OPEN DEBATE

THE HRSC-INVESTIGATION ON HISTORY TEACHING - A RESPONSE[1]

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R A U

THE ILLUSTRATIVE SYLLABUS

I will start by making some general comments on the nature and validity of the criticism levelled against the illustrative syllabus in particular, although the investigation as such will also be referred to. The criticism was generally very divergent, ranging from positive approval to almost outright rejection. Quite a number of critics from both the "left" and the "right" had a common feature and that was that many of them were at times petty, and one suspects even personal, in their criticism.

As far as the so-called left is concerned I find it particularly inappropriate that Professor Kallaway and some of his associates chose to argue that this exercise had the aura of a conspiracy of the Right and therefore was not worth considering at all.[2] In this way the impression is created that sinister motives were behind the whole endeavour and the perception was advanced that it once again was a case of "us" against "them". The moral high ground was claimed for the Left. Instead of seeking common ground, the categorisation and stigmatisation of people and the resultant bogging down of a potentially fruitful debate around personalities and ideological jargon and flagwaving, might be the inevitable result. This certainly isn't conducive to a spirit of reconciliation and curriculum renewal.

It has to be categorically denied that there is any validity in the accusation that this is again an effort of apartheid supporters to slip in at the back door. Apartheid is dead but of necessity human diversity and the reality of cultural and other groups cannot be denied. To confuse diversity with racism and apartheid is simply wishful thinking. It will certainly serve no purpose that we stand here pontificating to each other on this issue, trying to detect hidden agendas. What is far more important is that we accept the bona fides of all fellow South Africans who are openly and seriously committed to a democratic South Africa where universally accepted human rights are adhered to (No matter how recent there conversions might have occurred.)

What is more, we have to be grateful that many white South Africans are changing their racial attitudes and we should rather urge them on instead of letting our scepticism get the better of us. By the way, does the so-called Left not also have a few skeletons in the cupboard these days? In any case, it is about time that everybody in this country got rid of the apartheid habit of categorising people first (be it on racial, class or whatever criteria) and then continue by using this categorisation as the main criterion to evaluate his/her personal contribution as a human individual. I therefore want to appeal to everybody to try and address the criticism to the illustrative syllabus as presented and not to base the arguments on assumptions and questionable perceptions. If this isn't done, the whole issue is pre-judged and might be counterproductive. It will in any case, under these circumstances, be awfully difficult to sit around a negotiating table and come to a mutually acceptable compromise.

The mentioned sentiments do not imply that one should avoid or smother the present debate - as long as it is presented in a constructive way it has to be applauded.

THE HSRC STUDY

A further general observation needs to be made. Why was it decided precisely at this point to conduct this investigation? As one person argued: "I wonder, in the context of a rapidly changing political order, how wise it is to move forward with syllabus proposals now ... Is it not possible to delay further deliberations for a year to see how things

change? On the other hand appreciation was expressed for proactive action with a view to the new South Africa. This matter was in fact discussed at length by the committee and there were differences of opinion about this throughout. It also needs to be stated that the revision of the History syllabi that had been undertaken by the Network Committee for white education over the past years moved organizations such as the South African Society for History Teaching to make representations to the HSRC rather to conduct a national investigation that would not be confined to one population group only. The wish of the supporters of this school of thought was probably that professionals would be able to rise above the politicized reality. Unfortunately this ideal was asking too much. The fact is, however, that due to amongst others the representation of the same Society for History Teaching, this curriculum renewal exercise has, to a great extent, been abandoned.

A further matter related to the above, needs to be discussed briefly. What exactly did the working committee hope to achieve by the investigation? Did they want to establish a draft syllabus? Did they simply want to stimulate discussion? It can be stated categorically that the committee itself did not want to establish itself as an alternative curriculation body. It was however, hoped that the HSRC's status as a relatively independent research body would enable it to bring the different interest groups together in respect of what is regarded as a contentious, but important subject in any society. This exercise probably did succeed in stimulating the debate on History even if the criticism on the subreports was divergent and often completely contradictory.

There were differences of opinion on the committee on how a debate could best be stimulated. Professor Kallaway and his supporters were adamant that there should be no effort to concretise any of the ideas of the general reports in an illustrative syllabus. I myself and amongst others Dr Van der Ross, felt strongly that something more tangible was essential to elicit teacher response. Of course I would be the first to disapprove vehemently if the present illustrative syllabus would be regarded as anything more than just that. It is obviously crazy to present blueprints at this stage, but I want to reiterate that it is a pity that the illustrative syllabus is projected out of context.

