

# **Discursive Dancing: Traditionalism and Social Realism in the 2013 English History Curriculum Wars**

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This paper is an exploration of the debates surrounding the publication of a new National Curriculum for history in England. The draft curriculum was published in February 2013 and was withdrawn just six months later in the face of considerable opposition. This paper offers a tentative explanation for this example of a rare phenomenon: effective resistance to curriculum change.

Using van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to Discourse Analysis (2009a), the paper explores the context models of the two antagonists in the contestation: new right traditionalism and social realism. While both context models are viewed as coherent, it is suggested that critics of the draft prevailed because they more fully comprehended the context model of their opponents, and were prepared to adapt their strategy accordingly.

The paper takes an analytical narrative approach to the contestation. Resistance to the draft is presented in two phases: an initial phase in which criticism was diffuse, instinctive and political; and a more effective mature phase in which opposition united around a depoliticised disciplinary defence of the subject in social realist terms. It is argued that this deft shift went unnoticed by Education Secretary, Michael Gove, rendering ineffective his attacks on his critics as 'Marxists' and 'progressives'.

**Keywords:** History Curriculum, Teacher Resistance, Michael Gove, Curriculum reform, Discourse analysis

In May 2010, a Conservative-led coalition came to power in the United Kingdom ending 13 years of centre-left Labour Party rule. The Conservatives had fought the election campaign on a platform of traditionalist education and, in January 2011, the new Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove launched a review of the country's National Curriculum (Gove, 2011). As expected, the draft curriculum which emerged in February 2013 (DfE, 2013a) was heavily influenced by the core knowledge movement (Hirsch, 1987). The previous curriculum which had emphasised 'Key Concepts' and 'Key Processes' that children were to learn was replaced with one which stipulated specific items of factual knowledge. The response of history teachers to this change was overwhelmingly negative; some 400 history teachers responded to the government's consultation (DfE, 2013b) with one poll putting support for the changes at just 4% (Historical Association, 2013b).

While history curriculum wars are far from unusual (Taylor & Guyver, 2011; Nash, et al., 1997), two interlinked characteristics make this particular controversy worthy of closer study. Firstly, resistance to the draft was remarkable simply because it was so effective: the draft curriculum was withdrawn in August 2013 and replaced with a curriculum which met with general approval (Historical Association, 2013c). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the changing nature of the arguments presented by opponents of the draft. While initial opposition to the draft railed against the curriculum's apparent right-wing bias, this instinctive ideological assault was soon replaced by a careful disciplinary critique.

This article suggests that between February and August 2013, opposition to the draft evolved through three planes: strategy, representation and content.

**Reflex action → Reflective Action**

**Participatory democracy → Representative democracy**

### **Practical/Ideological critique → Pedagogical /Disciplinary critique**

The 'discursive dancing' of the paper's title refers to the deft ability of the opposition to adjust its strategy during the contestation processes. The political/ participatory opposition seen in February 2013, soon evolved into a more organised disciplinary critique centred on the Historical Association (HA). As opponents of the draft voluntarily left the field clear for the HA to organise resistance, this resistance became more nuanced. The HA had skilfully softened the language of opposition and even incorporated the language of New Right discourse into its critique.

These subtle changes in argumentation went largely unnoticed by the government in general, and by Michael Gove in particular. To Gove, opponents of the draft were necessarily motivated either by ideology or self-interest, and he wasted little time in denouncing them for this. However, by the summer of 2013 these attacks seemed badly aimed as ideological arguments had been removed from the mainstream critique of the curriculum. Gove's attacks were therefore left hanging in discursive space as vituperative assaults on a non-existent enemy; as though relics of a 1970s battle between traditionalism and progressivism. To continue the titular metaphor: if opponents of the draft were 'discursively dancing', then the government was trying to lead with feet of lead.

This paper argues that debates over the history curriculum in 2013, should not be seen as 'just another curriculum war' but as a new phenomenon – a mature subject community able to exert some influence on curriculum change through coherence of argument and discursive unity. While the familiar nationalistic and traditionalist arguments of right-leaning commentators have changed little in the past 40 years (compare, for example, (McGovern, 1994; Conquest, 1971; McGovern, 2015), their opponents have proved more flexible. Attempts by the Right to frame curriculum debates in binary political terms in which 'progressive and traditional' is a proxy for 'left and right' now appear somewhat anachronistic. By avoiding a political argument, the history teaching community was able to expose both the fallacy of the New Right's attacks and the ideology which underpinned them.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis as theory and methodology**

The role of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in examining policy formation and contestation is now firmly established (*inter alios*: Fowler *et al.*, 1979; Kingdon, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). CDA is a diverse field and, as Rogers (2004) writes, 'there are no formulas for conducting CDA' (p. 7). This plurality has sometimes led to accusations that the field is unsystematic (Widdowson, 2004), crudely ideological (Hammersley, 1997) or at least ill-defined (Slembrouck, 2001). However, CDA researchers counter that their methodological plurality is a strength and see at least two unifying characteristics: that all CDA research is problem-orientated and that it concentrates on longer texts through which the problem is enacted or challenged (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This study is very much in the CDA tradition since it perceives hegemonic traditionalist history curricula as an inaccurate and exclusionary rendering of the past. However, since it studies an effective example of contestation and resistance, it might be better characterised as an example of what Martin and Rose (2003) call *positive* discourse analysis.

