

Culture Wars, Nationalism, and the Politics of History

written by Daniel Johnson | August 14, 2024



Censorship in the United States is back. In 2022–2023, PEN America recorded 3,362 book-banning incidents, a 33 percent increase over 2021–2022. As well as ridding public schools of immoral content—including, in addition to “sexually explicit” material, books on physical abuse, health and well-being, and themes of grief and death—the new McCarthyites have worked for the passage of numerous state-level laws censoring teachers and subjects. Since 2021, more than forty state legislatures have introduced “divisive concepts” laws to prevent instruction in U.S. racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. And as of February 2024, more than thirty state bills have targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at American public colleges.¹

The discipline of history has figured prominently in the right’s efforts to silence critical thought in education. Divisive concepts laws have been motivated largely by hysteria over critical race theory (CRT), which claims that racism in the United States has been historically embedded in institutions and is not simply a product of individual prejudice. Aside from it being demonstrably true that racism pervaded American legal, educational, and political institutions from the country’s founding, the theory has been around for decades and is therefore far from new.²

The recent panic around CRT is attributable to the growing awareness of the history of systemic racism in the United States following police murders of Black Americans and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. A divisive concept often paired with anti-CRT legislation is the 1619 Project, initially a 2019 special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* that was followed by a podcast, educational curriculum, bestselling book, and Hulu TV docuseries. According to issue editor Nikole Hannah-Jones, the project aimed to reframe American history by imagining 1619, the year English colonists in Virginia first purchased enslaved Africans, as “our nation’s birth year,” in a direct challenge to the symbolism of 1776, conventionally associated with American founding.³

The conservative reaction to the *Times Magazine* special issue and CRT was predictable. President Trump, a man unlikely to ever have read a work of serious history, claimed the “crusade against American history” would “destroy our nation” and quickly assembled a 1776 Commission, whose report on the supposed crisis was so absurdly pitiful it received little attention even in conservative circles. A number of states banned the teaching of both CRT and the 1619 Project curriculum.⁴

The prize for authoritarian reaction must go to Florida, however, where Governor Rick DeSantis instituted the most sweeping restrictions on classroom discussions of race and gender in the nation. In addition to barring educators from teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity, DeSantis has waged a war on African American studies programs and the teaching of racism in the United States. In July 2023, SB 266, which prohibits professors from teaching that racism was designed “to maintain social, political and economic inequities,” took effect in Florida.⁵ We have

arrived in Orwellian territory.

The furor over the U.S. past also spawned a controversy within the historical discipline. Following the publication of the 1619 magazine issue, five established historians published a letter in the *Times* condemning the project's factual errors—mainly involving Hannah-Jones's hyperbolic introductory essay—and the “closed process” behind its making.⁶ A Twitter firestorm followed, and the historians' dispute was soon featured in mainstream and liberal outlets like the *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, and *Harper's*, to name a few. The American Historical Association (AHA), the discipline's flagship professional organization in the United States, has been consistently engaged in the controversy and has developed a number of initiatives to help teachers as they find themselves “on the front lines of a conflict over America's past.”⁷

What has been unquestioningly assumed across the political spectrum, in academic as well as public discourse, is a highly nationalistic understanding of the purpose of historical knowledge. Conservative and liberal interlocutors alike agree that the fundamental *function* of history education is to instill a distinctive civic identity among the country's youth. For conservatives, history education should confirm a belief in the United States as an exceptional country endowed by God with a mission to spread freedom and democracy across the globe. Liberals, by contrast, point to founders' hypocritical commitment to natural rights in theory and slavery in fact, while nevertheless retaining faith in an exceptional “American creed.” In the liberal telling, if Americans could only acknowledge the “origin sin” of slavery and racism we might finally fulfill Thomas Jefferson's noble proclamation of inalienable rights for all. Conservatives and liberals are in agreement over the fundamental terms of the debate, however: the idea, in Hannah-Jones's words, that history is a “story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.”⁸

