

BOOK REVIEWS

The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of Human History, by J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003, 368pp., \$27.95 hardbound.

Neil Cameron

From Herodotus to Francis Fukuyama, historians who take on big topics, especially the stories of entire civilizations, have always looked for helpful metaphors, large concepts around which they can organize their narrative. The perennial favorite is to interpret a long process of change as if it were the life of an organism, even the life of a human being. This handy bit of anthropomorphism has appealed to both writers and readers, since it converts their own biographical experience into an apparently objective report on how the world unfolds. Civilizations have repeatedly been imagined as moving from birth to youth, maturity, even senility, preceding an inevitable final death. Spengler and Toynbee added reincarnation. Hegel, Marx and their disciples did much the same, with dialectic spirals replacing Toynbee's challenge and response.¹

As the persuasiveness and prestige of the natural sciences steadily rose after 1600, new and more mechanistic metaphors began to invade historical writing and social thought. Newtonian physics pervaded Enlightenment thought, and the influence was continued in nineteenth- and twentieth-century positivism. Lamarckian and Darwinian evolution also joined the mix. Chemistry had less impact: history has seldom been explained as a tale of elective affinities or acidic decomposition. Thermodynamics, however, fasci-

nated some speculative pessimists at the end of the Victorian era; Henry Adams was a classic example. The law of entropy suggested the grim but exciting prospect of an inevitable grand burnout, soon to arrive or already observable.²

Variations of this latter theme can still be found in the writings of some of the more feverish contemporary environmentalists. These secular Jeremiahs draw on gloomy extrapolations of future population growth (formerly too much, lately too little), energy consumption, and climatic change, but their underlying message is simpler. All have sinned; only an enlightened few are living as they should; all others should heed their cries or prepare to meet their doom. However, the greatest resemblance the twentieth century had to previous ones was in disproving confident theories of historical inevitability and predictable futures of any kind. Determinist theories are now in headlong retreat, demonstrated again and again to be not only mistaken, but in the Marxist case, a rationale for mass murder. Only terminally deluded Stalinists like Eric Hobsbawm are still willing to defend the ruthless determinism that he and so many other academic intellectuals adopted in the 1930s.³

The attack that Karl Popper made over half a century ago on what he called "the poverty of historicism" has been entirely vindicated. There has now been a general rejection of Marxism, at least of the more dogmatic versions of it, and a wider scepticism now exists about the claims of all forms of speculative "metahistory" that were once influential, at least any making explicit or implicit claims to predict the future. However, this disillusionment has posed a prob-

lem for historians of liberal and progressive inclinations, since many of them regard prophetic status as part of their *raison d'être*. They can scarcely find any helpful suggestions in the writings of the post-1990 far left, which has largely responded to the overwhelming evidence that they or their predecessors had been wrong about everything by trying to invent explanations of why no one can be right about anything.⁴

On the other hand, even the most sceptical empiricists will concede that staggering changes in the technology of information gathering, analysis, and communication have taken place in the last three decades, and cry out for some kind of intelligible synthesis. It is not surprising that historians have found a new metaphor for the human story in the internet, mingling past and present, order and chaos. In *The Human Web*, two distinguished academic historians, William H. McNeill and his son, J. R. McNeill, have reframed the entirety of world history as a story of the growth of networks of communication. A popular history has already argued that the nineteenth-century telegraph was a "Victorian internet", but this new comparison is far more wide-ranging, drawing together almost every kind of human interaction over thousands of years.⁵

The McNeills have long had a preference for history on the grand scale. William McNeill is probably best known for his book, *The Rise of the West*, but has produced an impressive list of scholarly contributions on a wide variety of other historical topics, like the impact of technology on warfare through the centuries, and of diseases and plagues over time. While knowledgeable about tradi-

tional political history, his clear preference has always been for social history of a broader kind, the stories of peoples rather than princes or prelates. His son Robert has achieved a separate and different reputation in recent years as a historian of the environment, including in its pre-human and non-human aspects.⁶

