

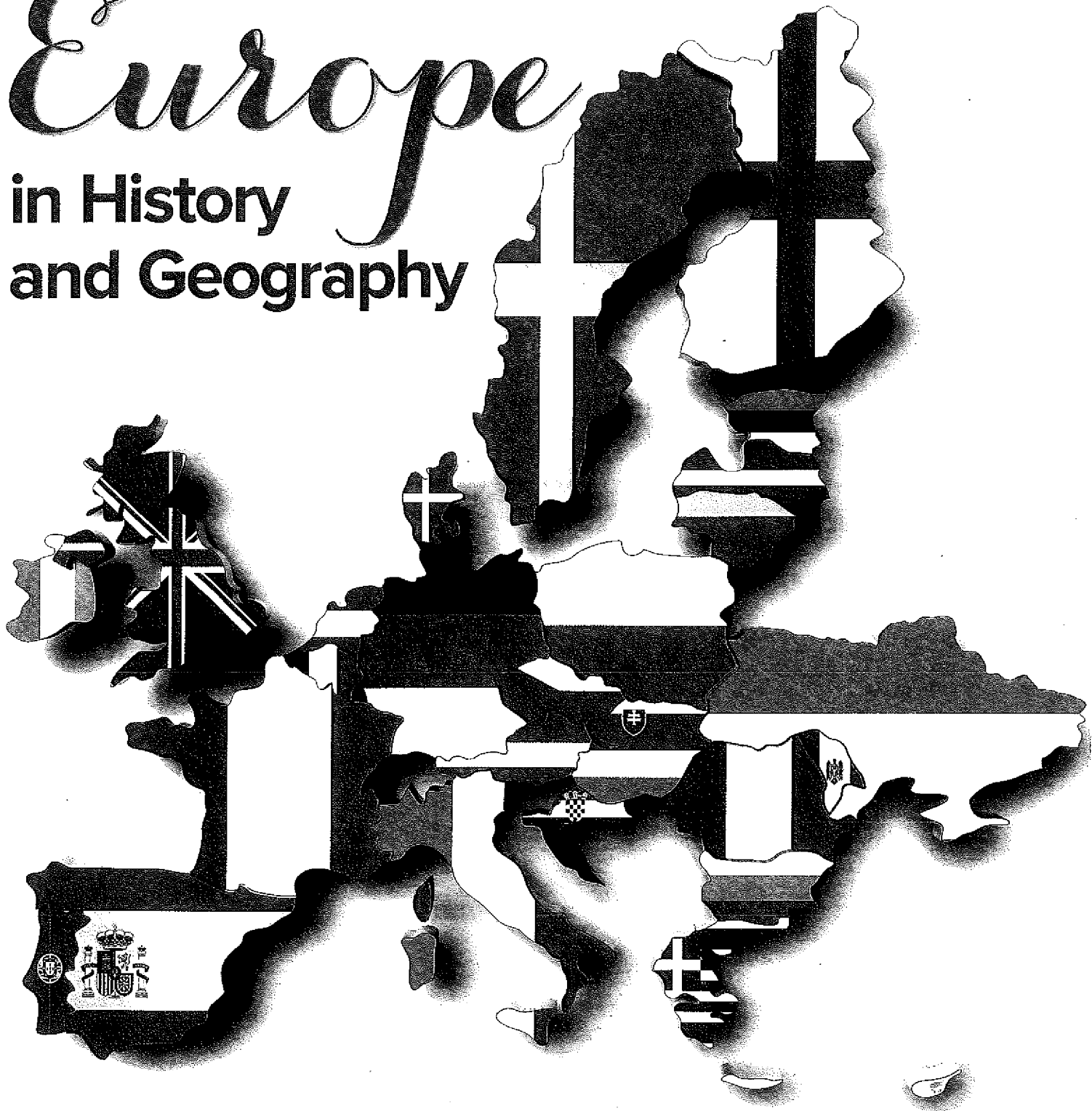


The
Social
Studies

TEXAN

The Official Publication of the Texas Council for the Social Studies

Europe in History and Geography



A Defense of European Intellectual History

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Introduction

The College Board recently revised the AP European History curriculum in order to provide more thematic direction for the course and much appreciated consistency with other AP history courses in terms of the historical thinking skills that are developed and the rubrics that are used to assess essays. While I found much to applaud with the re-write and indeed approve of the broad themes that now guide the course, I also found the critique of the re-write produced by the National Association of Scholars (NAS), titled "The Disappearing Continent," to be interesting and worth engaging. I read their critique of the re-write and found much to grapple with and it helped me clarify for myself why it is that I believe teaching AP European History is so important and why studying it is so beneficial for students.