This is bad history and, from any serious left perspective, bad politics. While there is nothing wrong with studying national politics, movements, or cultures, there is something deeply problematic about assuming the purpose of historical knowledge is to narrate to ourselves a story about our national self—in this case whether the United States was born in pure goodness or is stained with original sin. Leaving aside its metaphysical (and highly ahistorical) underpinnings, such a view fetishizes the nation and makes a political entity the sole subject of historical interest or worth. History becomes a story of triumph or betrayal, a struggle for the “soul of a nation.” It is not a question of *whether* the United States is an exceptional beacon of democracy, but of *who* is responsible for making it so.⁹

Progressive teachers and scholars should reject such narrow provincialism. History is an inherently comparative discipline that demands knowledge of long-term processes as well as sudden ruptures at a variety of levels, from village or town to regional, national, and global. Making the study of the past a national morality tale flattens history's complexity and richness and implicitly privileges an electoral and legalist approach to change. Centering “our” history on an *idea*—freedom and democracy's embodiment in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence—rather than the changing relationship between socioeconomic, cultural, and political processes, is ultimately an exercise in competing idealisms, not history.

It may therefore be useful to step back and examine the origins of the historical profession itself, specifically within the context of public education and the emergence of the nation-state. The nineteenth-century development of public education and the professionalization of history were motivated by a desire to create loyal and obedient citizens, and in the United States these efforts were often related to fears of “un-American” ideas imported by immigrants. (In the case of Native Americans, assimilation through education was a genocidal project to eradicate Indigenous cultures.)¹⁰ The creation of history as the source-based profession we know today was inextricably tied to nation-making and educational indoctrination.

Fortunately, in the twentieth century methods of studying history emerged that transcended national boundaries. People's history, or history-from-below, privileged the experiences and self-activity of working people on the assumption that knowledge of popular struggles in the past might have something to teach us about making a better future. First emerging in the interwar period, methods of history from below gained academic credibility in the 1960s as practitioners shed light on vast areas of the past in a radical humanist project of intellectual democratization.¹¹ The conservative backlash of subsequent decades included an ideological war on humanities education, however, and the current history culture wars are a continuation of this unfinished struggle. How this war should be waged should be a major concern for socialist educators, writers, and activists.

Making Nationalist History

All human cultures tell stories about the past, and the writing of history is as old as writing itself. Developments beginning in the late eighteenth century would dramatically transform how history would subsequently be written and taught, however. Revolutionary movements across the Atlantic world created republics in North America, France, Haiti, and Latin America between the 1770s and 1830s. In Europe the emergence of a variety of competing nationalist, liberal, democratic, and socialist ideas would culminate in a revolutionary wave that swept the continent in 1848-1849. Though Europe's "springtime of peoples" was defeated, it was clear that in a new age of capitalist industry new forms of governance would be required.¹²

History would be central to the project of making nations. Romantic nationalists began collecting the traditional ballads and stories of common folk in the interest of making an organic "people" in Europe in the late eighteenth century, while the first academic chairs in history were established in Berlin and Paris in 1810 and 1812, respectively. Between the 1820s and 1890s historical journals appeared in German, Danish, Italian, French, English (in Britain and the United States), and Swedish. A desire to instill a national identity among the masses was also evident in the "invention of tradition": the parades, holidays, and memorials paradoxically invented to foster a proper sense of the past. The ritual repetition of such "traditions" was intended to inculcate values and norms that would establish continuity with an appropriate, if contrived, past.¹³

The professionalization of history came relatively late in the United States. The AHA was established in 1884; its house journal, the *American Historical Review*, in 1895.¹⁴ The importance of education to nationalist indoctrination was evident from the country's beginnings, however. Revolutionary elites, steeped in classical political theory and history, emphasized the importance of an educated citizenry to republican forms of government. Early republican patriot elites envisioned women as the nation's primary educators, who would instill proper values of civic virtue and national identity in children (meaning, of course, boys). "Republican motherhood" therefore encouraged women's education while perpetuating a highly gendered ideology of domesticity.¹⁵