This analysis uses van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA (van Dijk, 2009a). Van Dijk argues that *cognition* (the way in which individuals and groups conceive, perceive and imagine the world) is an essential aspect of interpreting discourse because it creates the individual's "*context model*" (2009b). This context model is an individual's dynamic and ever-evolving worldview through which discourses and social structures are interpreted. But the context model is not just a passive filter through which discourse and society are mediated; it also shapes the context for the individual's responses to society and to discourse. Thus, van Dijk theorises a triangular relationship between discourse-cognition-society in which each impacts the other, so that studying the individual and his world view reveals much about the nature of the power of the society in which he lives. Further, building on the work of Serge Moscovici (1973), van Dijk argues that there exist *social* event models – context models which are shared by identifiable social groups. These shared models not only imply a shared view of the

world, but are also essential in framing group identity – sharing the group’s worldview is an essential dimension of belonging to that group.

Perhaps van Dijk’s most valuable contribution is his idiosyncratic definition of ‘coherence’. To van Dijk a discourse is *coherent* if the actor can construct a mental model for it, irrespective of whether it accords with the facts of the world. Thus, coherence is a self-referential system in which components of speech are interpreted in relation to an overarching event model, not in relation to some objective idea of reality. Consequently, when one looks beyond the group the reasons for conflict and resistance become obvious – each group has its own shared event model and consequently interpret discourse and events differently.

Contestation of the history curriculum should therefore be seen as the meeting of two *coherent* (in van Dijk’s sense) discourses; two holistic yet incompatible context models. The coherence of these context models causes them to be closed systems, they cannot be modified piecemeal – there is no theoretical ‘middle ground’ between the two models since they are underpinned by irreconcilable ontological assumptions. Thus, contestation based on the principle of challenging the opponent’s context model is doomed to fail – by challenging the world view, one is partially endorsing the assumptions which underpin that worldview.

The paper now turns to a discussion of the nature and socio-cognitive origins of the two context models a thorough understanding of which is central to a proper conceptualisation of the contestation.

### **Defending the Draft: New Right Traditionalism and the socio-cognition of Michael Gove**

For those politicians seeking career-advancement in Britain, the post of Education Secretary is sometimes seen as a stopping-off post on the road to better things (Cannadine, et al., 2011). However, Finn (2015) has argued that Michael Gove – together with only Butler and Crosland – was one of only three post-war Secretaries of State to see the role as a vocation. In the run-up to the May 2010 General Election, Gove was asked about his educational philosophy by *The Times* newspaper; his response had much of the unvarnished candour with which he was later to become associated,

‘I’m an unashamed traditionalist when it comes to the curriculum. Most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England’ (Gove, 2010a)

Elsewhere, Gove spoke enthusiastically about E.D. Hirsch whose book *Cultural Literacy* (1987) confidently asserted the core knowledge that ‘every American needs to know’. Although Gove was a pedagogic traditionalist by conviction, he was also acutely aware of the political capital to be made from offering a return to educational traditionalism. The 2010 election took place in the midst of an economic recession and considerable anxiety about the declining living standards of the middle classes. As Apple (2001) and Ball (2003) have argued, conservative curricula appeal to middle-class voters who see a traditional conception of knowledge as a way of safeguarding their privilege at a time when they feel ‘room at the top’ might be shrinking.

Once in office Gove’s philosophy recalibrated slightly: educational reform was now recast in terms of global competitiveness. Announcing his intention to overhaul the curriculum he told the House of Commons:

‘We have sunk in international league tables and the national curriculum is substandard. Meanwhile the pace of economic and technological change is accelerating and our children are being left behind. The previous curriculum failed to prepare us for the future.’ (Gove, 2011)

Two claims are made here: that the UK is losing out in global terms and that the school curriculum is to blame for this. There is nothing new in these arguments which represent a dimension of the

'discourse of derision' described by Stephen Ball (1990). While many arguments from global decline espouse a curriculum directly reflecting the needs of the economy and business, Gove felt the answers lay in tradition. Somewhat paradoxically, the best 'preparation for the future' was to be a curriculum which returned to the past.

If Gove's blend of technological dynamism and curricula traditional was paradoxical, it was certainly not new. As Ball (1990) has shown, these arguments were extraordinarily effective in the early 1970s when the economic decline triggered by the 1973 oil crisis gave credence to the arguments advanced some years earlier in *The Black Papers* (Cox & Dyson, 1969). Closer analysis of Ball's arguments show how little New Right educational reform strategy has evolved in the intervening forty years. Ball identifies three strands to the argument in the *Black Papers*, two of which are echoed in Gove's thinking forty years later: firstly, that progressive pedagogy had undermined academic standards; secondly, that teachers were dangerously politically-motivated and thirdly, that poor behaviour in schools was increasing. It did not matter, of course, that these charges were unsupported by evidence, as they formed a common-sense discourse or, in Ball's words 'what we all know about school'.

To Gove, even in 2013, schools remained dominated by a progressive pedagogy and egalitarian discourse which acted as a cover for low standards. A major speech in 2013 even cited the continued malign influence of the Plowden Report, the *bête noir* of *The Black Papers* forty years earlier.

'Throughout the twentieth century – and in particular since 1967 and the publication of the Plowden Report – the new educational orthodoxy was progressive. The role – and authority – of the teacher and traditional subject knowledge was undermined.... Didactic became a pejorative term' (Gove, 2013c).

In the case of the contestation over the history curriculum, it was this straw-man approach to argumentation that fatally undermined his position. In Gove's Manichean world-view, anyone opposing his proposed core knowledge curriculum must be a pedagogical progressive and, since the publication of *The Black Papers*, progressivism had been linked with leftist ideology. In the context of the 2013 contestation, it would therefore be critical for Gove's opponents to avoid any accusations that they were politically motivated. As will be shown later, although initial criticisms might have fallen into this discursive trap, later opposition to the draft was more nuanced; emphasising pedagogical and disciplinary defences of the subject.

