

LEARNERS, TEACHERS, PROFESSORS AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

The following main points will be covered:

- *What is historical consciousness and why is it significant?;*
- *The level of development of historical consciousness among SA learners;*
- *Possibilities of a historical consciousness approach to history teaching;*
- *Obstacles in the way of closer co-operation in this regard between stakeholders such as history professors, teachers and learners;*
- *Recommendations to try and forge a stronger partnership between these stakeholders in the development of historical consciousness;*

Introduction

Each individual, group, culture, nation, state has a vision of the past, which is not possible without historical consciousness. Many authors have attempted to define the concept of historical consciousness (see e.g. Brightman, 1990: 109; Collingwood, 1946: 7-10; Lucaks, 1988: 340-341; Marcus, 1980: 205; Rauche, 1990: 14-15; Rüsen, 1993: 195). From all of these definitions, in some cases very high-sounding formulations, following tentative definition:

Historical consciousness is a dynamic (i.e. not a static, but a forever changing) and culturally based and determined mental awareness of how a string of historical events of the past has conditioned the current position of an individual as part of a larger group. This mental awareness involves a consciousness of various elements, e.g. a perspective on time and chronology, an ability to periodise, an ability to recognize change and transition, an ability to establish cause and effect, and a sense of development. Historical consciousness influences the behaviour of the individual and group in the present and his/her/their aspirations with

regard to the future.

Jörn Rüsen (1993: 195) identifies experience, interpretation and orientation as key elements of historical consciousness. Through historical consciousness one experiences the past, interprets it as history, and receives life-orientation. Rüsen in particular has identified the development of historical consciousness as an indispensable function of the practice of history as a discipline. The development of a sound historical consciousness plays a crucial role in the education of people to fulfil their role as citizens in any society. Historical consciousness is highly significant for both the individual and the group in a variety of ways, some of which I only mention here briefly.

What is historical consciousness and why is it significant?

In the first place, historical consciousness provides a temporal orientation, through which the human self extends itself beyond mere mortality and becomes part of a temporal whole larger than that of his/her personal life. It addresses current issues in terms of their historical roots and shows the implications for the present and the future. It gives meaning to the past in such a way that it orientates society in the present. It provides a crucial link between past, present and future and helps a person to interpret the present through the past and develop a future orientation. The essence of historical consciousness thus does not lie in merely remembering and transmitting the past, but in the way it helps us view the present and in shaping the thoughts and actions that will determine the future (see Esposito, 1984: 61; Osagie, 1997: 64-66; Rüsen, 1993: 66-67; Schieder, 1978: 1).

Secondly, historical consciousness also plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of both the individual and the group, based on perceptions of the past. It presents a vision on the world and on the position of the individual and the group in the world. As a collective memory history acts as a conscious or unconscious influence on the decisions of individuals as well as on the collective actions of the great social forces that move in history. Historical experience has a formative influence on and clearly affects the mentality of groups (Kapp, 1997: 7).

In the third instance, historical consciousness helps to shape moral

values and thus serves as a moral force in determining human behaviour. Historical consciousness fulfills a mediating function between cultural determinism and moral free will and between values and action (Budick, 1989: 88; Marcus, 1980: 186; Rösen, 1993: 66).

The level of development of historical consciousness among SA learners

Postgraduate studies undertaken under my supervision by Kwang-Su Kim (1997, 1999) revealed serious gaps in the development of historical consciousness among history students at South African universities. Some of the results of our empirical studies have been similar to those of the extensive study of the historical consciousness of 15 year old learners in Europe by the Körber Stiftung in Hamburg (see Anvik and Von Borries, 1997):

- Learners have a rather superficial interest in history, limited to the few topics with which they are familiar.
- The resources of their historical knowledge are limited to information received from teachers and parents and a narrow range of textbooks and popular media.
- They lack historical knowledge, particularly in fields such as economic history and international relations.
- Knowledge about the history of their own cultural group or of local history is often lacking.
- There are deficiencies in their understanding of time concepts, chronology and periodisation.