While early advocates for public schools were well-versed in classical republican beliefs in the need for an informed citizenry, the potential for class conflict in industrializing societies was a major stimulus to educational expansion. Horace Mann, the "father of American education," wrote in the 1840s that only schooling could keep laboring people in the United States from degenerating to the condition of British factory workers, who at the time were held in far greater subjection than were their peasant ancestors. Notably, it would do so not by helping common people demand economic and political rights, but by "disarming" the poor of their hostility to the rich. A major benefit of public education would be the prevention of riots and strikes through the opening of "a wider area over which the social feelings will expand," ostensibly making possible a rising tide to lift all boats.¹⁶

Mann's whiggish and depoliticizing vision was not the only view of education in the early republic. In the early 1790s the radical democrat, anti-Federalist, and teacher Robert Coram called for a national

system of education freed from traditional elitist views of learning. Most controversially, Coram attacked European pedagogical methods in favor of Native American modes of knowledge and child rearing.¹⁷ Beginning in the 1820s labor and women's rights activists demanded universal public education as a matter of fundamental right, democratizing from below conventional genteel visions of schooling.¹⁸

More than anyone, however, it was Black people who recognized the power of education and knowledge. In his rousing and internationalist 1829 call for Black self-emancipation (a self-published work too radical for white abolitionist printers), David Walker attacked the ignorance in which enslaved people were held by contrasting it with the rich history of African arts and sciences. And, in contrast to mainstream reformers, rather than cite the Declaration of Independence's lofty ideals Walker looked to the recent Haitian Revolution for revolutionary inspiration.¹⁹ The importance of literacy would be a constant theme in slave narratives through the Civil War, and following abolition in 1865 the establishment of schools was a key demand of freed people.²⁰

However, as federal and state governments abandoned educational efforts in the South following the failure of Reconstruction, educational thinkers grew more concerned with how to "Americanize" and assimilate growing numbers of immigrants than with demands for a democratic form of education for all. With an era of violent class conflict beginning with the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 coinciding with an explosion of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, educational authorities dreaded a pending assault on WASP economic and cultural hegemony. Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris claimed that if new immigrants weren't properly assimilated, they would "contribute to the degeneration of our political body and thus de-Americanize and destroy our national life."²¹

The ideology of Americanization conveniently dovetailed with the doctrines of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank Gilbreth, whose time and motion studies sought to improve efficiency through the repetition and systematization of industrial tasks.²² The inculcation of a proper sense of American identity would coincide with, and contribute to, making industrious and obedient workers. While rare voices, like those of the philosopher John Dewey, argued for a humanistic system of education that aimed at individual and social renewal, Progressives were generally of a technocratic orientation, favoring compulsory education in the interest of technological and industrial efficiency.²³

With immigrants and Black Americans shepherded into vocational training programs justified through racist and classist devices like IQ tests, humanities education remained the preserve of a tiny elite. As future president (and historian) Woodrow Wilson put it in 1909: "We want one class of people to have a liberal education, and we want one class of persons, a very much larger class of persons, of necessity, to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit into specific manual tasks."²⁴ In 1895 there were only about a hundred full-time college teachers of history across the U.S., almost half of whom were trained in Germany where the modern university was established.²⁵ Though the Humboldtian model of education sought to integrate research with the arts and sciences across social classes, humanities higher education in the United States would remain the preserve of rich white men.

Making People's History

Alternatives to mainstream education did emerge in the early-twentieth-century United States. Beginning with New York City's Rand School, Christian socialists and labor activists established schools that sought to raise political consciousness among the working classes. The Communist Party started labor schools in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle in the 1920s and 1930s. Though providing an important source of knowledge for working people (especially immigrants and Black Americans), such efforts would not fundamentally challenge

educational norms in the United States.²⁶

While the Second International (1889–1916) made the “national question” a subject of discussion for the global left, it was only in the interwar period that professional historians seriously began to question state- and nation-centric models of study. French historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were brought to a shared belief in the need for a new kind of history by the experience of trench warfare in World War I. In 1929 they founded *Annales*, a journal dedicated to “overcoming disciplinary and national boundaries and promoting a more human, accessible history.”²⁷ Febvre coined the term “history from below” in 1932 in a comment on the Marxist historian Albert Mathiez, and over the mid-twentieth-century contributors to *Annales* deployed a variety of methods from the humanities and social sciences to produce innovative historical scholarship from a variety of left perspectives.²⁸