### **Opposing the Draft - Social Realism and Socio-cognition of New History**

In the year before Cox and Dyson published the first of their Black Papers, Mary Price published her seminal article '*History in Danger*' (1968) which perceptively articulated a growing feeling of unease among **many** in the history teaching community. Referring to the influential Plowden Report's preference for skills-based curricula and an interdisciplinary approach, Price began by criticising the growing trend towards teaching of mixed-humanities or cross-curricula world studies and argued, "These are days when every subject must justify itself" (p. 344). Price's call to arms and the diversification of history in university departments (Ballard, 1970) was to lead to the 'New History' movement which redefined school history during the 1970s.

In the decade following Price's article, the Schools Council History Project published several key texts which adumbrated the philosophy of this 'New History' (Coltham & Fines, 1971; Rogers, 1979; Schools' History Project, 1976). Taken together, these texts established the principle that school history was both a body of knowledge and a disciplinary method of enquiry. Criticisms of New History which describe it as a 'progressive approach' are therefore badly aimed. New History rejected much of the Plowden-era child-centred pedagogy and is based, not on a pedagogical rejection of former approaches to teaching the subject, but on an epistemological one. New History starts from the epistemologically uncontroversial position that historians create accounts of the past and that these accounts inevitably differ. This is not a post-modernist position – not all accounts are equally valuable

– but children must be given the tools to pick between these accounts and to formulate their responses to them. Although the term did not exist at the time that these arguments were forming, ‘new history’ can now be described as a social realist (Young, 2008a) or ‘disciplinary’ (Counsell, 2011) conception of the subject. Social realism aims to provide a basis for defining powerful knowledge which relies neither on tradition, nor on transient instrumental utility. To social realists – and proponents of New History – ‘powerful knowledge’ is not a list of core knowledge that every school child ought to know, but a knowledge of powerful disciplinary and procedural concepts.

By 2013 there were, then, two competing context models concerning the nature and purpose of school history which both boasted an intellectual pedigree stretching back forty years. History educators shared a unifying narrative, every bit as powerful of the narrative of academic decline and remorseless global competition advanced by the right. This narrative served to bind members of the community together with shared context models – what van Dijk (2009a) calls ‘*social representations*’ and also formed the basis of the community’s arguments against the new curriculum

There was, however, a mismatch in the extent to which each side fully comprehended the other’s context model. While the arguments of the right had changed little since the publication of *The Black Papers*, the arguments of history educators had evolved significantly since the 1970s. Supporters of the draft curriculum did not fully comprehend the epistemic foundations of the criticisms they faced, preferring to see them as a reheated version of former arguments from self-interested producer-capture and leftist ideology. The effectiveness of opposition to the draft depended, in part, on the ability to defy these inaccurate caricatures.

The remainder of the paper consists of an analytical narrative showing how this was achieved. While initial opposition to the draft ran the risk of seeming ideologically-motivated, opposition soon shifted in terms of both nature and content towards a depoliticised defence of school history in disciplinary and educational terms.

### **Before February 2013 – Laying the ideological ground work**

In the first Conservative Party conference after taking office, Michael Gove turned his attention to the history curriculum:

One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past. Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know - the history of our United Kingdom... The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. Children are given a mix of topics at primary, a cursory run through Henry the Eighth and Hitler at secondary and many give up the subject at 14, without knowing how the vivid episodes of our past become a connected narrative. Well, this trashing of our past has to stop. (Gove, 2010b)

Such a rousing appeal to tradition was inevitably well received by the Conservative Party faithful, but we can see within this short extract the establishment of the key tropes in the forthcoming discursive assault on school history. Three themes are apparent. Firstly, that there exists an ideological bias in current history teaching wherein Britain’s past is ‘trashed’. Secondly, that the curriculum as currently framed is failing to give children a ‘connected narrative’ and thirdly that its existing teaching is superficial or ‘cursory’. In the two years between the announcement of the curriculum review and the publication of the draft curriculum, these themes were repeated relentlessly by politicians and the press in order to cement their status as common sense.

A survey of the newspapers at the time serves to illustrate the process through which this narrative was established. In December 2012, the Daily Mail reported on a ‘leak’ from the Department of Education under the headline ‘Gove faces war with equality activists as he axes Labour’s PC curriculum that dropped greatest figures from history lessons’ (Petre, 2012). Beneath this a subheading read, ‘The likes of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Nelson and Winston Churchill had been dropped from history

lessons under the last Labour Government in a move critics said was driven by 'political correctness'. This was intentionally misleading; it was indeed true that none of the names listed had been included in the 2007 curriculum, but nor had anyone else's been. The Labour curriculum had deliberately eschewed the 'list' approach to curriculum design, preferring instead to specify key concepts and key processes. The *Daily Express*, meanwhile, relied on unsubstantiated assertions to construct its narrative; former government history adviser Anthony Freeman was quoted as saying 'Many teachers are more concerned to promote politically correct social themes than to present a narrative' (Hughes, 2012).

Two days before the publication of the draft, Gove made his own contribution to the narrative in a major speech to the *The Social Market Foundation*:

In history, rather than a disconnected set of themes and topics there is [to be] a clear narrative which encompasses British and world history, with space for study of the heroes and heroines whose example is truly inspirational. (Gove, 2013c)

Once again, teachers were failing to 'teach narrative' and were taking ideologically-motivated decisions to airbrush 'heroes and heroines' from our nation's past. The veracity of these attacks is unimportant; instead they should be seen as an attempt to establish an uncontested narrative of declining standards and ideological bias to which the traditionalist curriculum was to be an antidote. The consistency of message should be seen as a sophisticated attempt to frame the debate over the curriculum even before it was published.

