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History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

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History Abroad: How Do Denmark and the U.S. Measure Up?

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Abstract
By viewing bias itself as a product of history, educators and scholars can understand it better in their own times. By studying the historical path of the United States and Denmark, scholars can see that the nature of history can have subtle but important impacts on common education. Even when educators are aware of potential bias, history itself warps its dissemination.

Comments
This project was created for the International Bridge Course, Fall 2014, and was funded by the Mellon International Bridge Course Grant.

The International Bridge Course is a unique opportunity for Gettysburg students to engage in a faculty-mentored research project of their own design over a three-semester period. IBC scholars began their research in semester one, carry out continuing or comparative research while studying abroad in semester two, and complete their research and submit their final project in semester three. Credit is awarded in semester three via an independent study. In this way, students, under the continued mentorship of a faculty member, may truly integrate their study abroad experience with the coursework they have taken on campus.

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Danish History

Denmark provides an interesting case study to the discerning scholar. It is a much smaller country than the United States. It resides in a distinctly different part of the world; one shaped greatly by the events of the 20th century and beyond. And it is a country of high international standards: 12th in education, 1st in transparency and democracy, and 1st in happiness. With much to emulate, Denmark serves as a prime example for investigation, both to see if its admirable traits include historical honestly and to see how conditions affect the bias of such a small nation.

Case Study: Denmark

Denmark traces its history to the Vikings, who terrorized most of the European world throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, Denmark traces its heritage to Harald Bluetooth, the king who established Christianity amongst the Danish people. From the Viking period to the Reformation, Denmark was an expansionist state. Danes were raiding through Europe and the Middle East, exploring the Atlantic, serving as mercenaries, and conquering lands and kingdoms.

The trajectory of Danish history has influenced the culture of Denmark and subsequently, the way it remembers its past. Denmark has always had to contend with powerful neighbors, even at its peak. It decline through the modern period required a new lens for viewing Danish history. Danish history, by traditional standards, had shown a declining trajectory: lost lands, weakened economy, and defeated ambitions. A more modern and progressive style of teaching was the result of this cultural shift. History was open to discussion because history had not been kind to Denmark. Harsher questions about national identity became commonplace, and teaching centered itself to this new Danish history, having the opposite trajectory, developed a different cultural view of the past. History was linear, with nothing but unbridled growth and success. Therefore, a straightforward, triumphalist narrative became the dominant method of teaching education. It fit nicely both with the perception and the realities of American history, allowing it to perpetuate itself.

The teaching of history is always fraught with bias. From political bias to class bias to race bias, history is in the eye of the beholder. This bias can be observed in causal conversations as well as in academic debates.

But is this concept as universal as we believe, or do Americans suffer from a particularly virulent breed of bias? By examining a country whose history has taken a markedly different trajectory, we can explore how people deal with the historical hand they are dealt.

Classroom Observations: Denmark

I visited two separate Institutions of high school education: GI. Hellerup Gymnasium and KBH West Gymnasium. The Danish Institute for Study Abroad has an outreach program, DIS Ambassadors, where American students travel to high schools and discuss issues in the U.S. I spoke on several occasions about American policy on topics like gun control and culture, immigration policy, and creationism. I also observed several history classes at the GI. Hellerup Gymnasium.

The DIS Ambassador visits were very informative. The students were able to readily engage me with in English. And they shared their own opinions and experiences readily. They were also aware of events in the United States. On of the classes was on the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, the U.S. as a major topic for many Danish students.

The classroom experience was of a very high quality. The teacher was engaged in a very high level of discussion with the students. Lecturing was used, but it was interspersed with much interaction between students and teachers. Some lessons were completely free to discuss and work with your peers.

In addition, some classes were left to their own devices. Students were expected to complete their work on their own, allowing the teacher to take a hands-off approach to learning when appropriate. Such a degree of freedom was impressive, since the students seemed to be using their time effectively and meaningfully.

The Danish curriculum was more international than its American counterpart. The Danish students could converse well in English and had a fair understanding of American laws and current events. However, the lack of which confuted every day. It is this engagement with the world. U.S. policy can directly affect the lives of Danes, but Danish policy can have no such effect on the U.S. This means that knowing about the United States is more important to Denmark than vice versa. It also does not show how much Danish students are engaged in world events, only in U.S. events.

Danish History

Historical Bias

For my research, I relied on several sources. I joined the DIS Ambassador program, which allowed me to meet and discuss issues of interest with Danish students and teachers. I learned a great deal about Danish history from a variety of teachers and different perspectives from across the country. The teachers were generous in sharing their experiences of teaching Danish history, at all levels. I also relied upon several personal contacts with Danish, ranging from a newspaper reporter to a tour guide. Finally, there was the extensive literature I studied and used while abroad from my European studies. My memory and identity count.

The challenges facing the class were greater: greater economic disparity and greater amounts of material to cover. As Americans, these students would necessarily have a global reach to their studies. Every country on Earth would be a valid choice for study, making it harder to properly cover global affairs. And economic differences at home impaired the ability of students to focus on their school work.

Conclusion

My study was not nearly broad enough to make national generalizations. However, my work has developed a useful perspective for looking at bias in America.

The trajectory of Danish history has influenced the culture of Denmark and subsequently, the way it remembers its past. Denmark has always had to contend with powerful neighbors, even at its peak. It decline through the modern period required a new lens for viewing Danish history. Danish history, by traditional standards, had shown a declining trajectory: lost lands, weakened economy, and defeated ambitions. A more modern and progressive style of teaching was the result of this cultural shift. History was open to discussion because history had not been kind to Denmark. Harsher questions about national identity became commonplace, and teaching centered itself to this new Danish history, having the opposite trajectory, developed a different cultural view of the past. History was linear, with nothing but unbridled growth and success. Therefore, a straightforward, triumphalist narrative became the dominant method of teaching education. It fit nicely both with the perception and the realities of American history, allowing it to perpetuate itself.

Case Study: Denmark

A Dane ruled in the British Isles shortly before the Norman Conquest. And the Normans themselves were descended from the Vikings who invaded and settled in Normandy. Settlements were founded in Iceland, Greenland, and the Americas. Trade networks were established throughout what would become Russia. And the Danes dominated the North and Baltic Seas.

Other Sources

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Other Sources

In the U.S., my main source of information was my observations in the field. Once a week, for two hours, I would observe two classes taught at Littlestown High School. I consulted with several high school teachers and on my experiences at Gettysburg College. I also collected material from American history classes at Littlestown and KBH West, both of which were taught by American instructors. I also had the opportunity to teach two of these classes while in the field and have those first-hand experiences to rely upon as we continue our discussion. The purpose of this classroom observation is to begin to understand the different ways that students learn about American history, and to see how conditions affect the bias of such a small nation.

American history, by contrast, is short. The United States is a young country and a young country with an incredible past. It is a nation that knows, quite literally, nothing but incredible past. It is a nation that is engaged in world events, only in U.S. events.

Acknowledgments