NAS Report

The NAS report, much like its earlier critique of the AP U. S. History re-write, focused on the specific figures or events that were supposedly "deleted" from the course or that received less attention than they expected. As with the discussion that took place about APUSH, I find that too much value is often placed on the specifics of the curriculum framework and that the assumption that teachers limit themselves to only teaching what is included in the framework is unwarranted and simplistic. Every good social studies teacher knows that the curriculum framework, whether it is that provided by College Board or the TEKS, is just a guide and that much more can and should be covered. Still, the specific concerns expressed by the NAS that APEH was not being taught with a particular objective other than spreading "progressivism" led me to reflect on what I personally perceive some of the objectives of the course to be as informed by my own teaching philosophy, political views, and civic aspirations.

I expect that some "Euro" teachers will agree with what I have to say, while others may have different and equally valid reasons for believing that the course is worthwhile and relevant; and consequently, teach the course differently than I do. Unlike the author of the NAS report, I think that such

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diversity in orientation towards the course is a natural and desirable outcome of going beyond the curriculum framework and making the course your own. Every teacher should draw on their own life experiences, scholarly interests, and values to make the course relevant in their own way.

The author of the NAS report, David Randall, argued in a follow-up article published by the American Enterprise Institute, that "APEH fails miserably at providing the history of liberty that animates the chronicle of European events, and which justifies the very existence of European history in our high school curriculum" (Hess, 2016). In other words, he believes that lacking a proper focus on "the *debates* about how freedom should be defined and applied" (Hess, 2016) constitutes a civic deficiency within the course. While I disagree with the NAS report's contention that the curriculum framework is biased in favor of progressivism, I do agree that the civic dimension of the course is at the heart of why it is so relevant and arguably indispensable for American students today.

My Approach to APEH

For me, the value of AP European History rests on the rich intellectual history of Europe that provides a medium through which to introduce students to theology, political philosophy, economic and social theory, and ethics. The major intellectual movements and individuals contained in the curriculum framework allow me to teach the very debates about freedom that Randall laments are missing from the course. Though, if a true debate is to be taught, then the course will encompass more than a merely classical liberal or libertarian promotion of political and economic liberty, which those at the NAS, American Enterprise Institute, and National Review would surely prefer. If introducing students to Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche in addition to Locke, Burke, and Mill makes a course "progressive" then I suppose I endorse the alleged "bias" and consider

the particular usefulness of AP European History to reside in the very diversity of thought that the critics seem to think constitutes a "leftist" agenda.

Because American conceptions of freedom are so influenced by Locke and Mill, it is important for students to be exposed to other formulations and evaluate on their own terms the relationship that exists between the individual, the community, and the State. The American Experiment has always drawn on the ideas of other times and places, whether it be ancient Athens or the Roman Republic or the works of 17th century English philosophers, so why should civic education in American social studies courses automatically cut students off from alternative ideas that arose in Europe after 1776? In the end, the NAS report seems all too familiar: the author perceives that something isn't "conservative" enough for his liking so it is deemed to have a "liberal" or "progressive" agenda.

I consider myself to be both a "liberal" and a "progressive," which may be why I do not object to the AP European History curriculum framework for the reasons that the NAS report identifies. However, I also genuinely believe that my presentation of the material in my instruction not only isn't "biased" or "one-sided" but actually does what the NAS would seemingly want teachers of the course to do: highlight the cultural, intellectual, and political heritage of Europe that influenced and continues to impact the history of the United States. It is possible that some "Euro" teachers will cringe at the thought of teaching European History with the overarching goal of making it relevant to American history and current events, and insist that Europe should be studied for its own sake, but that is precisely what I do. Essentially, I agree with the NAS that AP European History has an important role to play within the context of civic education and I believe that one of the main benefits of the course is the degree to which it enables me to build on the prior knowledge gained from other social studies courses,

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such as World History and U.S. History, and enhance the student's knowledge of and preparation for democratic self-government.