The collaboration of the two McNeills, however, has produced a rather odd book, one that suggests that father and son may have had to iron out some quite substantial disagreements. Assumedly, they managed this amiably; their preface gives thanks not only to several other historians, but to the particular "human web" of their own families, for putting up with extended conversations between them "that on occasion threatened to commandeer the normal routines and agendas of family life."⁷

The McNeills explain a number of different economic, demographic, and cultural webs as the joint products of competition and cooperation, and their own collaborative history appears to have been something of the same, with the competition aspect giving some uneven results. Collaborative authorship must have been especially difficult in writing a book that attempts a synthesis, or "bird's-eye view," as the subtitle puts it, of the entirety of world history, even if the collaborators are father and son. In fact, a joint effort by two colleagues of the same generation and interests would have gained in coherence what it lost in breadth of outlook. Among academic practitioners, there is probably no discipline in which generational disagreement is more heated and widespread than history, and in recent years, that has not just involved debates about

interpretations, but about the very subject-matter on which historians should concentrate their attention. However happily the McNeills believe they have reconciled their own competing viewpoints in their family web, their own past books certainly reflect this generational difference: William, for all his fondness for broad topics, has been primarily interested in humans, while Robert has so far been entirely enmeshed in the webs.

Most of the first half of the book, whether written collaboratively or not, is all on the son's territory: the very long-term influences of factors like climate, food supplies, distribution of natural resources, even bacteria. The sections of the book on these topics draw on recent scholarship, are skillfully condensed, and sometimes surprising, but are of a kind that used to be found in books by geographers and anthropologists rather than historians. Robert McNeill and several other historians who began their studies in the last decades of the twentieth century almost take it for granted that the amount of information available on these non-human factors now makes them a necessary component of a history that spans thousands of years. *The Human Web* accordingly has some resemblance to the ambitious integration of biology and history found in Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.⁸

William McNeill is on record, however, for having found Diamond's book "stimulating" but unconvincing, and this book arouses the suspicion that he is not all that fond of the kind of history that his son has produced either.⁹ On the one hand, he appears as the ideal candidate among older historians for the collabo-

ration he and his son have attempted. His own earlier books were cosmopolitan and internationalist in approach. He has been willing to draw on new perspectives and tools, and he has also consistently tried hard to give justice to non-Western cultures and religions. But he has still largely remained a historian of a traditional kind, primarily interested in the thoughts, symbolic frameworks, and actions of human individuals and cultures, recorded in documents. In both *The Human Web* and his past books, he rejects the more pessimistic view of civilizational conflict advanced by Samuel Huntington. But he has not been all that far from Huntington in his own interests, especially in tracing the effects of cultural clashes and wars on wider developments in human society.¹⁰

The webs of prehistory, of such things as nomadic migrations and the multiple separate discoveries of agriculture, do help to lay the foundations for those developing in the river valley civilizations of six thousand years ago, from which all later ones flowed. But even when the discussion moves to the great civilizations of antiquity, getting in all the more general information about biology and economic geography meant that ancient China, ancient India, Greeks and Romans, all had to be covered in about ten pages each. This in turn means that Plato and Aristotle have to be disposed of in a sentence, Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar in a couple. Julius Caesar doesn't make the cut at all. Furthermore, the sheer complexity and variety of worldwide civilizational development, unrelieved by portraits of individual character or anecdote, does not make easy reading.

The latter half of the book reads more like the elder McNeill in his other books, and most readers are also likely to find the “webs” considered there, of recent centuries, more interesting than the ones examined in the first half. Explanations are still heavily focused on the effects of large changes in European technology and communications. Christopher Columbus, for example, is given a few lines for his role in making the different parts of the whole world aware of each other, but these are followed by a much more extended discussion of the improvements in navigation and the design of ships that made his achievement possible. The adoption of a global perspective also means that the McNeills often use a somewhat different periodization than the one found in more traditional histories. The Second World War, for example, is described as being from 1937 to 1945, identifying the start with the outset of hostilities between China and Japan.

