

A EUROPEAN VIEW

## PLURAL SOCIETIES: HISTORY TEACHING AND THE DILEMMA OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

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### 1. Historical codes

Passing on historical knowledge and history research appear to be correlated. There is no contradiction between the historical knowledge we transmit, for instance, by academic teaching and the research work we are conducting. The dilemma referred to in the title only arises in its most extreme form when historical **tradition** is created. Research is free to choose its object. Tradition, on the other hand, creates a set of codes which determines what is worth passing on. *A curriculum represents just such a set of codes.*

Creating traditions involves questioning the value of historical knowledge. If we do not answer this question, how to evaluate the realm of historical insights the research had offered us, we would not be able to establish just what should be passed on and learnt. History is not merely knowledge about the past. For, by conveying this knowledge, the past takes on a meaning for the present. Moreover, it is supposed to give a particular direction, indicated by past events, to what ostensibly is an otherwise uncertain looking future. *Historical tradition combines the three elements of time, namely the past, present and future.* One of the functions of historical codes like a curriculum is to evoke a consciousness of this unity of time. In real historical terms this unity refers to specific socio-politically defined groups (peoples, nation-states) who pass on their history in order to *ensure a sense of belonging*, which, on the basis of their present relationship alone, would appear to be lacking in stability. History, however, is always selective; in the same way that it describes the group, it also constructs it, "invents" it.

In recent history, nation-states have incorporated just such a unity, where acknowledging the significance of history was linked with a missionary consciousness regarding the future and affecting the actions of the present. *Defining one's own historical role meant excluding others.* In determining my own being, my affiliation to a particular nation, I am establishing what is foreign, who does not belong to it. The crux of the matter lies in making evaluations - recognizing or rejecting foreignness or otherness. Will **their** history remain foreign to me, something I can disassociate myself from, which I only regard as an **object** of my own history? Or will I be able to manage to see myself in a context with others and recognize their rights as historical **subjects** as well?

In the past history textbooks in use in the grand European nation-states reflected political and economic competition within European nation-states and, as a rule recognized only a few other nations as equal in power and esteem. These were the nations which had been involved in competing in the so called historical mission to conquer the world while the civilizing contribution of all the "others" was regarded in the texts as "inferior".

### 2. Textbooks

**International textbook revision** was based on the knowledge that school textbooks do not only convey facts, but also spread ideologies, follow political trends and help to make the present legitimate by using the past. History textbooks used to, in particular, support feelings of nationalism, justify nationalistic aspirations for power and also glorify the violent means adopted to achieve

nationalistic aims. It was then thought that a **comparison** of different or even conflicting depictions would lead to a **compromise** in opinions. This should prevent textbook authors from representing only the victorious history of one group.

After the catastrophic experiences of the First World War, the League of Nations adopted international textbook revision into its statutes. This in fact stimulated a series of neighbouring states, such as in Latin America and Northern Europe, to exchange history and geography textbooks and make agreements concerning unacceptable representations of each other's society. The model was, above all, successful between neighbouring states which had already for quite some time enjoyed peaceful relations. It was, however, also possible to arrange textbook conferences between old rival states as, for instance, between Germany and France and Germany and Poland. The aim was by no means to generally question the essential way of representing history regarding one's own nation, but to revise the individual point of view to the extent that it could be understood by those with a different basis of historical experience.

The war policies of National-Socialism destroyed these initial efforts. They represented the bleakest point in the development of racist-nationalistic ideologies in Europe which divided the world into "worthy" and "inferior" races. The National-Socialist concept of racism served as the basis for suppression, deprivation of individual rights and ultimately for destroying entire nations or social groups, during the Second World War.

### 3. Georg Eckert Institute

After this War, the task of international textbook revision, which had been initiated under the patronage of the League of Nations, was continued by UNESCO. In Germany, it was primarily Georg Eckert, a historian from Braunschweig, who dedicated himself to this work. He felt it was imperative to correct conceptions of history seen in relation to Germany's former rivals. International conferences were held in which scientists and educationalists devised a set of criteria for analysing representations of their countries in textbooks and comparing these with the scientific findings of recent research.

They examined the extent to which research had been incorporated into textbook representations. Using the results of this scientific and didactic analysis, it was then possible to formulate the final recommendations for improving and making textbook representations more objective.