I really believe it is a document that has substantial merit, especially as far as the accommodation of the nature of the subject and the didactic approach is concerned. The content is more debatable. It should once again be emphasized that the illustrative syllabus was intended to stimulate people to think anew on the nature of History as a school subject and its formative possibilities. In this regard one critic asked how the new syllabus would halt the decline of History. First of all an explicit effort was made to dislodge the debate from a potentially destructive confrontation of the skills versus content approach, by arguing that both are important within a broad definition of historical understanding. The premise was further that the subject, as structured in the illustrative syllabus, would make a stronger, existential appeal to the pupil (on account of more contemporary history, more contentious, debatable history, less pure political history and a stronger thematic-conceptual and formative focus). At the same time an explicit attempt was made to do justice to the unique nature of History (for example less political history and also social and cultural history, and a stronger focus on debatable content, because History presupposes not only a narrative approach, but also an ongoing debate between the past and the present and between different interpretations of the past).

CHRONOLOGY

To illustrate the above even further, the point of departure was for example that a historic experience of time needs to be established through History. The conventional perception is that chronology is the best (or even the only) way of doing this. Research in, for example Germany (cf. Rohlfes, 1979), also mentions other ways of realizing precisely this - such as the theme illustrating the political emancipation of women and the relation between church and state in standard 9 in the illustrative syllabus. These themes focus very strongly on the pupils empathically reliving a particular event. The same applies to the themes on plural societies which, besides the fact that they can be useful to all South Africans, presuppose an ability to empathise. Such experiencing of a historical "Zeitgeist" or an interpretation of a particular value are in fact extremely important ways of establishing an historic experience of time. But maybe the opinion of no less an authority than J. Fines is needed to conclude the argument. He argues: "One should consider for a moment the notion of "period" that so bedevills history. .... So let us ban centuries and millennia, and all the rest of the mathematical junk that has fouled the course of true history teaching

in the past" (1983: 150-151). We therefore tried explicitly to liberalise the historical perception of time. Accordingly apart from a broad chronological development, a thematic approach was often utilized to place a concept like democracy or capitalism in its global setting. On the other hand, it is still possible to use specific historic examples to highlight the concepts. This is a sound Brunerian principle married to the German "exemplarische Lehre". The specific phenomenon ought as a result of this approach to be more intelligible to the child. The concept is here central to the learning process and the danger of historical "side shows" is considerably lessened.

Lastly, to underscore the existential appeal once again, it is argued that knowledge of democracy, socialism, capitalism, plural societies elsewhere, etc. are knowledge domains that should be part of any historical shaping - therefore it has been taken explicitly into account and not, as so often in the past, by implication.

If one further links up with the explanation why preference has been given to a conceptually thematic approach, the fact is that the formative potential of the syllabus simply is undermined if it is presented in the conventional manner. What is more, it makes sense that the structuring should not only represent different content priorities, but also different methodological priorities. In other words, by linking a stronger conceptual theme to a more conventional (narrative) chronological module, and adding for example the so-called lines of development model, one necessitates different didactical approaches which emphasize the different facets of the nature of the subject and allow learning to be realized in different ways.

PRACTICAL CRITISISM

A fairly general objection against the illustrative syllabus was that it remains overloaded. This critisism is largely valid and it can for example be dealt with by scaling down module 3 in standard 10 to a single example (so to module 4, standard 9 and several others). However the problem can obviously be addressed in other ways. One can demand that a textbook should deal with the essence of the matter within a limited number of pages (in this way the writer of the textbook is for example forced to do justice to the criterion that History should also be a synthesis of different perspectives of society). On the compulsory modules there were also differences of opinion. Naturally an improvement is also possible in this regard. However the writers were convinced that at least certain themes were necessary for all South Africans - such as knowledge of democracy, the apartheid era and totalitarianism and everything related to these concepts. There can therefore be fewer compulsory themes, but a core syllabus seems to be desirable and even essential.

A further point of criticism was the argument that the syllabus was still too Eurocentric. Here too, one has to admit, there is in places, room for improvement (e.g. module 3 in standard 9 does not need to have such a strong Western bias). On the other hand one should also guard against the temptation of writing certain groups or individuals out of history for ideological reasons. Contentiousness is an extremely valuable didactic bonus for the good history teacher - especially if he/she can teach this in a perspectivic way. In connection with the above it is ironic that precisely this accusation, namely that the syllabus is still too white-centred, on the other hand elicited the objection from several critics that it is too neutral or represents an unnecessary broadening of emphasis on Africa at the expence of the RSA's other ties, for example with Europe. This again goes to show how difficult it is to remain balanced.

