Thus popular and official forms of nationalism will differ not so much in terms of the symbols and narratives they employ but more in their source and the social relations of their mobilisation. Anderson’s work around the production of nationalism in colonial nations highlights how the government school was a tool with which to enact official nationalism:

the government schools formed a colossal, highly rationalized, tightly centralized hierarchy, structurally analogous to the state bureaucracy itself. Uniform textbooks, standardized diplomas and teaching certificates, a strictly regulated gradation of age-groups, classes and instructional materials, in themselves created a self-contained, coherent universe of experience. (Anderson, 1991, p. 121)

This institutional capacity to impose and enforce system-wide coherence helps manufacture a ‘unison’ of opinions (Anderson, 1991, p.144). This capacity has been exploited in many settings:

There is a strong consensus amongst scholars that the discipline of history served an inherently political function in the 19th century projects of nationalism and conservatism and the genealogies of the nation-state. In a similar vein, postcolonial scholars have argued that history texts have been complicit in the rise of imperialism and colonialism ... Yet because history is written within particular political formations, the debate has never been about whether history was or should be political but about what sort of politics should prevail. (Simpson & Halse, 2007, pp.4-5)

The efforts of governments to explicitly control or influence history curricula can be understood as the exercise in official nationalism to endorse one certain image of the nation’s ‘biography’ (Anderson, 1991, p.204) over the alternatives circulating in any
robust democracy. Where Anderson describes the map as the territorial model of the nation imposed on spatial realities, an official history or approved ‘biography’ of the nation legitimated through school curriculum similarly serves as the temporal model imposed on realities – it decides what ought to be remembered how, and what ought to be forgotten.

Popular nationalism could be expected to be informally expressed in the enacted curriculum – with teachers and students drawing on everyday expressions and celebrations of the national identity as commonplace happenstance in educational settings. The choice of song for assembly items, the book for story time and the current affairs item for morning talk will often promote and nurture local and national identities.

In contrast, the exercise of official nationalism would be expressed and pursued through the overt, planned school curriculum, for example, through tight government regulation of syllabi and textbooks, or censure of their content. Set textbooks are obvious examples of how some knowledge makes the cut and other knowledge is dis-endorsed. The more democratic the setting, the more problematic this tactic can become, given the multivocality of the community:

If books are distributed to schools as official or adopted history texts, and this distribution takes place in democratic societies where there can be open debate about interpretations of the past, that is when the trouble really begins, as every pressure group and political party in town tries to get in on the act. And the arguments rage back and forth, their success being determined, in the short term only, by whoever is in control of the government at the time, be it national or state. (Taylor, 2007p.24)

Chen’s work (2005) explores more subtle forms of official nationalism exercised through textbook choice. Chen describes waves of deregulation of school textbooks in Taiwan as the state moved towards a more democratic state less fixed on mainland China. These reforms in turn produced more complex and subtle politics in its curriculum, and ‘a series of hegemonic struggles over school knowledge and textbook production’ (p.60). These struggles played out through the decentralization of educational bureaucratic processes, and the marketisation of textbook production that still allowed the government to steer ‘the production of official knowledge at a distance’ (p.61).

Both popular and official nationalism can contribute to what Billig (1995) describes as ‘banal nationalism’, which he distinguishes from the more strident and dramatic forms of nationalism performed in moments of crisis or war. He defines ‘banal nationalism’ as:

the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. … these habits are not removed from everyday life. … Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition. (p.6)

He makes the point that ‘banal’ nationalism is neither ‘benign’ nor innocent, but rather powerful, and ‘primed for use in battle’ (p.7) The power of banal nationalism lies in its everydayness, for example its habitual symbols and its taken-for-granted ritualistic invocation in such mass institutions as the school. Where Billig suggests that the hanging flag in the corner symbolises banal nationalism at work, I would similarly highlight the symbolic work of the Anzac Day school ceremony, the national anthem at school
assembly, the patriotic content of school readers and the ‘commonsense’ history reinforced incidentally through the hidden curriculum. The historical narratives thus circulated cement and ‘naturalise’ selective accounts in the collective memory.