During the same years that *Annales* was transforming historical practice Europe was descending once again into barbarism, as Bloch and Febvre were painfully aware. In his dedicatory letter to Febvre in *The Historian's Craft*, written in 1941, Bloch wrote that the comrades had long worked for “a wider and more human history,” but in the midst of a new world war their common task was under threat. In this now-classic work of historiography, Bloch derided historians’ “obsession with origins,” a fixation that too often produced histories in the service of value judgments, with history-as-judgment substituting for history-as-explanation.²⁹ This was an implicit critique of the nationalist origin myths embodied in Fascism and Nazism with which Bloch was all too familiar. A Jewish member of the French Resistance under the Vichy regime, Bloch was captured in Lyons in 1944. On June 16, as the Nazis’ hold on France began to weaken, Bloch was taken from his cell and shot in an open field with twenty-six other prisoners.³⁰

The Depression era also saw important developments in history writing in the English-speaking world. In 1935 W.E.B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction*, a work that emphasized the agency of Black people in the United States during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Though now a classic, the work was largely ignored by professional historians at the time. In 1938 A.L. Morton’s *A People's History of England* appeared, as did C.L.R. James’s *Black Jacobins*, a pioneering study of the Haitian Revolution. As important as these key studies were collaborative efforts like the New Deal’s Federal Writers Project (FWP), which collected more than 2,300 first-hand accounts of slavery and 500 photographs of enslaved people. The collection remains an essential source base for researchers today, while the FWP and other New Deal projects are themselves evidence of the importance of people’s struggles in transforming culture.³¹

The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s produced a very different educational environment. The liberal consensus of mainstream U.S. politics and culture was reflected in a postwar “consensus school” of history, according to which the absence of a feudal past and a founding Lockean commitment to individual rights and private property distinguished American (meaning colonial English and U.S.) history from that of Europe. When mentioned at all, slavery and Indigenous dispossession were portrayed as mere aberrations in a longer narrative of progress.

Educators at all levels were victims of McCarthyite witch-hunts during these years, with as many as 600 teachers across the country losing their jobs. As programs like “Zeal for Democracy,” introduced by Congress in 1947, encouraged the teaching of democracy in explicitly Cold War terms (U.S. democracy vs. Soviet totalitarianism), students were subjected to the psychological terror of films like the Federal Civil Defense Administration’s *Duck and Cover* (1952), which instructed children how to respond to a nuclear attack.³²

Yet out of the prospect of nuclear annihilation and the political apathy of the early Cold War grew new left movements that would dramatically advance the methods of people’s history. In the UK the

Communist Party Historians' Group (established in 1946) forged British Marxism, like *Annales* less a "school" than an orientation that utilized materialist analysis to provide new interpretations of change over time. Most influential was E.P. Thompson, whose 1963 opus *The Making of the English Working Class* single-handedly redefined the writing of social history. In an oft-cited preface Thompson argued for a relational and experiential understanding of class in highly polemical opposition to reigning structuralist interpretations of class as a "thing" abstracted from culture and consciousness. He famously sought to "rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity."³³

A new left, and new approaches to history, were also emerging in the United States. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and a dramatic expansion of higher education encouraged young Americans to question the absence of workers, women, and people of color from history books. People's history, or new social history (NSH), paid particular attention to the experiences and struggles of enslaved people, immigrants, and working-class women. The field of professional history was transformed as for the first time academic journals, book publishers, and university departments embraced previously neglected areas of study. It is this rich tradition of activism and scholarship that makes historians like James Oakes apoplectic when twenty-first-century journalists claim to have "discovered" some unexplored element of the past.³⁴