George Eckert first broke new ground with the German-Polish textbook conferences. Since the bloc frontier had to be crossed, fundamental patterns of perception were questioned. The German-Polish textbook recommendations were, therefore, less readily accepted politically; the recommendations remained controversial in both countries. They did, however, achieve a deeper effect than the Franco-German or German-American recommendations, since the public discussion provoked by these recommendations opened up a new phase of relationship to the Eastern European countries. The new "Ostpolitik" of the Socialist-Liberal coalition under Willy Brandt supported this process. Or rather: both events influenced each other. Nevertheless, the German-Polish textbook conferences demonstrate that international textbook comparison can break through and break down firmly established and old traditional conceptions. Textbook research can influence politics and give it new contours. It is not confined by the political climate as was the case after the First World War and directly following the Second World War.

The process of revising national conceptions of history enjoyed a great deal more success after 1945 than it had after the First World War. This was primarily due to the fact that political preconditions, in as far as Europe was concerned, were more conducive to reducing the significance of nation-states. They were now more intensely bound to historical processes which aimed at larger organizations and extended to include different nation-states (eg. Nato, EC, UNO, Warsaw Pact). Thus, although they managed to bury old grievances to a large extent, new political battlefield in the form of adversary images and stereotypes emerged: Capitalism versus Socialism, the industrialized world versus underdeveloped countries.

Even the German-Polish talks, however, abided by what was already the traditional model of bilateral textbook revision. Their restrictions became clear in view of the

internationally changed conditions in structure. There were of course still those differences between conceptions of history which could not be eradicated, for instance with respect to fundamental ideological beliefs. But even historical facts were not without ideological distortions, which at that time were not ready to be revised. This is true, for instance, for the way in which the Hitler-Stalin-Pact was represented; Poland was obliged to consider the interests of the all-too powerful Soviet Union. The question arises as to how to deal with conflicts of this kind which still exist. At that time, the talks were based on the harmonizing principle: in other words, the primary goal was to achieve an agreement through comparison. The aim was to smooth out or even if possible to eliminate different approaches. The areas where conference members could not come to an agreement were as a rule left out of the recommendations. The pupils were not presented with the different angles of approach, but instead with stated facts requiring a simple true or false answer. History was continually presented to the pupils as a completed process. This prevents the realization that historical opinions develop and change within a long and contradictory process; they can even determine historical events and become a historical power.

#### 4. Controversy as Object

Having realized that historical opinions are formed from one's own interest and historical experiences which cannot be cancelled out or often as not overcome by making comparisons, the new methods enforced in the 1970's broke away from the harmony or consensus principle. The process of forming opinions became an integral part of textbook representation and comparison. Research into National-Socialism in Germany made a contribution to this change of approach to history. If people were eager during the "Gründungsjahre" of the Federal Republic of Germany to minimize the number of perpetrators and to believe that most members of the National-Socialist leadership were forced to toe the line, it was now revealed that many had placed themselves voluntarily at the dictator's disposal and for personal gain. Society was affected to varying degrees by the violent measures. For instance, the 9th November 1938, the day Jewish synagogues were destroyed, whether seen from the perspective of the perpetrator,

victim or follower is bound to affect my historical evaluation of this event. Empathizing with the victims is today not enough to explain or make comprehensible why there were so many active supporters. Justifying or explaining the motives of the perpetrators would ignore the suffering of the victims. By changing the angles of representation, the different dimensions of historical experience should become part of history teaching. This includes not only the relationship between but also within nations. This approach does not only compel new forms of representation but also other forms of teaching; for, the history teacher's task can no longer be just to present history the "way it was". His task is to incorporate the motivation and real-life experience of historical subjects and use the contradictions for discussion purposes. *Controversy becomes the object of the lesson.*

International interaction on the political and economic level, but also an increasing standardization of life-styles generally, no longer give us the right, in this day and age to limit our historical knowledge to that of our own national history. The national curriculum is less and less concerned with only reflecting the concerns of one's own nation; it is increasingly expanding to include international and indeed global aspects. Now, Western European textbooks are to a large extent devoid of national stereotypes. However, social, religious or ethnic prejudices within people's minds have not been overcome, moreover since the development in Europe is not uniform. With the newly gained political freedom for the Eastern European countries, we are at present witnessing how processes for reinstating a sense of national identity are being set into motion which resume historical patterns and again afford new meaning to the question of national feeling. In our country we are finding out just how very difficult it is to accept other historical experiences outside of our own and, instead of simply discarding them as historical mistakes, to accept them in our minds and memories and adopt them in our historical traditions. Moreover, especially in Western Europe, there is a feeling that international interaction itself is creating new problems of demarcation: those ones who have already found their national identity and those ones who are on the way to define their concept of collective identity. Considering the different stages of

development in Europe, a danger may arise: the old fashioned European nationalism could be replaced by an extensive Eurocentrism which could now make the industrial world the core of historical consciousness just like the developed imperialistic nation-states once had done.

