MULTINATIONAL TUTZING CONFERENCE

To a really multinational conference in Tutzing - Sept. 6-10, 1993 - delegates came from many nations and cultures - from the ethnically homogeneous Japan as well as from the melting pot of Venezuela.

Our task was to examine the possibilities of bridging the gap between history and social sciences: what are the chances for these two school subjects to promote the peaceful co-existence between various cultures and nations within a state?

Some important pillars, or perhaps the first foundation, were found during this week. This was quite evident on the last day, when we heard Prof. Mütters's elegant summary of our work. But the complete and usable bridge is still only a vision!

One explanation why we managed to get on so well with our difficult task was probably that most participants were positive about the idea of multinational states. During the conference no one explicitly declared him/herself to prefer culturally or ethnically homogeneous societies. (Possibly the reason for some delegates' pessimism over the possibilities to conserve or recreate mono-ethnic states).

Another explanation for the harmonious development of our week was perhaps that most speakers used most of their time to describe the situation in their countries. We got valuable information on how paragraphs in national curricula and school books try to promote multinational education. Sometimes the audience (or parts of it) wished to hear personal reflections - but it is perhaps not "comme il faut" for a speaker to criticise her/his own country when abroad ...

The common opinion was that history and social studies working together can offer a major contribution to the political efforts of a state trying to lessen tensions between cultures and nations within a state. How big this contribution can be we don't know. Must our portion be marginal in comparison with legislative and economic efforts?

Perhaps we could be really important:

Isn't the Bosnian war to a great extent a war about the "true" interpretation of the Bosnian past? If pupils in states nowadays beset with tensions are allowed to study-in-depth some good examples of happy resolutions of tensions, then they perhaps will gain so much confidence that they can do something valuable in the future. Let the schools present to them cases like those of Finland, South Tyrol and Venezuela, where minorities and majorities have learned to live and get on well together!

The conference made it clear to the writer of this report that it is very important to start didactical projects to find out good ways of using history. We were given one good example. England (Booth) showed us how tensions between English-born people and immigrants decrease when young people in local schools are allowed to study all the good things that immigrants (from Romans via Vikings to Pakistanis) have brought with them or created while living in England.

On the whole it was a conference dominated by consensus. Only once did the atmosphere become a bit agitated. This happened when Estonia reported all the problems involved in integrating the big minority of Russians into the state. Some delegates seemed to be critical of the conditions put forward by Estonia before accepting Russians as full citizens.

Possibly more controversies would have emerged in Tutzing if we had been more daring and tried to touch some really "hot potatoes":

What would have happened:

- if we had tried to formulate a didactically well-founded proposal to send to the school authorities of Estonia? Would our unity have survived such an ordeal?

- if we had discussed the advantages and disadvantages of Japan and Finland (now with very low proportions of "foreigners") becoming "more multinational"?

Our meeting in Tutzing was a constructive first step, but only the first of many steps to be taken, before we eventually can offer the History teacher good, reality-oriented programmes.

In Tutzing a group of mostly intellectual theorists assembled, academics who are sympathetic towards multi-nationalism and trying to avoid conflicts. The next step could perhaps be to bring in other groups, people with other fundamental values and experiences than ours:

- Next time why listen to those who believe in the old idea of "the melting pot"? Is it really true that the USA has for ever abandoned this dream that by mixing cultures there will arise "a new and better man"? In Tutzing the only message was that the melting pot is "passé". Is it really true that "the whole can't be better than its parts"?

- An interesting part of a future conference would be a debate between a Schlesinger Jr enthusiast and a militant Hispanic American on the theme: "Is it possible for a future multi-cultural USA to continue to base its history teaching on the values from an old British-oriented constitution from the 18th century?"

- A debate would also be welcome between Indians and other Canadians on the problem: "What would be good didactical reactions from Canadian history teachers if the Indians insist that only their culture is original - and therefore is to be taught in an Indian way all over Canada?"

- The real challenge would be a session where Croatian, Serbian and Muslim Bosnians discuss this question: "Is it possible to create a history syllabus which can decrease the tensions in the schools of Bosnia?"

- Another stimulating discussion would be between a representative of "Merry Old England" and a British Muslim on the theme: "Should pupils from Pakistan learn as much as those from Kent about the Battle of Britain 1940?"

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