As an example, in the wake of the September 11 2001 events, the recent Howard government stipulated that government schools had to have a flagpole flying the national flag to be eligible for Commonwealth funding (“PM unfurls his patriotic school agenda”, Sydney Morning Herald, 23 June 2004, p.5). This could be interpreted as the official recontextualising field demanding a more overt display of banal nationalism through the hidden curriculum of the school grounds.

In contrast to banal nationalism, Hage (2003) is interested in the affective premises of nationalism – how people relate to the nation emotionally. He describes the current state of nationalism in Australia, precipitated by global competition and neo-liberal policy environments, as ‘paranoid nationalism’, premised on self-interested and defensive worry about the nation’s security, rather than on altruistic hope for the nation and a willingness to share its ‘surplus of hope’. For Hage, recent political efforts around re-nationalisation have deflected internal discontent and insecurities by focussing on external threats and ‘border disorder’.

It seems to be this kind of paranoid nationalism which has driven recent conservative curricular reform and its renationalising efforts in the US as well:

…one other drawback of national identity - the tendency to regard one’s own social group as inherently good, moral, and strong, and to believe the worst about other groups. After the September 11 attacks, this justification for studying history was all the rage among conservative commentators, who renewed their efforts to justify history teaching as a way of inspiring patriotism.(Barton & Levstik, 2004, p.62)

Apple (2002) similarly documents ‘the urge to have schools participate in a complicated set of patriotic discourses and practices that swept over the United States in the wake of the disaster’ (p.300), the strong control exercised over what was to be thinkable and sayable about the event, and the delicate politics of pedagogical responses in the face of political intrusion into school business. By Apple’s narrative account, the ‘mandated patriotism’ (2002, p. 306) and the ensuing ‘redefinition of democracy as “patriotic fervour”’ (p.307) effectively closed any space for democratic debate.

This section has distinguished different types and styles of nationalism – its officially sponsored type as opposed to its popular type; its banal style and its paranoid style. It explored how these forms and styles can interrelate – official nationalism can sponsor expressions of banal nationalism, and similarly feed paranoid nationalism, as can popular nationalism. With this more texture treatment of nationalism and the earlier understanding of the inherent politics of curriculum, the discussion now turns to recent events in Australia concerning the history curriculum.

3. An Australian example of nostalgia and the retrospectively oriented curriculum

Like the conditions in the US described above, parallel efforts were made in Australia to promote a more limited, fundamental and paranoid version of nationalist pride. Over its
eleven year incumbency, the conservative government of John Howard gradually encroached more and more onto the state’s legislative territory of school curricula. It was intent on gatecrashing the official recontextualising field with the aim of turning the clock back on progressive reforms that, amongst other developments, had nurtured a national identity that embraced and celebrated diversity. For example, on his Australia Day address to the National Press Club, 2006, Howard issued a call to arms of ‘“a coalition of the willing’ to promote changes to the teaching of history, which he said was neglected in schools and too often questioned or repudiated the nation’s achievements’ (“Howard claims victory in national culture wars’, M. Grattan, The Age, 26 January 2006). It is significant that this address followed the racialised violence at Cronulla Beach, 13 December 2005. He complained of the relativism of history curricula, and argued for a re-adjustment of the relative strength of value accorded to the versions of history legitimated. He wanted to work symbolically through the school history curriculum to re-image the nation along nostalgic and celebratory lines, re-asserting ‘the values, traditions and accomplishments of the old Australia’ (Howard quoted in Grattan, 2006, my emphasis).

The pursuit of this type of celebratory nationalism would not sit comfortably with the processual, historiographic focus of recent history curricular reform. Allowing students to undertake research processes to create their own interpretations of historical events from primary sources would potentially undermine the ‘unison’ of opinion desired by the official nationalism agenda. This conservative political agenda was explicitly linked to the aim of shutting down public debate, that ‘divisive, phoney debate about national identity’ (Howard quoted in Grattan, 2006), that had made the production of binding collective narratives problematic and prompted some collective soul searching on less than glorious moments in Australia’s history. As his proposed alternative, Howard’s address invoked a simplistic and populist ‘one people, one destiny’ version of the national identity, referencing the image from Federation discourses a century earlier.