The young New Left scholars who transformed humanities study were internationalist in outlook, with Vietnam and other anticolonial struggles in the global South central to their work and activism. Frightened conservatives took note, with rightwing intellectuals noting that it was on college campuses that "Communists, New Leftists, and other revolutionaries" were making especially deep inroads. Writing to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971, soon-to-be Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell lamented the threats to American capitalism that were germinating on college campuses. Powell outlined a strategy for the funding of conservative think tanks and urged businesses to lobby boards of trustees for the hiring of conservative academics. Similar "action programs" would be created for high schools while staffs of researchers, writers, and speakers with media knowledge would be enlisted to reach the general public through television, radio, and print.³⁵

The ending of the postwar boom and the crumbling of the postwar "consensus" between capital and labor coincided with the New Right's new war of position.³⁶ These related developments led some analysts on the left to reconsider the phenomenon of nationalism. The Scottish political scientist Tom Nairn began an influential 1976 *New Left Review* article with the blunt claim: "The theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure."³⁷ The next two decades witnessed a flourishing of studies on the origins and varied manifestations of nationalist ideologies and movements.

Benedict Anderson influentially theorized that the decline of religion and rise of secular rationalism, together with the expansion of print capitalism (specifically the novel and the newspaper), made possible the creation of nationalist "imagined communities." While these cultural and economic processes emerged in Europe, it was among educated "creole pioneers" in the colonial Americas that modern nationalism originated.³⁸ Orthodox Marxists like Eric Hobsbawm, by contrast, placed the origins of nationalism solidly in nineteenth-century Europe, as nationalist ideologies originating from above would be shaped from below by "the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people."³⁹

While comparative studies of nationalism thrived, the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of Third Way centrism was accompanied by a postmodernist "cultural turn" in academia that problematized twentieth-century verities, liberal as well as Marxist. In the discipline of history, at its best the cultural turn posed important questions to the reductionist assumptions of some social

historians while shedding further light on the experiences of previously marginalized populations. These years also saw scholars expand their historical imaginations with regional, transoceanic, transnational, and global frameworks of inquiry. Less positively, the apparent disappearance of any alternative to liberal capitalism led many scholars to retreat into a postmodernist incomprehensibility that masqueraded as political radicalism.

The Great Recession of 2008-2009 exposed the false promises of neoliberal economics, Third Way politics, and postmodernist relativism. However, it has generally been the right that has capitalized on the political vacuum created by these related failures. Dissatisfaction with the current order in the United States and across much of the world is especially prominent among young people; constructing an inclusive and egalitarian alternative to national populism will be central to forging an emancipatory future.

Remaking People's History in the Twenty-First Century

In off-year elections in 2023, conservatives spectacularly failed to implement a triumphalist vision of the U.S. past and present. Moms for Liberty, the book-banning group formed in 2021 to oppose Covid-19 restrictions like mask and vaccine mandates, was unable to take over local school boards with their endorsed candidates, losing in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Ohio, and Virginia. It turns out that parents support children learning about subjects that might make them uncomfortable and disapprove of banning books and censoring teachers.⁴⁰

Yet according to founder Tiffany Justice, Moms for Liberty is “just getting started.” The subjects of race, immigration, and sexuality enflame the hatred of others among the rightwing base, with “wokeness” a successful, if ill-defined, animating keyword. As important is the long-term goal of delegitimizing public education, an aim suggested by the financial support given to Moms for Liberty by groups like the Heritage Foundation.⁴¹ The response of university administrations and the media to student activism regarding Israel's genocidal war on Palestinians is yet another indication that education will remain a key arena of struggle for the foreseeable future.

The question for progressive educators, then, is how best to defend humanistic principles of free inquiry and public education as a common good from the right's desire to privatize education by demonizing teachers and censoring information. Liberal nationalists would argue that they are providing a more complex, complicated, and therefore accurate, portrayal of the U.S. past. Oppressed groups' struggles for liberty and equality should undoubtedly stand at the center of history education, and teachers' right and duty to teach how racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia have been manifested and opposed should be defended.