## 5. Textbook Research

International textbook **revision**, based above all on bilateral relations between countries, aiming at harmonizing conceptions of history which disqualified one another, has now developed into a scientific discipline called **textbook research**. The task is to identify conceptions of oneself and others in textbooks and examine the degree to which these texts also accept other historically developed identities and can reconcile these with their own respective self-conception. Consequently, there is generally-speaking a debate on the relationship between "us" and "them", whoever "they" in each case may be. Topics for study could for instance be: the sexes, different social, cultural or religious groups. The projects undertaken by international textbook research reflect how this issue has been expanded. Hence, the Georg Eckert Institute, sponsored by UNESCO, is carrying out a project on human rights in textbooks. Comparing European textbooks, our interest lies in the relationship between national, European and global history. More and more people are turning to the institute for counselling in problems which are not related to German history. All around the world ethnic peoples or groups are growing together, having until recently lived separately or in hostility, and are now having to re-evaluate their history which had formerly only been considered from one angle. Thus, the institute is counselling a group of Israeli and Palestinian scientists and educationalists who in a joint effort are preparing a textbook account of the Arab-Israeli conflict aimed at overcoming existing and age-old traditions of hostile images. This project would appear to come closest, with respect to the nature of the problem, to textbook revision in South Africa.

## 6. Multi-dimensional Presentation

Taking the present course of international textbook research, will it be possible to develop a general model which could determine different patterns of identification

and allow for comparisons to be made? Seeing that there is a multitude of approaches and different educational systems, it would only be possible to draw up a rough version of a set of questions and possible answers. Therefore, the principles given here, which a comparison should aim at, are very general:

- the future is basically open
- historical experiences, even of the same historical event, are different
- present-day orientation has to be shaped in a multi-perspective character.

I would like to explain these three points with reference to our problem.

- (1) The future is basically open-ended, even if every single factor, which determines it, is rooted in history. As yet, we do not know of any law according to which these factors interact. The past alone cannot define the future. After all, it was because historical materialism tried to construct a future society based on ostensible laws of history that it failed. Hence, the actions of the future cannot only look to the past for their legitimacy. Textbook representations must not preempt the basic openendedness of the future, they should instead make it comprehensible. At best, one can use history to derive different types of development, but it is up to politics to decide which path to take.
- (2) It has to be possible to relate to the different types of historical experiences. What was self-assertion and the growth of a civilization on one side, has turned out to be suppression, and negation of someone else's being and culture on the other side. South African society comprises to a large extent groups, which, although they are historically bound to one another, represent diametrically opposed experiences.
- (3) Historical consciousness in contemporary South Africa must be derived from these experiences. A multi-perspective angle of approach is consequently necessary in order to

perceive these historical experiences and to be able to do justice to the future hope which depend on them.

Does not such an open attitude to the past and future destroy the mutual basis for united action in the present? How can a nation which is divided into many groups exist, if it recognizes these principles? The only answer to this is, because there is no precedent in history which tells us how to find a basis for a joint action to establish a united non-racist South African society simply by analyzing the past, we cannot offer such an experience of unity or such certainty for the future in history lessons. It would otherwise only serve to legitimize present interests and possibly future hopes. International textbook research is not the art of finding answers acceptable to everyone; this is sometimes only possible by leaving out aspects of central importance. It aims more than anything at activating a process of communication which will lead to an agreement over contents which offer conflicting points of perception.

#### 7. A Right to One's Own History

In South Africa, just as in Germany after the war or in the former socialist states, dominant conceptions of history have now become dubious. They represent the ideas of a ruling class which wanted to make its history into the general history of the country. However, this does not mean that once the claims to absolute rulership have disappeared, that the conception of history, which for a long time held the exclusive rights to validity, will just be complemented by new conceptions of those groups ignored up until now. On the whole, they will be doubted even more, and finally even suppressed by new groups claiming to represent a superior truth. The question is - irrespective of the balance of power at the moment - whether a war of ideologies can be avoided; and instead a process of communication concerning history can be undertaken where it is clear from the outset *that each side has the right to his own history and none can claim that their history alone holds the key to the future.*

We are in a somewhat similar, if not quite so

existential conflict, as to the historical identity of Germany today, in which the East German citizens are clearly seen as the losers of history. Their path, regardless of whether they had followed it with conviction or not, proved historically to be inferior. Will the West Germans with their "right" past allow the East German citizens to stand by their history, even if it has failed? And moreover, seeing that the state in which they had lived has proven to have been criminal? How can one cope with such a past?