### **Curriculum Announcement and Contestation in overview**

The long-awaited draft National Curriculum was released for consultation on February 7<sup>th</sup> 2013 with Gove promising the House of Commons that

'...programmes of study in almost all subjects - other than primary English, mathematics and science - have been significantly slimmed down. And we've specifically stripped out unnecessary prescription about how to teach and concentrated only on the essential knowledge and skills which every child should master..... In history there is a clear narrative of British progress with a proper emphasis on heroes and heroines from our past.' (Gove, 2013b)

Most with an interest in the history curriculum did not recognise the description of a 'slimmed down' curriculum. Where the previous curriculum had mandated the study of just four items of content (The Holocaust, World Wars and the British Empire), the draft curriculum identified 60 named events for compulsory teaching and 28 named individuals (presumably the heroes and heroines on whom there was now to be a 'proper emphasis'). The curriculum was, however, 'slimmed down' in terms of its focus: secondary students were to study no events before 1750 and the histories of no countries outside Europe.

In the first week after publication the draft attracted a flurry of commentary in the popular press both defending (Abulafia, et al., 2013a) (Ferguson, 2013) and criticising it (Evans, 2013) (Sheldon, 2013). The subsequent months did not see much reduction in this controversy, but the nature and content of the arguments did change. These changes will be analysed in more depth in later sections, but are outlined here.

**Phase One - February:** Announcement of the curriculum is greeted by howls of protest from the history education community. The objections are a disorganised jumble of the political, disciplinary and pedagogical. In this phase, grassroots campaigns such as 'Save School History' and 'History not Propaganda' provide online forums in which a range of grievances are aired. The initial response from the Historical Association (2013a) is also noticeably less measured and more overtly political than later.

**Phase Two - March-May:** This is the decisive period during which there is a noticeable shift in the form and content of opposition. While arguments of the history education community shift towards the educational and pedagogical, those of Michael Gove move in the opposite direction - becoming more overtly political. There is also a corresponding shift in the question of 'who speaks' as grassroots organisations named in Phase One decline in influence and contestation coalesces around the Historical Association. The Historical Association not only restricts itself to disciplinary/ educational critiques, but also appropriates the language of the 'New Right', making appeals to 'knowledge' and 'rigour'. These often overlapped with practical considerations. For example, the sheer volume of specified content could only be squeezed into the time available if events were covered in very superficial and simplified ways. Thus, the argument of the government was inverted: greater specification of content ensured less rigour, not more.

**June-August:** Much of the heat of the contestation declined in this period as it became increasingly clear that compromise would be reached. The tone from both parties becomes more conciliatory as leaks from the Department for Education suggests significant revisions to the curriculum were set to be made (Mansell, 2013).

### Detailed analysis of the contestation discourse

#### Phase One – February 2013

The release of the draft curriculum led to an immediate explosion of comment by teachers in the electronic media. Existing forums at the Historical Association and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) were used as places for practising teachers to go to express their thoughts<sup>1</sup>. Since these responses came from individuals, they inevitably lacked a singular message, and so stressed a range of diffuse objections. Smith (2013) identified three strands (ideological, practical and Educational/ Disciplinary) to this initial opposition and the following examples from the SSAT forum typify these.

**Ideological** - Why does this feel like white middle class history? There are so few examples of other cultures in positive roles that it almost feels like Victorian History. Is it me or does this read like "England civilised the savages!"? I could go on. One of my Year 12's simply said "Sir they can't teach that – it's racist." I think that's where I will leave it.

**Practical** - Now we will have to plan and prepare, as well as fund, a huge change. Does anyone know if this will be phased in over three years?

**Disciplinary** - This proposal is not History – but it is Heritage Studies with contempt for the hard work History departments across the country have aspired to achieve.

Within two days of the draft, two online protest groups were established: a facebook group entitled 'Save School History' (@save\_our\_history) and a website entitled 'History not Propaganda' (@unbiasedhistory). The names of these groups indicate their primary concern with the practical/ political dimensions of opposition. Although both critiqued the 'bad history' of the new curriculum, these critiques were secondary to their main lines of argument and were somewhat amorphous – in the case of 'History, not Propaganda' this consisted of a defence of 'critical thought'. The participatory nature of this approach was also evident in an e-petition calling on the UK Government to 'Keep school History Politically neutral'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, online discussion boards are inevitably a temporary source of information. The SSAT closed its discussion forum several years ago while the Historical Association migrated to a new website in Spring 2016 and did not store the contents of discussion boards.

<sup>2</sup> Archived here: <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/46338>

The diverse responses of practising teachers reflected the logistical challenge of implementing this curriculum in schools. Elite commentators, however, (including historians and history educators) did not face this practical challenge and so their objections united around an epistemic/ disciplinary critique. On the same day that the curriculum was released, Professor Sir Richard Evans wrote that 'the document gives no sense at all of the fact that history is an academic discipline, like physics or chemistry' (Evans, 2013a). Four days later, Chris Husbands (2013), Director of the Institute of Education, London, wrote, 'History as an academic discipline is both a story, and a mode of inquiry'. On 14<sup>th</sup> February, Nicola Sheldon contributed her perspective concluded that Gove's objectives were not inappropriate, but that his solutions were:

'Chronology is obviously high on Gove's priorities – and reasonably so... Reconciling the need to offer students the "big picture" of the past, while enabling them to understand key events, has been a conundrum for history teachers ever since the national curriculum was introduced' (2013)