These empirical results imply that history teaching in South Africa seems to be missing its goals and that the functions of historical consciousness in terms of temporal orientation, identity formation and moral education may be severely impeded in the case of many or even the majority of learners at South African schools and universities.

Possibilities of a historical consciousness approach to history teaching

One way to address the inadequacies in terms of history teaching may

be to follow an approach specifically aimed at developing the historical consciousness of learners. What are the possibilities of a historical consciousness approach to history teaching?

In his doctoral thesis, done at Unisa, Gerald Mazabow (2003) proposes a historical consciousness approach to the teaching of history at school. He contends that it is compatible with OBE and consonant with the highest didactical criteria. He has developed a model, aligned to the policy and curriculum statements of the Department of Education and complete with an applicable learning programme organiser, specific outcomes, practical classroom examples and assessment methods, which will place historical consciousness at the centre of the educational task of the history teacher.

I do not wish to go into the details of the merits and demerits of Mazabow's model, but only wish to state that in my opinion there are many potential benefits of such an approach. A list of positive outcomes for learners of a historical consciousness approach to history teaching have been identified in the literature:

- Historical knowledge, understanding and skills are developed
- The capacity to participate in the ongoing dialogue between historical and contemporary reality is enhanced
- Moral consciousness, an awareness of values and the ability to make sound value judgements are fostered
- The ability to understand and demonstrate civic responsibility and democratic values is developed
- The preservation of tradition, culture and collective identity is promoted
- A multi-perspective interpretation of history is cultivated and empathetic understanding nurtured.
- A clear perception of the interrelatedness between past, present and future events is developed.
- The competence is acquired to form an overall picture in which each particular event of the past is part of a wider whole.
- The ability is developed to ascribe meaning to the learner's own present situation in a manner which reflects the value he/she attaches to the past, and the expectations he/she has for

the future.

To the degree in which his/her historical consciousness is developed a person will be able to:

- Develop an insight into and an understanding of the historical background of contemporary problems and phenomena.
- Develop an historical open-mindedness regarding issues and a critical appreciation of the value and role of historical heritage and tradition.
- Acquire knowledge and understanding of the uniqueness and interdependence of human relations on micro and macro level in order to develop a national and international vision (Kapp, 1996: 2).

I agree with Mazabow (2003: 28) that the historical consciousness approach has the potential to restore the dignity of history as a subject and cultivate an ability in learners to overcome impediments which obstruct their attainment of an authentic knowledge and understanding of the past. Conceiving history as a process that encompasses the past, present and future might lead to a new appreciation of the legacy and meaning of the past, and to a new capacity to assess and judge contemporary problems and complexities within the context of their evolution in time.

Historical consciousness and a multi-perspective interpretation of history

ScholarssuchasMartin Trümpelmann(1990)andPieter Kapphaveargued the case for a multiperspective approach to the past in history teaching. An approach specifically focused on the development of historical consciousness will promote precisely this type of multiperspective approach, which is needed to counter the danger of a so-called politically correct or officially endorsed version of the past, which is one-sided and divisive.

Such an approach will deal with the conflicting interpretations of the South African past by taking into account the diversity of our population. It will appreciate the fact that for different groups with different

values the events of the past have different meanings. We can only appreciate the kaleidoscopic nature of the South African past when our historical consciousness has reached a level of maturity.

It will also inculcate a strong sense of identity, of who we are and where we come from. This is a prerequisite for the appropriation by each individual and group of a specific part of the colourful tapestry of the past. Thus the relative place and role of events and people are put into perspective. Furthermore it will create the sense of a contested but shared past. The task of the historian and history teacher is to incorporate the different values and perceptions in South African society into a dynamic vision of the past which would promote understanding of one another and tolerance. Learners need to understand that there is no simplistic division of heroes and villains in the past, and that guilt is not limited to one group. The past is a mixture of good and bad. Intellectual engagement with the self and the other in terms of a divided and shared past will culminate in the appropriation of co-ownership and co-responsibility.

Thus, if a high level of historical consciousness can be attained maturity and tolerance become possible.