Relevance of APEH Today

The year begins with a brief look at the late Middle Ages, a world characterized by three things that the United States explicitly rejected in 1776: monarchy, aristocracy, and state religion. The late Middle Ages is the foil for the Renaissance, which is an opportunity to introduce students to the idea of the humanities as a course of study that equips individuals to improve themselves and society. Secular and Christian Humanism introduce them to the notion that individuals can make the world a better place. A reading of Machiavelli begins our study of political philosophy and ethics. Do the students agree with him that effective political leaders should ignore morality? Do they endorse such consequentialist thinking? Next, we study the Reformation and try to place ourselves in a world where modern science and religious toleration aren't taken for granted. Are people really killing each other over how to interpret communion? Why does it take so long for political rulers to accept that social harmony can exist alongside religious pluralism? What evidence do we see today of the influence of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Jesuits?

Next, the Age of European Exploration launches our consideration of whether "progress" is ever really without negative consequences. The Scientific Revolution provides an opportunity to grapple with the tension between science and religion that still exists today. Do the students agree with Galileo that the answers to questions about Nature should be sought therein rather than the Bible? What do we make of Descartes's "methodological doubt" and Pascal's "wager?" The development of constitutionalism in England gives rise to a debate between Hobbes and Locke over human nature, government power, and the right of rebellion. The Enlightenment furthers our study of political philosophy and ethics with a look at Kant and Rousseau. How does the Categorical Imperative differ from the Golden Rule?

Do our motivations matter as much as our actions? Is Rousseau correct in arguing that "progress" is actually a digression?

The French Revolution is the turning point of the course. The students must grapple with the Reign of Terror and the fact that passionate calls for freedom and equality can lead to oppression. Furthermore, humanity's belief in its own potential for progress can make it susceptible to hubris. How can we really dispute what Burke has to say regarding incremental vs. revolutionary change? Who are the Burkeans in America today? Who are the Romantics in America today? The Industrial Revolution, according to Marx, was a revolutionary force in terms of efficiency. How can government maximize the technological and material benefits of free-market capitalism and minimize the harm to individuals and the natural world? What did Marx get wrong? What did Marx get right? Wait, Marx got something right? Are anarchists right-wing or left-wing by today's standards? What are the pros and cons of utilitarianism? What can Americans today learn from Mill's defense of free speech? What can Americans today learn from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*? Why is it that the welfare state was founded by conservatives in Germany? Why are the welfare states of Europe more generous than America's?

The year ends with most of our attention paid to war, diplomacy, and foreign policy. The Age of Imperialism in the late 19th century allows us to consider the long-term political effects of foreign intervention. How did the militarism and nationalism that imperialism required lead to World War I? Did Europe ever really recover from the disenchantment brought on by the war? Is America suffering from a similar disenchantment today? What happens when a crisis of faith leads individuals to find ultimate meaning and purpose in political ideologies? Why was Wilson's vision at the Paris Peace Conference not realized? Was Pankhurst's militancy justified? Was the Soviet Union really Marxist? How did fascism become so intoxicating? How was the Holocaust even possible? Is the United States immune to fascism? If socialism entails a loss of freedom, then why did Great

Britain elect a socialist government after World War II? Is existentialism empowering or debilitating? How can religion continue to provide meaning in our lives today? Can we solve the environmental crisis? Why is the European Union failing?

Conclusion

Almost all of the topics, themes, and questions that I have outlined are not found within the AP European History curriculum framework, which according to the NAS report means that I couldn't possibly be teaching it and that other "Euro" teachers are similarly hamstrung. In reality, all effective social studies teachers, whether they are teaching World History or U.S. Government, go beyond their curriculum standards to make the course reflective of their own interests and strengths, and most importantly, relevant for students today. AP European History has been and remains today an intellectually rigorous and relevant course for high school students in Texas. I have been privileged to teach it for the last five years and sincerely hope that social studies teachers who are members of the Texas Council for the Social Studies will consider promoting the course at their local high school. The theological, philosophical, political, and ethical debates that can be introduced to students through a study of European History are more important than ever in a world where many students may lack a religious upbringing, encounter a dearth of morality in popular culture, and assume that anything worth saying can be summed up in a tweet.

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