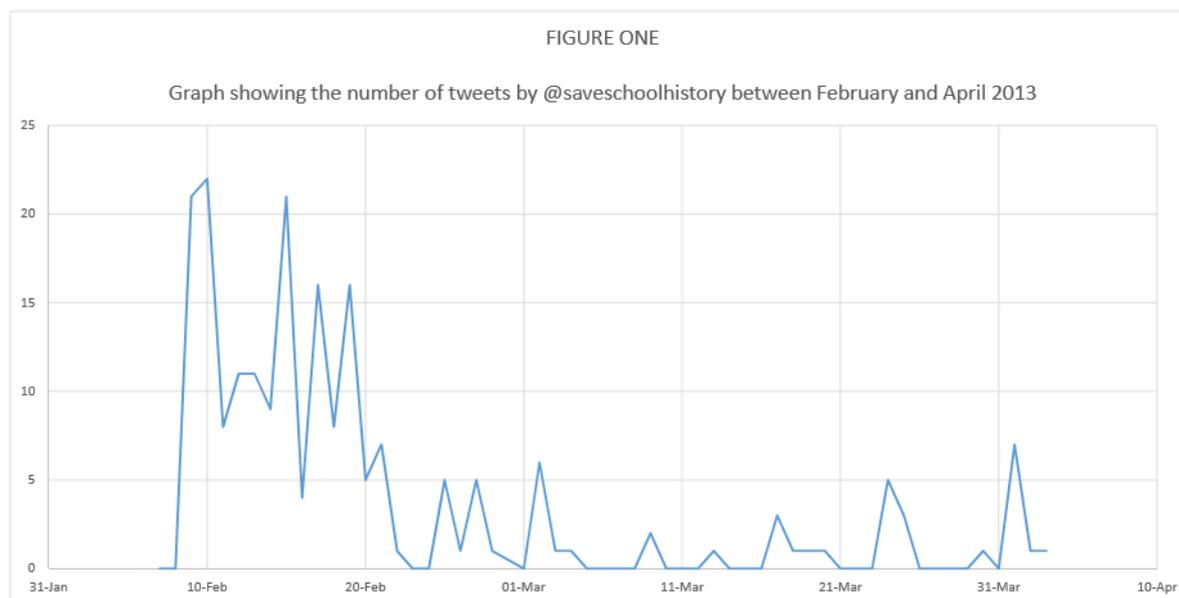
As Jenkins (1991) has argued, appeals to the objectivity of the historical method can perhaps be seen as an unwillingness to accept one's own partiality; an attempt to present one's own accounts as politically neutral while condemning the ideology inherent in others'. Indeed, the subheading of Evans' article – 'Little England folly at the heart of history' – would lend weight to this view. However, it is not the ontological possibility of historical enquiry which is at issue here, but the more prosaic question of whether the new curriculum represented 'history' as commonly understood. Conversely, it is noticeable that those academic historians who defended the draft did so in more explicitly ideological terms. The defence of the curriculum offered by Niall Ferguson (2013) was very much in the tradition of *The Black Papers*; leaning on an account of a single classroom teacher in *Standpoint*, a right-wing current affairs magazine (Hunter, 2013), Ferguson attacked the current school approach which is underpinned by 'a rejection of historical knowledge in favour of "source analysis" and "child-centred" learning.' Ferguson saw 'partisan prejudice' as the only possible reason for rejecting the draft which he defended as 'a model of political correctness'. A letter to *The Times* by historians on 27<sup>th</sup> February (Abulafia, et al., 2013a) was similarly redolent of the *Black Papers*, arguing that critics of the draft were 'attached to the status quo and suspicious of change'.

A week after the curriculum had been announced, therefore, there existed two simultaneous debates: a classroom-based critique which attacked the curriculum on a range of fronts and one from the academy which focused principally on disciplinary arguments. This is not to say that disciplinary critiques were absent from school-teachers' voices, but that these represented one critique amongst many, whereas they were the exclusive focus of academic protestations. However, despite these differences, defenders of the curriculum saw both arguments as fundamentally political: their context model cast their opponents as Marxists and pedagogical progressives. In the next phase of contestation, this oversimplification was to prove damaging to the curriculum's chances of success; as opponents shifted their focus more towards an explicitly depoliticised disciplinary critique.

### **Phase Two – March-May 2013**

On 14<sup>th</sup> February, the Historical Association took two significant steps: the first was to release its initial response to the draft curriculum and the second was to organise a thorough consultation (Historical Association, 2013a). This consultation was to consist of an online poll (which received 1600 responses) and five public meetings around the UK (which a total of 545 people attended) (Historical Association, 2013b). The impact of this decisive action in shaping both the form and content of opposition cannot be underestimated, as it showed the Historical Association taking a lead in organising resistance. While we must guard against '*post hoc*' logic, this decisive action by the HA preceded a decline in the kinds of unreflective grassroots opposition seen in the first few weeks of the draft's life.

Given the transient nature of social media, this is difficult to quantify (many groups have deleted their online presence) but Figure One shows how the twitter activity of one account declined after the initial flurry of activity in mid-February.



The HA published two different critiques of the draft curriculum: one on 14<sup>th</sup> February before its national consultation (Historical Association, 2013a) and one afterwards (Historical Association, 2013b). Although these critiques remain substantially the same, the changing way in which they were framed is revealing.

Table One juxtaposes these two critiques for ease of comparison.