This way of looking at the war has appealed to some other historians; it was suggested almost forty years ago by Geoffrey Barraclough.¹¹ But Barraclough’s proposal was not widely taken up, and has not become the norm even in the latest histories of World War II. Despite current general preoccupations with “globalism,” the war historians still tend to be divided between those who mainly cover the European war and those who cover the Asian one. The reason that this is the case shows something of the enduring problem of “bird’s eye” historical explanation in general. Even after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the fall of Singapore, only the Americans, and to a lesser extent the British, were heavily involved in both theatres. Historians dis-

posed to “counterfactual” speculation love contemplating how different the present world might have been if all-out war had broken out between the Soviet Union and Japan, with different alternative futures depending on whether the non-event is scheduled in 1940, 1941, or 1942. But speculation it remains. Integrating the actual political and military history in any detail is no easier in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth.

The example of the Second World War also shows that the metaphor of a web, or rather of a great number of webs gradually being drawn into one big web, simply does not work as well geographically and historically as it does electronically. If the McNeills are dealing with topics like the rise of universities in the European Middle Ages and the impact of the Gutenberg press, they are quickly drawn into a web proliferation that could just as easily be imagined as a near-solid blanket. Switching to the non-adoption of printing until centuries later in the Islamic world offers them only a very thin thread. In several chapters, moments like this do not so much suggest a skein of interconnections as a series of separate labyrinths.

Father and son, in a final chapter headed “Big Pictures and Long Prospects,” write separately signed conclusions, which do not noticeably clash. William McNeill opens his concluding summary by describing the purpose of their book as being that of showing that, throughout history, human beings have “used symbols to create webs that communicated agreed-upon meanings and so, as time went by, sustained cooperation and conflict among larger and larger groups of people.”¹²

Such an intention is less open to criticism than the grand cyclical theories of past universal histories. On the other hand, its almost tautological blandness calls into question the very value of making such an all-inclusive synthesis in the first place. The dust jacket carries a quote from another noted historian fond of big topics, Alfred Crosby: "If you are going to read only one book on world history, this is the one it should be." This is something of an ambiguous tribute. Certainly in the breadth and depth of the recent scholarship on which it draws, *The Human Web* is a more persuasive book than *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, or than a variety of other world histories from the time of H. G. Wells to the time of Fernand Braudel.¹³ But that claim does not really answer the question of why anyone should "read only one book on world history," or many, or none at all.

The Human Web does provide a quite remarkable condensation of the whole history of the world in less than 330 pages of narrative. The amount of factual information that has been drawn on is staggering, and fitting it all into a single narrative is something of a heroic achievement. It is also one that has been carried out with a blessed absence of the jargon and ugly neologisms that disfigure so much current scholarly publication. The great virtue of the McNeills is that they steer well clear of reductionist and formulaic fashions. But they err in the opposite direction: it is hard to pick out a single paragraph or sentence in the whole book that strikes fire in the imagination of the reader. That would have been a weakness at any time, but is an even more glaring deficiency in a book finding itself in both academic and popular competition with

writers like Niall Ferguson and Bernard Lewis. Like too many distinguished American academic historians, the McNeills seem to have more talent for assimilating the most recent scholarship than they do for turning it into lively prose.¹⁴

Still, they have been skillful in weaving their web, and they may substantially influence future historical syntheses. The main doubts they arouse are not with the web metaphor, which has some real advantages over those of organic growth or decline used in the past, but with the very concept of universal history. Their very attempt to escape from "Eurocentric" history oddly undermines itself, and this applies to all other supposedly "Geocentric" alternatives.

The universal historians of past centuries, or even of the early twentieth century, largely began with the confident assumption that the "Western" civilization, which found its origins in Mediterranean antiquity, had special qualities that made it different from, and arguably superior to, both all previous ones and all rivals in other continents. That there were some parochial and indefensible aspects to such a view was already being recognized by European thinkers at least as long ago as the Enlightenment, but not even the most cosmopolitan and broadly "internationalist" Western interpreters of the past have ever been able to get around the awkward fact that the very languages and conceptual systems they employ to understand the world come to them in lineal descent from that Mediterranean and European world.

