

YESTERDAY AND TODAY 1981-1997 – SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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During 1980 some of us at the former Rand Afrikaans University (now University of Johannesburg) decided to do something to counter the decline of history as a school subject. The publishing of the first issue of “Yesterday and Today/Gister en Vandag” in April 1981 was the first tangible proof that our efforts were at least partially successful. Thanks to a sponsor we were able to print 1000 copies which were distributed to a selection of primary and secondary schools of most education departments. Of course a lot of planning accompanied this effort. We had to get a sponsor, an administrative infrastructure had to be established and we needed contributions. The History department at Goudstad declared themselves willing to serve as administrative headquarter. We from RAU did most of the initial canvassing for articles. A very successful partnership was born. For the next decade this effort to improve a nations historical consciousness, met with tangible successes.

First of all the marketing of the journal was very successful. Our subscriptions rose to almost 2000 in two years and at the peak of the journals existence we distributed almost 3000 copies twice a year. We were lucky in the sense that some of the influential individuals in some of the departments were known to us – in this way we were able to elicit a few group subscriptions – but individual subscribers at one stage amounted to almost 500 individuals. Fact is, this involvement made us financially viable. We also were able to involve some corporate sponsors from time to time – these further boosted our ability to show some initiatives in the type of activities we could endeavor.

Secondly our success was also possibly attributable to a liberal, open minded editorial philosophy. “Yesterday and Today” had three editors, myself, Johan Horn and Pieter Kapp – all three of us deliberately tried to involve as broad a spectrum of opinions as possible. Although initially, with Majuba on our first cover page and an all Afrikaner editorial committee, critics and skeptics might have been warranted in their

hesitation to be involved. Our real efforts to broaden the participation however proved to be quite successful. Tony Cubbin, Owen van den Berg, Peter Buckland, Francis Graves, Rosemary Mullholland, Rob Siebörger and even Peter Kallaway and a host of other English speaking methodologists and educationists over the years contributed to our publication. In fact, even imminent overseas historians like Jörn Rüsen and Henry McIntosh on occasion wrote articles. It was also possible to get some involvement from “black” academics like Simon Kekana and especially Richard van der Ross and a few others. In this regard our success rate was limited. It can, however, be concluded that at the height of successes (in the early nineties) “Yesterday and Today” was an important local journal.

Another component of our approach was to try and involve specific interest groups – historians, methodologists, educationists, history teachers and learners – the whole spectrum. Some contributions were of a philosophical nature dealing with problems linked to the formative value of history as a school subject. The “why history” type of issues. In this regard, amongst others, Pieter Kapp, Floors van Jaarsveld, Jörn Rüsen, Owen van den Berg and Richard van der Ross made valuable and often provocative contributions. Herman Giliomee’s input on a pluralist South African school history (April 1987) was thought provoking and timeous.

There were also some very useful articles on bias, prejudice and history within a multi- cultural paradigm. Often these articles highlighted different perspectives. In fact, the open ended effort of the editorial staff was nowhere more evident than in the critical exchanges on political literacy and the place of history in the new dispensation. The golden thread was always the position of history within the school context. Pieter Kapp’s authoritative contributions over the years in this regard need special mention. “A culture without a memory” was to him a danger which was increasingly becoming a reality, but typically he argues that History is often seen as a divisive subject but that it is of the utmost importance in a heterogeneous society because “differences do not minimize the value of History, but in actual fact maximises it”. This was the kind of message “Yesterday and Today” all along tried to carry.

Fact also is, we had a number of very constructive colleagues who over the years were willing to make a lot of personal sacrifices for the sake

of the greater good. Pieter Kapp was perhaps the single individual who in this regard is to be saluted most. But we had other individuals like H van Niekerk and many others who believed in our course. We salute them for their support, loyalty and dedication even if some of them are no longer with us.

Yet another reason for our success was possibly the fact that a society for history teaching was formally established in 1986. This society held national conferences on a bi-annual basis. This broadened the pool of possible contributions substantially. For the first time the editor had on occasion, the luxury of selection as far as contributions to “Yesterday and Today” were concerned.

These were our successes, but all along it remained an uphill struggle to maintain the position of History as an important school subject in a democracy in the face of a host of negative issues that impacted on History. In short an a-historical and materialistic time and age had a negative influence on History as a school subject and the uncertainty and new priorities of a new political dispensation were not helpful either. Old prejudices and perceptions around power structures aggravated the tensions. To add insult to injury, Goudstad Onderwyskollege was closed down – a working partnership was ended.

Professor Kapp meanwhile moved to the Cape and Stellenbosch now became the new headquarter. Unfortunately the number of subscriptions were continually declining for a number of reasons linked to the general malaise within the education fraternity. At the end of 1997 Pieter Kapp had to bow to the inevitable – mainly due to financial constraints and a lack of input by those involved with History teaching at all levels – “Yesterday and Today” was discontinued.

I have no doubt in my mind that “Yesterday and Today” played an important role, at a critical junction of our history, in broadening the debate on history and the value of an open, liberal society. To paraphrase Cicero once again (done in the first editorial) we do not want to remain for ever children because we do not know our past. “Yesterday and Today” did it’s very best to avert this possibility.

Unfortunately financial constraints will always impact on reality. Secondly perceptions and a lack of trust at times did have a negative impact. The necessity exists to find common ground and for that we

need interaction, open debate and especially mutual trust and an acknowledgement of our different subjectivities. It is only recently that the South African Society for History Teaching (SASHT) has kind of risen from the ashes under the present chairperson and secretary. Unfortunately the position of History has meanwhile deteriorated even further. We really need to pool our sources. We can ill afford to fail.