<b>'Curriculum Concerns'</b> HA's Initial Response <a href="https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/news/1722">https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/news/1722</a> (Historical Association, 2013a)	<b>'You spoke, we listened'</b> HA's Response following consultation <a href="https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/news/1779">https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/news/1779</a> (Historical Association, 2013b) NB – All emphasis in original
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It completely fails to recognise that history is an intellectual discipline underpinned by a rigorous conceptual framework and fails to give any guidance on how the academic processes of history should be fostered.</li> <li>The Purpose of Study statement is inadequate and the aims do not reflect the content.</li> <li>The content is heavily prescriptive and shows little evidence that any meaningful thought has gone into selection; indeed some decisions seem quite arbitrary and even bizarre. Attempting to teach such a content heavy curriculum will lead to little more than a superficial recollection of names and dates.</li> <li>The content of the draft Programmes of Study are far too narrow in their focus on British political history. References to women and diverse ethnic groups are clearly tokenistic. Nods to social, economic and cultural history are rare.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Dumbing down</b> - The proposed history curriculum will not achieve its aims. To be able to include all the units and areas listed especially at primary level content would need to be simplified and shortened to such an extent that information would be dumbed down and the importance of key events would be lost.</p> <p><b>Time allocation</b> - there has been no indication that history will be given any more time in the curriculum. It is only compulsory to aged 14 unlike most other European countries. Some schools provide less than 1 hour a week for history</p> <p><b>Chronology</b> - Teaching history in chronological order alone will not help students to develop chronological understanding. Chronological understanding is something that can only be built up over time and by making connections across periods.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The decision to include all ancient, medieval and early modern history in the curriculum for 7 to 11 years olds makes little sense and will leave young people with a simplistic understanding of past societies. Secondary teachers will, inevitably, be left trying to plug gaping holes in pupils' understanding.</li> <li>• The resourcing and training implications are enormous. There are no resources to cover much of the content for primary pupils, primary teachers are largely non-specialist, secondary teachers would need to scrap many of their existing resources and completely re-write their schemes of work.</li> <li>• The authors of this curriculum have completely failed to understand what progression in history might mean or how a good grasp of chronology can be developed.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who is teaching</b> - Too much of the important history will only be taught at primary level - by non specialists, with little or no training in history.</p> <p><b>Aims</b> - The history curriculum displays a complete mismatch with how children learn and child development. It is also mismatched with content and aims of other subjects.</p> <p><b>A narrow focus of history</b> - too Anglo-centric and politically focused, very little British, European, or global history and very little social history.</p> <p><b>The term discipline has been removed from the history aims</b> - does that mean history in schools is not a discipline and instead just a collection of facts?</p>
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The first obvious difference is the use of bold subheadings in the later version (emphasis in original). It is not so much the mere matter of formatting which is of interest here, but rather the words that are chosen for highlighting. There is a clear attempt to engage with, and appropriate, the language of the New Right. For example, the opening bullet point of the later document invokes the favoured traditionalist trope of 'dumbing down' and inverts it to defend current practice. Similarly, another of Gove's key arguments – the need to develop chronological understanding – is also foregrounded. Like Sheldon's observation above, the position of the history teaching community is not that the development of children's chronological understanding is unimportant, but that this depends on something more than simply learning events in order. Although the specific point remains in essence unchanged from the earlier version, it is decoupled from the term 'progression'. This seems to be part of a larger attempt to remove 'education speak' from the critique.

Another important adjustment is the 'toning down' of the more explicitly political language. The accusation in the earlier version that, 'References to women and diverse ethnic groups are clearly tokenistic', has been removed in favour of the less controversial statement that there is a 'narrow focus'. Similarly, the assertion that there is 'little evidence that any meaningful thought has gone into selection' has been removed and no corresponding reference to the selection and omission of content is included in the later version. The more intemperate language has been modulated, with the words 'arbitrary and bizarre' appearing in the first version, though not in the latter. There is a definite sense that while the first version represented an angry 'kneejerk' response to the changes, the later version shows more restraint in terms of its presentation and greater care is taken to frame arguments in a way that would resonate with conservative curriculum planners.

A similar movement from reflex reaction to reflective action is seen in the pages of *Teaching History*, the HA's journal for school teachers. The draft was released late in the publication cycle for the March 2013 edition of the magazine and so the only overt reference to it appears in the 'HA Secondary News' section, authored by Simon Harrison, Chair of the HA Secondary Committee. The piece denounced the draft as 'bloated' and a 'list', while the process of its authorship was condemned as 'bizarre and secretive' (Harrison, 2013a). Also noticeable is the sense of defeatism in Harrison's words, 'we can contribute to the consultation... in the vain hope that we might be listened to... We must engage because not to do so would mean surrendering to an administration that already believes our views are worthless.' By June, Harrison's language was more diplomatic, but it continued to complain about the 'political agenda which appears to drive some of the curriculum content' (Harrison, 2013b).

However, there was a major shift in emphasis elsewhere in the June edition from the reflex/ political to the reflective/ disciplinary. The editorial signposted this shift.

'authors [in this edition] take up various positions in relations to the draft, all of them critical, but... reflecting the rich debates... and careful concern of history teachers for ensuring the best possible historical learning for our students.' (Counsell, et al., 2013).

One article is particularly illustrative of this shift: *'Silk Purse from a sow's ear? Why knowledge matters and why the draft History NC will not improve it'* (Hall & Counsell, 2013) shows the authors usurping the language of educational traditionalists. Consider this section:

'We cannot endorse an NC which lacks academic rigour, which will leave England's children lagging behind every other educationally leading jurisdiction and which does not solve the 'knowledge problem'... we dared to hope that this Secretary of State would protect the entitlement of all students to an undiluted, rigorous, disciplinary experience of history.' (p. 24)

In this short section, the supposed 'home turf' of the New Right is discursively colonised. The opponents of the draft are casting themselves as guardians of 'academic rigour' and a knowledge-rich curriculum. In this article, rigour is redefined as an 'undiluted... disciplinary experience of history' and there is even an attempt to co-opt the New Right discourse of remorseless international competition with the phrase 'leave England's children lagging behind'.