The very idea of history itself, gradually understood as distinct from both simple chronicle and from religious tradition and popular myth, is an inherit-

ance from Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome. Something similar may have evolved in the civilizations of Asia, but in even more narrowly parochial form, and with little impact on other societies. Over most of the face of the earth, countless societies scarcely had any form of historical thought at all, and have only gained one since precisely because they have been to greater or lesser degree "Westernized." And "Westernized," not "modernized," is the operative word. As became obvious over three centuries ago and is still true, science, technology, and popular amusements have spread over the globe much more readily than either the historical and philosophical thought of the West or any universal, or "multicultural" alternative.

This is one of the main reasons that the more specialized disciplines of economics, human geography, and anthropology split off from history long ago. Europeans and their Western Hemisphere descendants might admire other cultures and civilizations; some might even see them as having superior qualities to their own. But not even the most ardent Sinophiles, for example, can think of Chinese sages as being the ancestral shapers of their own way of looking at the world. "Eurocentric" history may irritate some of today's academic historians, many now coming from other continents and different traditions. But even they can not escape the irony that it was European imperialism and colonialism, and the substantial later movement of colonized peoples into Europe and North America, that explains why vast numbers of non-Europeans now form their own ideas of history under the influence of the original European

model. Even their bitter criticisms are most often based on assumptions picked up from Marx and the Marxists, or more recently, fashionable Paris savants.

The existence of a universal human condition, in other words, does not justify universal history. Specific examples of competition and cooperation are instructive and interesting in themselves, not necessarily for the ways in which they can be tied to other examples elsewhere. That traditional historians concentrate their attention on individual societies and particularly significant individuals within them is not just an obsolete fetish, but a way of understanding thought and action that can not be readily extended, even by the most cosmopolitan and imaginative sympathy. The weakness of many past universal histories is that they tended to reduce human beings to Lilliputian dimensions, but the McNeills have gone even further. They may have conceived this new kind of history as taking a lesson from Bill Gates, but they more often recall the example of Alfred Kinsey, entomologist turned reporter of sexual mores. Their version of a bird's-eye view tends to make all human activities resemble those of colonies of insects. The book will probably serve as a valuable reference source, a kind of mini-encyclopedia. But anyone who intends "to read only one book on world history" would be better advised to try a volume of Tacitus.

Notes

1. Spengler and Toynbee have stayed in print throughout the century. See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, reprinted); Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, edited and abridged by D. C. Somervell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). The most

- ingenious and popular example of recent Hegelian interpretation is Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
2. Edmund Wilson offered one of the liveliest and most entertaining descriptions of the positivist influences on political and historical explanation in *To the Finland Station* (New York: NYRB, reprinted 2003). The shift to more subjectivist and irrationalist modes of thought was ably summarized by H. Stuart Hughes, in his *Consciousness and Society, 1890–1930* (New York: Transaction Books, reprinted 2002).
 3. Paul Ehrlich is the best-known advocate of environmentalist alarm; see especially *The Population Bomb* (New York: Buccaneer, reprinted 1987). While not a historian, Ehrlich, like Rachel Carson, has had broad general influence, including on historians, despite the failure of his predictions to come true. A sometimes astonishingly complacent recollection of a life of Stalinism is provided by Eric Hobsbawm, in *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Penguin, 2002).
 4. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, reprinted 1993). For a ferocious critique of various post-modernist “cultural studies,” see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History* (London: Encounter Books, 2000).
 5. Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet* (New York: Berkley, 1999).
 6. William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *Plagues and Peoples* (Boston, Peter Smith, reprinted 1992). While these two are probably the best-known, the elder McNeill has published an immense amount over several decades. The younger McNeill has not as yet been so prolific, and is known mainly for the book he coauthored with Paul Kennedy, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001).
 7. W. H. McNeill and W. R. McNeill, *The Human Web* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), Preface, xviii.
 8. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).
 9. William R. McNeill, “History Upside Down,” *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 1997; see also the reply from Diamond and comment from McNeill, in the 26 June correspondence section of the same journal.
 10. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
 11. Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).
 12. William H. McNeill, Chapter IX: “Big Pictures and Long Prospects,” in *The Human Web*, 323.
 13. *The Outline of History* is still obtainable from large book dealers, not only as a reprint, but also in used copies, and also continues to sell in used book stores, as do the works of Will Durant and other older universal histories. For Fernand Braudel, see especially his *History of Civilizations* (New York; Penguin, 1995).
 14. A complete bibliography of the works of Bernard Lewis would be as long as the one for the elder McNeill, but a great deal easier to read. For examples, see *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003) and *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Neil Cameron is a Montreal journalist and professor of the history of science at John Abbott College. Please address correspondence to Academic Questions / NAS, 221 Witherspoon Street, Second Floor, Princeton, NJ 08542-3215; editor@nas.org.