As far as the more detailed criticism is concerned, this too was widely divergent. The objection was raised that the general pattern of the syllabus was vague, that a class analysis of history was not feasible within the framework, that certain modules did not represent any improvement and that provision needed to be made for more options. There are further doubts about the concepts of culture and civilization. South African history was described by one critic as "deeply problematic". He argued that it should be defined "under some kind of thematic conception". Others had their doubts about local history or "plural societies", as this would have "apartheid overtones". Ironically in this regard module 3 (standard 10) was seen by one critic as an attempt to represent conservative communities in a negative light, while another argued that these examples served to strengthen the apartheid idea. A few felt that some themes were not historical, but that they were rather concerned with Political Science and Anthropology. Last, but not least, some objected to the so-called neutral content.

MULTICULTURALISM AND APARTHEID

The accusation that the illustrative syllabus and I personally am trying to sell multiculturalism under

the guise of an "apartheid baby in new clothes" is a last issue that needs a more elaborate response.[3] Simultaneously it is argued that our conception of culture is static and that we "effortlessly" lapse into impermeable plural communities. These types of accusations almost leave me speechless. It is on top of this argued that the Left has to decide wether it is worthwhile under this apartheid cloud to reclaim multiculturalism. I find these arguments extremely biased and flawed.

Fact is that multiculturalism was never a concept on which the Left has a monopoly. It is a holistic concept associated with issues like equal opportunities and respect for minorities. Amongst others multiculturalism implies anti-racism and conflict resolution. How on earth racism and conflict resolution in any context can be seen as typical new apartheid vehicles is beyond my comprehension. What is more, far from effortlessly lapsing into plural communities it was a deliberate attempt to tackle this controversial but vitally important problem within a historical context, without denying that this concept has strong antropological and sociological dimensions. However, it is here presented as relevant content within a properly structured module. This is one instance where a concept that is not conventionally seen as typically historical was explicitly given a historical dimension to, amongst others, boost the argument that history is also the pivotal social science within the secondary school (compare also Political Science concepts like capitalism and nationalism).

In summary, I was profoundly amazed and surprised at the reaction. I really expected applause, urging us on, as far as the issue of multiculturalism is concerned. Least of all, I expected this "knowledgeable than thou" aloofness.

In fact I sincerely believe that a sensitivity to basic multicultural realities focusing on issues like racism, human rights and democracy and the like, have to be addressed at school level. The history classroom is in this regard one of the most appropriate places to tackle these issues. What I am propagating here, or in the illustrative syllabus in this regard, is the very opposite of apartheid. People who persist with their negative analogy must be either driven by personal animosity or must have their own hidden agendas.

POSITIVE RESPONSES

On the positive side it should be stated that virtually all the respondents regarded the attempt as an improvement on the existing setup and that the comment of a substantial section was on the whole positive. In this regard the fact that the syllabus moved away from "a narrow political - constitutional content model", included more African history, and demonstrated both a perspectivic and a modular approach were regarded as some of the most important relieving features. Appreciation was also expressed for the fact that the content had been selected, at least partially, on the basis of empirical research. There was also appreciation for the fact that an attempt was made to reconcile content and criteria.

Finally I want to refer briefly to the curriculum document of the Department of National Education. Here I have an open mind. I believe the idea of Social Studies has seriously to be considered by a representative body of experts. I have however serious reservations about the simple lumping together of two of three established subjects. I also would strongly oppose any effort to finalise this document at this stage because it simply does not have enough legitimacy.

To conclude: the debate has just begun. Let us try and keep it constructive and positive. We need everybody's input.

Sources

1. Fines, J. (ed.) 1983: Teaching history. Edinburg: Holmes McDougall.

2. Rohlfes, J. 1979: Umrisse elner Didaktik der Geschichte. Göttingen: Kleine Vandenhoeck.

3. The confidentiality of the comments of most critics was respected. Some of them responded to the HSRC's request for comment; others discussed their criticism with the author personally. Specific reference is however made to the paper by Kallaway and the one by Cros and Vadi referred to in the notes.

Notes

1. Paper delivered at History workshop: 1992 Teachers Conference, 14 March 1992, at the University of the Witwatersrand.

2. In this regard see Kallaway, P. 1991: Education and nation-building in South Africa in the 1990's era. Cape Town : University of Cape Town and Cros, C and Vadi, I: Towards a "new" history curriculum-reform or reconceptualisation? Hand-out : History Workshop, 14 March 1992. University of the Witwatersrand.

3. See especially Cors, C and Vadi, I: Towards a new history curriculum-reform or reconceptualisation? Hand-out: History Workshop, 14 March 1992, University of the Witwatersrand p. 7.