It is clear, therefore, that opposition changed in three ways in this period. Firstly, there were fewer voices contributing to the debate, as the Historical Association took the lead on opposition. Secondly, the disciplinary critique which had dominated elite critiques of the curriculum in February became the mainstay of opposition in this later period. Thirdly, and most interestingly, there was a deliberate attempt to appropriate and invert the language of the New Right, with words such as knowledge, rigour, chronology and even global competition featuring increasingly frequently in critiques.

At the same time as the arguments of the curriculum's opponents were becoming more nuanced, those of Michael Gove became more strident. A month after the release of the new curriculum, Michael Gove used an article in the Daily Mail to rail against 'The Blob', a core of Marxist teachers and educationalists, whom he argued held disproportionate influence in current educational thinking (Gove, 2013a). In the article, his own opponents were dismissed as 'enemies of promise' who were 'in thrall to Sixties ideologies'. Moving onto university educationalists, he wrote,

'You would expect such people to value learning, revere knowledge and dedicate themselves to fighting ignorance. Sadly, they seem more interested in valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence.'

Although Gove was not referring to history teachers specifically, the contribution was designed to set up a binary which encompassed all opposition to his reforms. Gove's argument was a familiar device in which hegemonic values are presented as an objective good which can only be opposed by those with an ideological axe to grind.

Gove continued this line of attack in a speech to teachers at Brighton College in May, when he attacked a supposed 'culture of low expectations' in English schools, in which too many teachers were treating 'young people on the verge of university study as though they have the attention span of infants' (Gove, 2013d). Again, Gove chose to cast his opponents as ideologically motivated arguing, 'The one area of the national curriculum which has come under heaviest criticism from the unions and their allies for packing in too much content has - of course - been the history curriculum'. This claim was deliberately misleading: Gove's opponents over the history curriculum are accused of being 'allies' of trade unions (a by-word for left-wing ideologues) while their criticisms are reduced to a complaint about 'too much content.' In this speech, Gove chose examples of current history teaching in schools

which he believed demonstrated his point, accusing the Historical Association of suggesting 'students learn about the early Middle Ages by studying the depiction of King John as a cowardly lion in Disney's 'Robin Hood'. Another example which was widely reported in the press, concerned an activity on the Active History website in which children were asked to analogue figures in the rise of Hitler to characters in Roger Hargreaves' Mr Men books (Shepherd, 2013; Levy, 2013). Three days later, Gove appeared on political magazine show, 'The Andrew Marr Show', to repeat the accusation of 'dumbing down':

'What the current history curriculum does, I'm afraid, is reduce things to a lowest common denominator level which provides people with a level of historical knowledge that is just not adequate to then go on to be able to use the analytical skills that both of us want to see.'<sup>3</sup>

However, as we have already seen, the nature of 'dumbing down' had already been redefined by opponents of the draft. The question of the importance of knowledge had already been posed and answered within the internal discourse of the history education community.

There was, therefore, a significant disconnect between the arguments being made by opponents of the draft and the way in which these criticisms were being caricatured. While opponents of the draft made nuanced defence of history as a discipline, traditionalist supporters of the curriculum railed against a chimerical (or at least anachronistic) opponent – the history teacher as progressive ideologue. Although these attacks made for good copy in the right-wing press, in the context of the curriculum contestation they were ineffective. By refusing to engage with politicised slurs, opponents of the draft were able to expose the essential irony at the heart of neoliberal thinking: that a self-described post-ideological worldview so often falls back on the language of twentieth century ideologies in denigrating its opponents.

Interestingly, though, within weeks of Gove making his most strident attacks on 'the blob' and the 'culture of low expectations' in schools, out of the public eye, he was signaling a planned retreat.

### **Phase Three - June –August**

The Department for Education's consultation on the curriculum closed on April 16<sup>th</sup> and soon afterwards it was intimated that there could be major revisions to the draft. The first indication could be gleaned from a response to a question in the House of Commons concerning the reform of GCSE examinations. Here for the first time, Gove suggested that his approach to curriculum reform had been intentionally oppositional describing his department's 'Hegelian approach to policy making of thesis, antithesis and then synthesis' (Hansard, 2013). This description seemed to imply that public conflict was a necessary and desirable component of curriculum reform. As many commentators at the time pointed out, this approach differed markedly from previous versions of the National Curriculum where conflict took place behind closed doors and consensus was reached before publication. Further suggestion of a possible retreat appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper on 21<sup>st</sup> June which claimed 'DfE civil servants met history teachers last week to unveil the changes' and that 'Michael Gove is poised to backtrack on major aspects of his controversial new history curriculum for schools in England after sustained opposition from teachers and prominent academics'.

On July 8<sup>th</sup> The Department for Education published the results of their official consultation which they had known since mid-April. The report laid bare the scale of opposition to the history curriculum, stating that 'History received the largest number of responses of all the national curriculum subjects' (DfE, 2013b, p. 7) and that 'Of those responding in relation to one subject only (1,556), respondents to design and technology (340) and history (455) made up 51% of the responses' (p. 10).

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<sup>3</sup> Transcript available here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/1205132.pdf>

The government's response to the consultation seemed to accept many of the criticisms that had been levelled at it (DfE, 2013b). The new curriculum contained virtually no specification of content and addressed many of the disciplinary concerns. The final framework document (DfE, 2013c) was well received by the same voices who had criticised the draft. The Historical Association which had said earlier of the draft, 'More than twenty years of thoughtful and sophisticated approaches to curriculum development have been thrown away in this document' (2013a) now said that it was a curriculum which gave 'greater scope for choice and respect for teachers' expertise' (Historical Association, 2013c).

### **Epilogue and Conclusions**

On 30<sup>th</sup> December 2013, Michael Gove appeared on Radio Four's *'Start the Week'* and gave a post mortem of the contestation which had raged the previous summer.