The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn, by Diane Ravitch. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2003, 269 pp., \$24.00 hardbound.

Sandra Stotsky

Banned in Boston! How that phrase attracted attention in the first half of the twentieth century. And, most remarkable,

it emanated from the work of a self-appointed independent non-profit organization with no electoral sanction. With philosophical antecedents in Boston Puritanism, the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice was formed in 1878 as a “citizens’ vigilance” group to guard public morals. In 1891, it changed its name to the New England Watch and Ward Society.

For about 80 years, the Society actively investigated crime and what it perceived as moral corruption in New England. Among its targets, it sought to censor books, plays, and other artistic expressions deemed too depraved for the public to see or read—for instance, the novels of Sherwood Anderson, or magazines like H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury*. Its records from 1918 to 1957 are now deposited at the Harvard Law School Library and range from active correspondence with allied organizations such as the Illinois Vigilance Association and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice to the briefs filed in 1936 against Lillian Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour*. The records also contain the Society’s active correspondence with magazine distributors who needed the approval of the NEWWS before distribution of each issue in New England. In 1957, the NEWWS transformed itself into the New England Citizens Crime Commission. With that came the end of its role as a morals watchdog that could capture newspaper headlines whenever it issued a ban on a literary work judged as violating moral sensibilities, or sent police squads flying off on moral missions to close down the old Howard Theater, a burlesque house in Boston that regularly corrupted the morals of its audiences.

Although these organizations and others like them eventually died out or merged with others seeking to address transgressions of our legal code, the spirit animating them did not die out. Those driven by an impulse to regulate or improve public morality—a perennial strain in American civic life—shifted their scrutiny from the entertainment of adults to the education of children. As Ravitch comments, regardless of political orientation today’s censors all want publishers to protect children from “words and ideas that contain what they deem the ‘wrong’ models for living,” assuming that “by limiting what children read, they can change society to reflect their worldview.”

For several decades, school textbooks and test materials have been increasingly monitored by a variety of self-appointed pressure groups and routinely screened by appointed Bias Review Committees, postmodern reincarnations of the New England Watch and Ward Society in the sense that what constitutes bias is simply whatever is in the reviewer’s idiosyncratic eye. The workings of these pressure groups and bias review committees are so remote from the public eye that teachers and parents themselves are generally unaware of their existence, what has been kept from the school curriculum or their testing materials, and how the textbooks and tests their children do use have been adjusted to fit their demands. Although the religious fundamentalists on the Right and the politically correct groups on the Left have very different views of what constitutes social responsibility, both extremes want American students to read what they consider socially responsible texts and have ended up by

complementing, not negating, each other in the influence they exert behind the scenes.

Rarely have the Right and the Left or their agendas clashed in public. As Ravitch puts it, one wants certain topics censored, the other wants certain attitudes and images conveyed—often by censoring or altering specific words. The Right first staked out its demands by confronting publishers after they had published their wares or presented them for school adoption. The Left staked out its demands by going directly to the publishers and getting its constituent members on the bias review committees, which publishers and test developers have put into place in self-defense to ward off critics, to guard against potential law suits, to show sympathy to those promoting “social justice,” and to secure the good will of the educational establishment upon which they must draw for support and expertise. These bias review committees now form a seamless part of the process used by editors in publishing houses, test developers, or departments of education for determining whether the texts, items, or other materials that teachers, scholars, or others have created or assembled for them are fit to be published or used with students in the public schools.

Diane Ravitch has provided a monumental service to parents, teachers, and school boards in *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* by exposing the ways in which the censors on the Right and the Left have been achieving their goals in the K-12 curriculum. *The Language Police* is the first systematic examination of the almost invisible forces of censorship that

have thoroughly intimidated educational publishers and test developers in this country and corrupted the quality of what American students read in both their English or reading classes and their history classes. As she notes, “Bias and sensitivity review has evolved into an elaborate and widely accepted code of censorship that is implemented routinely but hidden from public sight.”

Although it is a form of intellectual terrorism that must be repugnant to many adults, this censorship has succeeded in the publishing and testing industry because people need to get on with their work and cannot afford to have their energies constantly tied up addressing the constantly expanding demands of today’s censors or bias detectors. Ravitch’s analysis of their methods and the results of their handiwork should be read by members of every school board, by staff in every state department of education, and by every English and history teacher.

Ravitch’s concerns about the practice and effects of censorship on the school curriculum arose from her experiences with bias panels after she was put on the National Assessment Governing Board—the federally-funded body that determines testing policies and oversees the construction and reporting of the tests given to students as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. A bias panel rejected using Aesop’s fable of the fox and the crow because it portrays a vain female crow succumbing to the flattery of a male fox, and the only way NAGB could get the fable past the bias reviewers was by changing the genders of the animals. It was clear that bias was not simply a matter of whether an

item might put a particular social group taking the test at a “disadvantage.”

Bias and sensitivity review has turned out to be an exercise in utopian social engineering, often done in the name of “fairness.” It seeks to exclude information or images that might diminish a group’s self-esteem, however authentic the information or images might be, and to include information or images that might bolster their self-esteem, however misleading, incomplete, or incorrect the information or images might be.

As an example of the social engineering I encountered in Massachusetts, one bias review committee member wanted to replace a selection on astronaut Chuck Yeager and the breaking of the sound barrier, chosen by a group of teachers for a grade 4 reading assessment, with a selection on Sally Ride, even though stories about Sally Ride are common in the school curriculum and not one teacher could recall a selection on a male astronaut in their own school curriculum—or a story about the breaking of the sound barrier in either the reading or science curriculum.

The Language Police begins with a sampling of the topics and words now forbidden in educational materials to help readers understand the scope and depth of current censorship. Ravitch explains the new meaning of bias as it was explained to her—“anything that upsets a member of a group, affecting test performance relative to other groups.” Common sense and moderation have both been abandoned. What was once a fairly sensible notion of fairness, she observes—for example, don’t always show women as homemakers—has turned into an ironclad decree that they

should never be shown in that role. Ravitch devotes one chapter to the content of the sensitivity guidelines used by educational publishers. Some of the injunctions are so ludicrous that one wonders how intelligent executives in the publishing world could have accepted the guidelines prepared for them on the words and stereotypes to avoid, and distributed them, without blushing, to their free-lance writers and illustrators or to school personnel.

For example, the guidelines of one publisher enjoined writers and illustrators not to depict Jews in such “stereotypical occupations as diamond cutters, doctors, dentists, lawyers, classical musicians, tailors, shopkeepers.” One wonders what indeed Jews *were* to be depicted as—basketball players, unemployed, migrant workers, ex-presidents of the United States? One also wonders how much money publishers paid consultants to prepare their guidelines—and whom they paid. (Not surprisingly, some publishers or public agencies didn’t want to send Ravitch their guidelines when she asked to see them or to admit that they had any.)

Appendix I in *The Language Police* is a glossary Ravitch compiled of “Banned Words, Usages, Stereotypes, and Topics,” accompanied by a reference to the publishers, testing agencies, state agencies, and professional associations using or recommending each one, and it is worth its weight in gold. The New England Watch and Ward Society would have been impressed by the easy and effective method today’s censors have used to avoid going to battle against individual offensive works (anything worthwhile published before 1970 contains at

least one offensive stereotype or word, Ravitch discovered) and to inhibit unacceptable thoughts by a would-be writer today.

Two chapters in *The Language Police* address the impact of the bias and sensitivity guidelines on the textbook industry and testing companies. Perhaps the most interesting bit of information Ravitch has unearthed for the general public concerns a statistical process known as DIF (Differential Item Functioning). This process is used by testing companies to determine whether a test item is "biased" even though there is nothing in the actual wording of the question to suggest any bias against any group. As explained by researchers at the Educational Testing Service, a test question exhibits DIF if equally proficient individuals from different groups (as judged by their performance on other items) do not have "equal probabilities of answering the item correctly." Questions that show differential scores for women and for particular social groups are thrown out. Nevertheless, because so few items on any particular test display meaningful DIF, the huge gaps in scores between Asians and "whites" on the one hand and Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans on the other, remain on the tests that are given.

What is not clear from Ravitch's conversations with testing officials is how DIF is used to address differences between girls and boys on reading and writing test items, on the NAEP assessments in particular, since the differential has historically and consistently been in the opposite direction from the one that would justify constant vigilance. Girls do

better than boys as readers and writers at all grade levels (and in high school graduation rates and admission rates to college), with the gap in reading and writing skills increasing at successively higher grade levels; indeed, the gap has reached an all-time high in the most recent NAEP tests of reading and writing in grade 12. Are items showing girls doing worse than boys being thrown out on a regular basis? What exactly is being thrown out? Whatever the generalizations gleaned from DIF are, the overall results of DIF, as Ravitch points out, have been to identify topics to be minimized or avoided on tests.

Four more chapters describe the origins and goals of the groups carrying the banners for each form of censorship and their specific effects on reading, literature, and history textbooks. Ravitch notes that battles over the political orientation of history textbooks are not new in American history, going back to the post-Civil War era where textbook publishers had to produce different versions of American history for Northern and Southern states. But censorship of the literary anthologies and individual literary works assigned in reading or English classes does not seem to have taken place until after the 1960s. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1980s, she reports, every publisher had complied with the demands of the Right and the Left.

It has been more important for publishers' survival to achieve demographic balance and exclude sensitive topics in their textbooks than to teach children to read and appreciate good literature. This has meant in many cases eliminating the classics because they are not "fair" in the current sense of the word. As for

history textbooks, the review process guarantees that they will not “offend” others even though they resonate with themes like race, gender, ethnicity, and class conflict. As Ravitch comments, everything is culturally equivalent and the treatment of other cultures is noncritical in an effort not to show we are superior in any way. Interestingly, because of the policy not to criticize others, only this country and other Western countries can be criticized or shown to have racial or ethnic problems. Thus, our students get a biased education in both their English and history classes.

Ravitch offers three solutions to combat the language police. First, eliminate the textbook adoption practice in California and Texas, the two states whose guidelines for textbooks influence every publisher in the country. One state is dominated by religious fundamentalists, the other by multiculturalists. Let teachers and schools buy whatever textbooks they want, she suggests, so long as they address their state’s academic standards. (However, in its favor, the practice of textbook adoption in California has served to promote sound mathematics and science curriculum materials since its adoption of first-class mathematics and science standards in the mid-1990s.)

Second, Ravitch recommends hiring better educated teachers who know their subject matter and can make critical judgments about the texts they use.

Ravitch’s third solution strikes me as potentially the most feasible and effective. Expose the current censorship practices to public scrutiny. To that end, Ravitch’s publisher has created a web site <<http://www.languagepolice.com>> for

readers to report instances of censorship they have encountered. The web site will be active at least until 2007.

I would also recommend that every board of education and state department of education be required by their legislature to make public the list of bias reviewers they use for any purpose themselves or that are used by any testing company they employ. Not only should the names of these reviewers be made public (and given to the local press), but so should their qualifications for bias review and the rationale for their choice. Publishing companies should also be asked to list their bias reviewers, their qualifications, and their fees. So far as I have been able to discern, the only qualifications bias reviewers have are the color of their skin, a particular gender or sexual orientation, a primary language other than English (preferably Spanish), or a visible disability, together with the right “attitude” toward bias.

Today’s censors deserve a public vetting, and the reports of their deliberations should be available through The Freedom of Information Act. The membership list of the New England Watch and Ward Society was public information, as were the minutes of their meetings.

Sandra Stotsky is a research scholar at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. Her Losing Our Language: How Multiculturalism Undermines Our Children’s Ability to Read, Write, and Reason was released in paperback by Encounter Books in 2002. Please address correspondence to Academic Questions / NAS, 221 Witherspoon Street, Second Floor, Princeton, NJ 08542-3215; editor@nas.org.