Whether teachers and historians on the left should leave unchallenged a functionalist and nationalist vision of history education is a very different question. In the 1960s, Civil Rights and New Left activists increasingly connected domestic policy with U.S. imperialism, and scholarship was crucial in making this connection. It is unfortunate that at a time when demands for racial justice, labor militancy, and student activism are on the rise historians and their organizations have remained in a defensive and nation-centric mode. While perhaps an understandable response to political demagoguery and reactionary legislation, it would be wise for historians to remember the elitist and nationalist origins of their own profession. Such self-consciousness might contribute to making history curricula that embrace a longer and broader past, and that explore struggles for communal and individual rights in a variety of settings and contexts.

In an article published on the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's “discovery” of America, Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted that in 1492 few people in Spain were very interested in the Genoese mariner's voyage. Of far more consequence was the recent

Spanish conquest of Granada in Andalusia, followed by the expulsion or forced conversion of Granada's Muslim and Jewish populations. However, as Trouillot noted, the year 1492 had come to function in the nineteenth century as a symbol for nationalist celebrations—in the United States, Spain, Italy, and throughout Latin America. Largely forgotten in public memory was the protracted fall of the Nasrid Dynasty, the ejection of non-Christians from the Iberian Peninsula, and Spain's consolidation of state power in Renaissance Europe.⁴²

The next two years will see an explosion of commemorations for the 250th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Arguments over the meaning of "our founding" will undoubtedly be prominent in public commemorations and debates. Just as 1492 cannot be understood without the complex backdrop mentioned above, so knowledge of 1776 requires awareness of economic, cultural, and political developments occurring throughout early modern Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Combating the mythicization of history that incensed Trouillot, Bloch, and others requires more than a new origin story. It requires questioning the very nature and purpose of national origins stories.

What should history be if not a national origin story about "who we are as a people"? Some years ago, the great practitioner of history-from-below Natalie Zemon Davis told an interviewer that "the enormous range in ways of living and possible actions" in the past was a source of hope as well as despair. While there is plenty of tragedy and cruelty in history, it is also true that since things were different in the past "perhaps we're in a position to make them a little different today." We cannot replicate the past, nor can we use historical models and simply apply them to today. What history offers us is a fascinating and endless set of "ideas, points of views, perspectives, landmarks, indices—possibilities."⁴³ We might do well to ask whether the history we teach offers possibilities, or platitudes.

Notes

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4. Organization of American Historians' "Statement on White House Conference on American History," Sept. 24, 2020; *The 1776 Report*, The President's 1776 Advisory Commission (January 2021).
5. Johanna Alonso, "Florida Approves Controversial Anti-DEI Regulations," *Inside Higher Ed*, Nov. 10, 2023.
6. "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued the 1619 Project," *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2019.
7. "Teaching History with Integrity."
8. "The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 14, 2019, 5.
9. The sole critique I am aware of that emphasizes the nationalistic and exceptionalist orientation of the 1619 Project is Hazel V. Carby, "We Must Burn Them: Against the Origin Story," *London Review of Books*, May 22, 2022.

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18. Robert Peterson, “Unfair to Young People: How the Public Schools Got the Way They Are,” *Youth Liberation* (June 1975): 10; Frances Wright, *Reason, Religion, and Morals* (New York, 1829).
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20. Janet Cornelius, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read’: Slave Accounts of the Literary Process, 1835–1860,” *Phylon* (1960-) (44, No. 3. 3rd Qtr., 1983): 171–86.
21. Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation’s Changing Needs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11.
22. Graham, *Schooling America*, 27, 32.
23. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916); Peterson, “Unfair to Young People,” 13–14.
24. Quoted in Peterson, “Unfair to Young People,” 13.
25. Theodore S. Hamerow, “The Professionalization of Historical Learning,” *Reviews in American History* (14, No. 3, September 1986): 321.
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