The shared responsibility of historians, history teachers and learners of history

In his study Mazabow (2003: 254-263) identifies the following tasks at hand to develop a historical consciousness approach to history teaching:

- Training educators in the historical consciousness approach.
- Developing methodologies for the historical consciousness approach.
- Revamping the content and scope of the curriculum to accommodate the historical consciousness approach.
- Promoting history as a discipline as a means to advance the historical consciousness of learners.
- Further research on the historical consciousness approach to history teaching.

Historians, history teachers and learners of history have a shared responsibility in realizing the ideal of a mature historical consciousness by working together in addressing these challenges.

Obstacles to stakeholder co-operation

Based on my own experience as an academic historian I would venture to state that some serious obstacles to stakeholder co-operation in the field of history teaching have arisen over the past number of years. In my view there are deep divisions in the history teaching profession in this country. Although many of these divisions may stem from the divisions of our apartheid past, others have arisen after 1994.

From my personal perspective I have experienced these divisions within the university and between the university and the schools. Within the university, at least as far as our own university is concerned, there has been a tendency for the Faculty of Education and the other Faculties that accommodate subjects which are also taught in the schools to drift apart. Because of several reasons, which I do not wish to discuss in any detail here, our university's Faculty of Education has, apart from the didactical training of would-be teachers, also taken over the task of teaching the content of subjects such as History, English, Maths, etc. We, as subject specialists, feel that we have been increasingly sidelined in the training of history teachers. I have heard that at other universities there are similar trends, but it probably differs from university to university. For obvious reasons, on which I do not have the space to dwell here, this is not a good thing in terms of the training of history teachers.

To me it seems that there is a general lack of communication and co-operation in the broader history teaching profession. Perhaps as a result of the drifting apart of the Faculty of Education and the History Department at our university myself and the other lecturers in our department have also lost track with what is happening in history teaching in the schools. Many years ago I used to often consult with history subject advisors of the provincial Department of Education. I served on task teams of the province. On several occasions I addressed history teachers on aspects of our discipline. Many history teachers used to register for honours and masters studies in history. None of these things are

happening any longer.

For a while I tried to keep track with the establishment of an SGB for history. Today I do not even know whether such an SGB has eventually come off the ground. When Kader Asmal was our national minister and the History Project was alive and well, I often got invitations to meetings and workshops. I have not had any communication from the national or provincial Departments of Education for many months. It may be partially my own fault, but I know of many other history professors who have had the same experience. We do not wish to sit in ivory towers, we would really like to get involved in building our discipline from the ground at all levels where it is practiced.

Recommendations for partnerships

Is it not now, at a time of crisis for our discipline, the moment to seek closer co-operation between stakeholders? I would like to make the following recommendations as a starting point for forging closer partnerships between all of us who have the common interest of promoting history in general and historical consciousness in particular:

- We should improve the communication between the various stakeholders. I think the South African Society of History Teaching and other organizations, such as the Southern African Historical Society and the Historical Association of South Africa, which have their infrastructure in the form of their management committees, should take a leading role to approach the national and provincial Departments of Education to establish better channels of communication.
- We should establish exactly what common ground does exist between us. At least we may be able to identify a set of common objectives for the broader history teaching profession. The development of a mature historical consciousness among learners at all levels, the topic of this paper, would probably be one of the major objectives, with a number of subgoals, perhaps in the form of the list of tasks at hand stated above.
- In terms of the development of historical consciousness and oth-

er common objectives that may be identified, the broader history teaching profession ought to engage in co-operative ventures, where our different levels of experience and expertise can be pooled more efficiently.

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- In terms of the development of historical consciousness and other common objectives that may be identified, the broader history teaching profession ought to engage in co-operative ventures, where our different levels of experience and expertise can be pooled more efficiently.

- Who should take the lead? Seeing that we, as the history professionals at the tertiary education level, are the ones who seem to be feeling left out, the initiative should probably come from us.

But our professional associations do not really have a track record of keeping intact the communication lines with the rest of the history teaching profession. Would it be too much to expect from the management committee of the South African Society for History Teaching to establish some sort of consultation forum for the broader profession? In my opinion that would be a great service to our profession.

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