These reactive reforms and the character of their cultural referents should be understood a both nostalgic and as reactions to the conditions of the 21st century. Robertson (1992) identified the production of ‘wilful, politically driven nostalgia’ (p.148) as part and parcel of the cultural relativisation of globalisation processes. He argues that as people have to grapple with more difference on a day-to-day basis, there is an equal and opposite social reaction that seeks to re-capture and re-assert old lost certainties:

Current controversies about the teaching canon are thus significant manifestations of globalization, not least because in the contemporary phase of globalization the concept of the homogeneous national society is breaking down, in spite of the assertion of nationalism in certain parts of the world. At the same time those controversies themselves generate new conceptions of world history…. an increasing number of ‘entities’ in the contemporary world are making and remaking their histories in terms of the constraints of the current phase of globalization. ‘Modernity’ has undoubtedly enhanced this kind of reflexivity, which itself has also helped to produce a certain kind of wilful nostalgia. (pp. 30-31)

Nostalgia is understood as ‘the appetite for images of the past, in the form of what might be called simulacra’ (Jameson quoted in Robertson, 1992, p.158). By Howard reasserting the ‘one people, one destiny’ image of the nation, he is seeking to re-build a familiar ‘home’. It is a ‘simulacrum’ in Baudrillard’s (1988) sense because it is a model of which
the reality no longer exists, if it ever did. Its premise of homogeneity no longer holds. The Prime Minister’s discursive intervention aimed to patch up the tattered and faded unifying narrative that initially helped achieve collective sentiment for the new nation, but is now under attack from growing diversity within. The effort to re-image the history curriculum was also an attempt to re-establish the primacy of national identity over other competing allegiances. Using Bernstein’s concepts, his vision and purpose was to achieve this through a strongly retrospective orientation in the curriculum, to re-construct the past in the present by tightly controlling curricular content.

In this frame it is significant but not surprising that the new Labor Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, made a statement early in her ministerial appointment that she was ‘an educational traditionalist’, backing a ‘traditional interpretation of the nation’s history, that is, that Australia was “settled” rather than “invaded”’ (“Gillard wants history taken back to basics”, *The Australian*, 3 December 2007). She is aligning with the same nostalgic work of re-nationalisation by promoting a retrospective orientation in the school history curriculum. Such strategies are not products of the past, but are the product of the present and its local/glocal political conditions.

**Conclusion**

This paper unpacked dimensions of the curriculum and its ‘social grammar’ to allow an exploration of how different types of nationalism (official, popular, banal and paranoid) could be expressed through school history curricula. Recent efforts of Commonwealth governments to intrude and pronounce on curricular matters were understood firstly as expressions of a paranoid turn in official nationalism and as effort to re-nationalise the social imaginary. The bipartisan promotion of a retrospectively oriented curriculum was then interpreted as a nostalgic reaction to the erosion of past certainties produced by cultural globalisation.

This paper suggests that history curricular debates warrant close attention as they have implications well beyond school settings. The school curriculum has been recognised by both sides of Australian politics as a powerful lever with which to steer national sentiment through these nervous, volatile times. It allows those that control it to assert and endorse powerful ‘truths’ that in turn will shape social realities, thus we can expect a growing struggle between state and commonwealth over its control. Australia is at an important watershed moment, about to negotiate a national curriculum, just when the curriculum has become an object of such intense political interest. Before putting all our eggs in this one basket, we should perhaps pause and examine the risk in creating a singular orthodoxy that is exposed to political interests. Will it be the one that produces the future we want?

Both political parties have publicly expressed their interest in a more heavy-handed role for the official recontextualising field, that is, in more regulation of curricular content to satisfy political agendas. As discussed earlier, this will not stop teachers from exploiting degrees of freedom and discretion in the pedagogic recontextualising field. My final point however, is that a robust democracy should not be satisfied with a curriculum that only allows debate around alternative versions of history to happen in between the cracks of the official curriculum.
References:


