

# Need for a Geo-Cultural Perspective in the Bicentennial

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*To be sound educationally, the flow of cultures into the United States must be viewed multidirectionally, with appreciation for the rich diversity which has resulted for our nation.*

THE advent of the American Revolution Bicentennial and the celebration of our national birthday party provide impetus and ambience for a thoughtful reconsideration of curriculum as it relates to the teaching of the American experience. In particular, the Bicentennial establishes a mood for reflection on our past and on how we have incorporated the development of American civilization into the curriculum.

One of the basic structural concepts for the teaching of American civilization—be it history, literature, economics, art, or any other subject—has been that of the United States as a unidirectional, east-to-west phenomenon. That is, the United States is generally viewed and taught as being the one-directional product of civilization which spread from Western Europe across the Atlantic Ocean to what is today the east coast of the United States and then west to the Pacific. Within this approach, ethnic groups appear almost always in two forms, as *obstacles* to the advance of westward-moving Anglo civilization or as *problems* which must

be corrected or at least kept under control. This ethnocentric vision of our nation's past continues to straitjacket most thinking and teaching about the American experience.

Somewhat representative of such ethnocentric tunnel vision is the article, "The Great Frontier Thesis as a Framework for the American History Survey in Secondary Schools," by Raymond Starr.<sup>1</sup> In his article, Starr suggests that teachers organize their U.S. history survey courses around the theme of the advancing frontier, as posited by such scholars as Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb. Of course, when Starr says "Great Frontier," he means only the east-to-west advancing frontier of the United States. And how would such an approach deal with those people—particularly Mexicans and Native Americans—who happened to be in the way of this advancing frontier and were "advanced over"? As usual, as *obstacles* to westward-moving Anglo civilization.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Starr. "The Great Frontier Thesis as a Framework for the American History Survey in Secondary Schools." *History Teacher* 6:227-32; February 1973.

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## Unidirectional Approach to History

The underlying rationale for this frame of reference is for the most part *political*—the idea that the development of America should be viewed as a process which occurred in an east-to-west direction *within* the national political boundaries of the United States. However, in applying this frame of reference, educators have been somewhat inconsistent. Most surveys of and courses on U.S. history discuss the geography of the area which ultimately composed the United States. Yet the fertile lands, valuable minerals, and important rivers which helped make the United States wealthy and powerful were all here before there was a United States. These books also dwell on the 13 British colonies, although they did not become part of an independent nation until 1776. And such historical events as the Texas Revolution of 1835 and the Lone Star Republic are generally included in surveys of U.S. history, although Texas did not become a part of the U.S. until annexation in 1845. Thus, even the traditional study of U.S. history does include phenomena outside of the boundaries of the political United States as a part of the American experience.

Yet American education has deviated inconsistently from this rigid political framework. While including land, minerals, rivers, English colonists, and Texans as significant parts of the American experience *even before* becoming part of the political United States, American education has not adequately included those Native American, Hispanic, and Mexican civilizations which developed on the land which ultimately would become part of the United States. While focusing on the east-to-west flow of civilization from Europe, American schools have devoted little substantive attention to the northwesterly flow of civilization from Africa to America, the northerly flow of Hispanic and Mexican civilization, and the easterly flow of civilizations and cultures from Asia. At best, most books and curricula on U.S. history, society, and culture give only token recognition to the development of cultures in America prior to the coming of the European, the growth of

the Native American, Hispanic, and Mexican civilizations *before* the U.S. conquest of their territory, and the flow of civilizations into the United States other than east-to-west from Europe.

## Need for a New Perspective

I would like to suggest an intellectually sound alternative to the distortions of the unidirectional approach to the study of the United States. This approach would illuminate the variety of cultural experiences which have composed the *total* American experience. The rationale for this alternative is *geo-cultural* instead of political. Rather than look just at the political United States, our educational system must deal *consistently* with the development of the entire *geo-cultural* United States—that area which ultimately would compose the United States and the various cultures and experiences encompassed by that area. Moreover, the flow of cultures into the United States must be viewed multidirectionally, with emphasis on the rich diversity which resulted for our nation.

For students to obtain an understanding of the United States in all of its cultural and ethnic dimensions, the application of the geo-cultural, multidirectional frame of reference must be made an intrinsic part of the educational process, starting with the first year of school. Moreover, it must be incorporated into all possible subject areas. In particular, the school curriculum must include, from the first year, the continuous, parallel study of the various civilizations which developed in the geo-cultural United States. Through this conceptual framework, teachers would examine such multicultural topics as:

1. The varieties of Native American civilizations
2. European and African-descent explorers and settlers of Northern Mexico (later the U.S. Southwest), French and Dutch settlements in what is today the U.S., and the English Atlantic colonies
3. Relations of Native American civili-

zations with expanding U.S. society from the east and expanding Mexican society from the south

4. Types of British colonial, United States, Spanish colonial, Mexican, Dutch colonial, French colonial, and independent Native American economic systems, political systems, philosophies, cultural patterns, class and caste structures, literary and artistic trends, and concepts of law, land, and water rights

5. Social and cultural origins of the varieties of peoples who entered the United States from various directions

6. The impact of these people on the development of U.S. culture and society and the converse impact of the United States on them

7. The process of cultural and ethnic conflict, fusion, and co-existence.

And what does this have to do with the American Revolution Bicentennial? Quite simply, the application of the geo-cultural, multidirectional frame of reference to the Bicentennial would provide a cultural democratization of our national commemoration.

It would raise such geo-cultural issues as what was happening in the West at the same time that the East was going through the process of rebellion against England? It would raise such multidirectional issues as what was the significance during the revolutionary era of those people whose movement into the geo-cultural United States had been from south-to-north, from west-to-east, and from north-to-south, as well as from east-to-west? <sup>2</sup> It would help make the Bicentennial a truly *national* celebration, not just a re-enforcement of the traditional east-to-west framework for looking at the American experience? And in the traditional spirit of the great independence revolution which we are now celebrating, the application of the geo-cultural, multidirectional approach could bring about a constructive curricular revolution which would help place in proper perspective the multicultural, multiethnic reality of the development of U.S. society. □

<sup>2</sup> For an example of such an approach, see: Geneva Gay and James A. Banks. "Teaching the American Revolution: A Multiethnic Approach." *Social Education* 39:461-65; November-December 1975.



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