

# The 1990 Biennial National Conference for the South African Society for History Teaching

This is a personal view of the Conference and is not intended to be in any way a full report on it, nor is it entirely without bias. The Conference was timed to coincide with the Instructa 90 exhibition at the University. This probably helped to contain costs as well as to offer displays of equipment which would not otherwise be available, but it also added to the noise and distractions and some apparent confusion in the canteen at lunch. The desirability of the combination of the two events is unlikely to become a question for many years yet as our conference will not be at R.A.U. again for a long time.

The programme soon showed that the theme of the conference was the issue of multiculturalism and that the conference would be busy. Most time slots held two concurrent lectures and here the balance was better than the 1988 Stellenbosch Conference as there was a split between an English and an Afrikaans session in each of the double sessions. It is always a moot point as to whether one doubles sessions or lengthens the conference - personally I would opt for the longer conference.

The conference opened with a Bible reading and prayer by Dr Kekana where he set the tone of respect and appreciation of the variety of cultural backgrounds in South Africa and the awareness that each had a unique contribution to make to the nation. The official opening by Professor Maree was more conventional and less memorable.

The keynote address by Prof. Rüsen of Bielefeld University in West Germany was entitled "Historical Education in a multicultural society - some thoughts from abroad" and looked at the three perspectives of historical study: the political, scientific and educational aspects. He argued that historical awareness gives the legitimacy to the political situation and that we need a common identity for the establishment of a national identity. Education must work with the collective memory because history is not the past, but the relationship between the present and the past and this depends on the questions we ask. Herein lies the challenge.

After tea the conference began to look at how to take up this challenge. First, in a slight change to the programme, was a look at alternative to the existing structures by Bruce Mohamed. His comments on alternative history were a bit vague - the need to change the present white domination in history teaching is obvious but the alternatives he offered are too complex and yet too woolly to be of use. He rejects people's history as an ideologically loaded concept. He was joined by Rob Sieborger who spoke of the need to abandon neutrality and take sides in the classroom. This might appear disconcerting, but he pointed out that the parallel developments of promoting international understanding and the skills approach with its emphasis on the analysis of evidence for bias encouraged students to debate the options offered by textbook and teacher.

Because of the concurrent sessions, I obviously missed Mrs Jooste on Kerkhervorming as I would miss Dr Broodryk after lunch when I chose to hear Ms Mulholland question whether we were asking the right questions. She made the point that apartheid has narrowed our vision and created a sizeable problem of vested interests. She further reminded us that history is essentially a western discipline and we must be aware of this so that in trying to create a new approach we do not rely on stereotypes; we need to have a stable identity of our own if we are to accept the differences of others.

The final session of the day was a general one in which Prof. Trümpelmann looked at an alternative history curriculum for a multicultural South Africa. It was a condensed version of a report to the H.S.R.C. He spoke of the necessity of history teaching as well as of the pitfalls such as indoctrination, associated with history teaching. He commented on the needs of society, on history as a discipline, as well as on didactical considerations before looking at a proposed syllabus. This was the disappointing aspect in that the syllabus is too similar to the existing syllabus, it is a remodelling not a radical departure which might better re-establish the credibility of the subject.



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I did not stay for the cocktail party as I felt I needed time to think over the day's programme without the confusion of the comments of others.

Friday began with coffee in the sunny downstairs canteen where discussion of Thursday's talks put us into the mood for further debate. The first session I attended was Dr Kekana's look at the History textbook in a multi-cultural South Africa. He stressed the problem of the Black schools where a paucity of other sources and a lack of sufficient subject specialists made the textbook the bible. The shortcomings of the textbook were therefore exaggerated in importance and he analysed these shortcomings fairly well but failed to give credit to the attempts by many of the newer textbooks to overcome these shortcomings. This was a major weakness in his analysis as these attempts need to be both noticed and encouraged.

The highlight of the conference for me was the next session I attended: Prof. Rusen on Historical consciousness and historical education. History, he said, is a significant relationship between the present and the past and the function of history is to orientate human political life in time. We need to help students to gain historical compe-

tence - a synthesis of the competence of experience awareness of the past and the competence of interpretation of that past. This will enable the student (as historian) interpret the past in the present and to use this experience for his own life in his own time. Prof. Rusen closed posing the hypothesis that one can look at the development of historical consciousness in the mind of a person as a process in which one can distinguish four stages (which can be compared to Piaget's stages of development): from the traditional to the exemplary, to the critical, to the genetic and thus see the self as a dynamic phenomenon.

After tea we reassembled for a talk on the integrated studies programme at Sacred Heart College by Steve Low and Joy Rees. The focus here is on the pupil and the approach to work is on a thematic base. One can argue that the programme is linked, more than integrated, studies but it is certainly an interesting experiment in trying to cross cultural and curriculum barriers. It is a workable system which allows teachers a greater flexibility than the traditional approach.

This was followed by the A.G.M. of the Society for History Teaching and one must congratulate the Society on the speed with which the business of the meeting was conducted. The work of the Conference over, we adjourned to lunch. It was a full, interesting and very worthwhile day and a half which left us with a lot of food for thought.



Proff J. Rüsen (left) and M.H. Trümpelmann, Chairman of the Conference.