'The first draft of the curriculum, most people thought had too much in it and I suspected that that was always going to be the case. We talked earlier about the curriculum being a compromise and this was my opening offer in the negotiation bazaar of the curriculum. I said, "Effendi, I would like much content" and various other people said, 'Absolutely not, you're asking too much' and what we, I think, arrived at in the end was a compromise that had more of a sense of a narrative arc and chronology and also a wider sense of the impact of Britain on the world and the world on Britain.' (BBC Radio 4, 2013)

Leaving aside the troubling Orientalism in this response, Michael Gove's analogy of a 'negotiation bazaar' is nevertheless a revealing one. While superficially this would seem to accord with his assertion in the House of Commons that curriculum design should be a Hegelian dialectic, these two metaphors differ in important ways. The Hegelian dialectic ends in synthesis, while a negotiation ends in compromise: synthesis and compromise are not quite the synonyms that Gove's interchangeable metaphors imply.

In a negotiation, one aims to achieve as much as one wants for as little expenditure as possible – the actual value of the artefact in question is not settled, but determined by the negotiating process. Further, it is customary for the buyer to begin negotiations with an opening offer which he knows to be unreasonable in order to gain an advantage in the inevitable compromise. In Hegel's dialectic, by contrast, the thesis is the best knowledge as understood at that time, the antithesis negates this and a synthesis is created; this synthesis is not a 'compromise', as commonly understood but 'new knowledge'. To Hegel, a *rational* solution – in the specific sense he uses the term – is arrived at through *conflict*, but not through disingenuous bargaining, as though over the price of an Arabian trinket.

The account of the curriculum contestation presented here would tend more towards the 'bazaar' interpretation than the nobler Hegelian model. The two sides did not engage with each other's arguments, but rather pursued their own arguments in parallel. After the initial outrage of February, the history teaching community pursued a disciplinary/ educational critique, while Gove launched attacks against the straw-man of the Marxist teacher 'fighting excellence' and determined to remove knowledge entirely from schools. This was an anachronistic attack on a largely extinct opponent: progressive pedagogies have largely disappeared from schools and teacher training institutions, but the 'self-styled educational progressives' for whom 'nothing could be as redundant as imparting knowledge' (Gove, 2013c) provided a convenient bogeyman for Gove.

The major irony here is that curriculum design is inevitably Hegelian: previous versions of the National Curriculum had been created as a result of conversations behind closed doors between teachers, academics and civil servants. While this process was not without difficulty (Phillips, 1998), it was, perhaps, a more dignified way of reaching a consensus view or, to use Hegel, a synthesis. The decision to keep the authorship of the draft secret and to release a completed draft curriculum for public

consultation before it had been discussed with curriculum experts was unprecedented. Indeed, even those who supposedly helped to write the curriculum were surprised by its content. One consultant, Steve Mastin, complained to *The Guardian* that the curriculum he agreed to in January 2013 bore no relation to the one which emerged in February and that 'someone has typed it up and I have no idea who that is,' (quoted in Boffey, 2013). This version is corroborated by the marked difference between the curriculum 'leaked' to *The Daily Mail* on 29 December 2012 (Petre, 2012) and the eventual abortive draft.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the spectacle of contestation was as great a prize to Gove as the curriculum itself. In positing a controversial curriculum and then demonising his enemies with *ad hominem* attacks and accusations of political bias, Gove was able to enhance his traditionalist credentials with the Conservative Party base. However, we should be careful of accusing Gove as bad faith as the same tactic had proved a devastatingly effective elsewhere in his reforming ministry. As Finn writes,

The extent to which his opponents – in the Labour Party, the teaching unions, the press and campaign groups – failed to counter his agenda was directly attributable to their inability to forge a competing narrative on education which articulated a national vision and which could not simply be dismissed (however wrongly) as self-interested special pleading (Finn, 2015, p. 9).

Finn's point is illustrated by the controversy over the changes to the GCSE English syllabus in May 2014 to remove non-British authors from the examination. Despite a petition signed by 83,000 people (Kennedy, 2014), Gove was resolute and the changes remained; not only this, but the pattern of contestation was familiar with Gove dismissing his opponents as 'culture warriors' (Gove, 2014). Gove's case was made easier by the kinds of arguments put forward by his opponents. For example, Bethan Marshall, the chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English complained: 'Many teenagers will think that being made to read Dickens aged 16 is just tedious. This will just grind children down' (Kennedy, 2014). Such an argument naturally played into the hands of the New Right for whom 'relevance', 'popular' and 'accessible' are synonymous with 'dumbing down'. It is important for those who seek to challenge government policy to anticipate likely lines of attack and not to fall into the role of self-interested anti-intellectual that has been written for them.

In this respect, the success of the resistance to the history curriculum is all the more remarkable since a competing narrative *was* forged. This was a narrative which not only articulated a disciplinary defence of the curriculum, but which colonised the language game of the New Right. Favourite right-wing themes such as remorseless international competition, rigour and knowledge were all appropriated, redefined and inverted; while ineffective political arguments were dropped. This kind of discursive dancing does not emerge suddenly in the midst of curriculum contestation, rather it is a sign of a robust subject association and a mature subject community with a strong self-concept and clear vision of how a curriculum should be framed.

The extent to which change was caused by this skillful opposition can, of course, be debated. There were strong practical and common sense criticisms of a curriculum which was overly-prescriptive, secretively authored and almost impossible to resource. Nevertheless, it has been argued that these factors alone would have been insufficient to cause a reversal of policy. It seems uncontroversial to conclude that careful epistemological introspection about the nature of one's own discipline is a necessary, but not sufficient cause of successful resistance to unwelcome policy change.

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