In history, the memory of the victorious powers has generally speaking dominated over that of the losers. We know of cultures which have obliterated the name of the losers from collective memory. As long as we can rest assured that neither our physical nor spiritual stability - the latter refers to our historical consciousness - is to be destroyed, then we can assume that this model will never be allowed to be used. *We must create forums where one can relate one's own history and listen to others and their way of thinking.* It would be unrealistic, especially from the German point of view, to demand a united national consciousness of history along with the unification of a nation. Real unity can only be achieved through a long process involving mutual understanding and future plans with common interests which will eventually lead to a standardization of lifestyles.

#### 8. The South African Situation

What are the chances of achieving a national unity and a pluralistic consciousness of history through these initial efforts? What are the difficulties facing us?

There are a lot of academic as well as political analyses of the South African conflict, stating that it will be possible to find a solution without civil war and expulsion or destruction of one or several ethnic groups. They argue that the issue in South Africa is not to substitute one group with another, but that all groups within the population should have an equal part to play in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of the whole society. Despite a policy of segregation in all aspects of society, it is still a fact that the general process of industrialization and modernization has prevailed in the end. Cultural, legal and economic division through segregation will in the long-run work against

this process. The task of making this process accessible to all areas of society and encouraging it appears to be a historical one. South Africa, in this respect, faces a different situation to that following a revolutionary overthrow, the aftermath of which always involves a complete control of the educational system. One conception of history is then exchanged against one another without permitting any room for differing views. Although the conflict in South Africa does have a pre-history of colonialism, it is no longer specifically one between a colonial power and autochtone inhabitants. Afrikaner and Black African nationalism both apply to South Africa. Even if this fact does indicate positive preconditions for a pluralistic basis, the problems are not to be underestimated.

- The fact of the matter is, a united South African nation does not exist: the term represents perhaps more a demand, but is not a description of reality. Even the Black African population can be said to be divided into different national or at least ethnic groups. The manifold break-up of South African society is not only the direct outcome of the policies of apartheid, but stems back to much older traditions of an ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic nature which are likely to attract more public attention in the times to come. Several of these groups will insist that their history is included in the textbooks.

- Segregation through apartheid has left groups in South African society which have, up until now, had extremely different educational opportunities. This broad discrepancy in education cannot be rectified immediately. Will it be possible in the future to teach history in the same way in the townships as in Johannesburg or Cape Town?

- The historical points of reference for the different groups covered a wide geographical spectrum, eg.: Europe for the Whites, for the Black Africans Africa and for the Indians India. What should the ratio be between South African, African, European and global history in new text books?

## 9. A New Relationship?

It is not to be expected that similar patterns of perception will develop within the next few years. History lessons have, up until now, been more important for Afrikaner schoolchildren. The lessons served to legitimize their better standing in life by seeing their superiority rooted in history. Future history lessons will no longer be able to continue this function, and indeed will more likely tend to destroy the identities of the whites. White pupils, therefore, appear to prefer lessons concerned with global matters, which are more orientated towards the future, rather than lessons which confront them with the faults of their own past. Black pupils, on the other hand, want history dealing more with South Africa and the pre-colonial era, since the roots of their historical identity, neglected until now, obviously lie there. They wish to acquire the tools for making critical assessments, which they no doubt would like to use for better communication in negotiations and for acting more effectively during the present process of liberation or emancipation. This group has the highest expectations of a real change in lessons according to the investigation into the teaching of history in South Africa conducted by the Human Science Research Council. These different expectations require different methods and forms of representation.

It becomes evident from this characterization that *unless a new relationship to one another's history is established, that it will not be possible to cope with the present or envisage a common future.* As with the German-Polish textbook talks, it is essential for such projects that political changes support the new direction taken in educational matters. It is impossible, in the long-run, to teach insights which are contrary to reality. Education, however, can also give politics new aims. It can lay the foundations of attitudes and opinions which are essential for policies promoting peace. Textbook research can, in this respect, turn into an adventure. We are conceiving the image of a, as yet non-existent, society. Should textbook revision succeed in South Africa, then we are concerned with just such an adventure.