

ESSAY REVIEW

Historical consciousness: a viable paradigm for history education?

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Historical consciousness is more than historical literacy

Twenty years ago the concept ‘historical consciousness’ was not recognized in the Anglo-Saxon discussion on history education; at best, it was considered a fuzzy concept belonging to the German idealistic-phenomenological tradition. In North America the substituting concept was ‘historical literacy’, in Britain ‘historical awareness’ or simply ‘historical education’. ‘Historical literacy’ is a behaviouristic term suggesting a mastery of the basic historical information, which enables historical reading and discussion. A person familiar with the Hapsburg Empire, the French revolution, World War I and II, the Cold War, etc., would be able to make sense of text and talk that included references to such terms. If the person can ask questions of evidence and explanation, he or she is assumed to have a grasp of the basic procedural concepts of history and to be a critical reader. In other words, historical literacy does not require a personal meaning-attribution to history.

The same issues surround the term ‘historical awareness’. To be historically aware, one has to be able to link a specific piece of historical information to some well-known basic events and phenomena. If one cannot do this, the implication is an inability to make sense of the past when encountering

The book reviewed here is Peter Seixas (ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), xi + 255 pp., CND\$60 (hbk), ISBN 0-8020-8713-2.

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traces or presentations of it. Historical awareness is a pragmatic requirement; it does not entail being personally bothered about history.

As modes of education the projects around both historical literacy and historical awareness are superior to the 19th-century encyclopaedic idea of history as a simple piling-up and memorizing of information. Such a history is widely seen as obsolete, 'a trivial pursuit', a past-time activity. The progressive pedagogy of the 20th century required personal and social relevance from history. Thus, in addition to their pursuit of 'literacy', Americans have traditionally expected ethical and citizenship education from history. The British have aspired to a development of critical cognitive skills through history as a part of 'awareness'.

Theorizing Historical Consciousness, edited by Peter Seixas, is an energetic search for a breakthrough for the concept 'historical consciousness' in North America. This concept extends the scope of terms like 'literacy' or 'awareness' to make historical consciousness a vital human asset for an orientation to life and the world.

However, the original Hegelian or Husserlian understanding of 'historical consciousness' does not meet today's needs. In a post-colonial and post-industrial world the requirements of orientation have been reconsidered. Moreover, the idea of knowledge has changed with the recognition of the unity of experience and cognition. The dimensions of the concept 'historical consciousness' have to be discussed in terms of the new situation. The authors of every chapter in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* acknowledge this. They take the present diversity and fragmentation of communities into account and relate the idea of historical consciousness to social constructionism and the linguistic turn. Moreover, they recognize school education, historical scholarship, and public history as equal shapers of historical consciousness.

The chapters of *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* are organized into three sections: 'Historiographies and historical consciousness', 'History education and historical consciousness', and 'The politics of historical consciousness'. The organization reflects well the underlying idea—that people's relation to the past is not only a matter of formal education but a broad social phenomenon. The authors range from history educationists (Christian Laville, Peter Lee, Tony Taylor) to historiographers (Chris Lorenz), theoreticians of history (Jörn Rüsen, Mark Salber Phillips, John Torpey), and cultural psychologists (James V. Wertsch). The editor, Peter Seixas, is a Canadian history educator, whose co-edited *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (Stearns *et al.* 2000) focused on curricular and pedagogical issues but can still be considered a predecessor of this new book.

The international dimension of the present book emerged from a symposium held in 2000 at the University of British Columbia, Canada. A discussion, reported as one of the chapters of *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, reflects well the dialectical encounter between European and North American traditions of thinking about history. 'Historical consciousness' was a European invention, but the first academic chair dedicated to its study was established in Canada. The initiative seems now to be held by North Americans.

Theorizing Historical Consciousness is a rare example of an anthology where the authors really interact and are involved in a dynamic dialogue. A

kind of a cornerstone for the dialogue is Jörn Rüsen's explication of historical consciousness. He introduces the concept as it was established as the key concept of history education—not only school education—in Germany in the 1970s. The Canadian, North American, Australian, and British authors react to Rüsen's thinking. The theme grows into a broad reflection on the temporal dimension of the human and social life. The thematic plot culminates in the multi-perspectival dialogue around the concepts of memory, narrative, and morality that concludes the book. The epistemological and rhetorical approaches to the theme meet, and eventually come to a feasible compromise. Like all good plots, the book leaves the path open for further discussion.

Historical consciousness implies a trans-generational mental orientation to time. Such an orientation is based on the human aptitude to think back and forth in time. Moreover, historical consciousness means an interaction between making sense of the past and constructing expectations for the future. Time is regarded not only as a technical measure but a substance loaded with human-given meanings and moral issues.

Rüsen's central role in the book is justified. He was one of the theoreticians who in the 1970s introduced historical consciousness as a key concept in history education in Germany. Later he built a theory of the personal development of historical consciousness. In his chapter here, 'Historical consciousness: narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development', he presents his scheme of four phases of historical consciousness.¹ The phases reach from (1) a recognition of a continuity of tradition, to (2) taking examples from history, to (3) critical deconstruction of the belief of continuity, and finally to (4) a temporalized, genetic view of the transformation of life. The 'traditional', 'exemplary', 'critical', and 'genetic' types of historical consciousness are partly overlapping, but from the logic of their continuum certain educational guidelines can be deduced. In addition to Germany, this has happened in the Nordic countries where the German ideas of history education have had a willing audience since the end of the 1980s. Within the European history teachers' association, Euroclio, the concept of historical consciousness has been actively cultivated and spread to the post-communist countries in the 1990s.²

What do we need the concept of historical consciousness for?

In his introductory chapter, Seixas points out that concepts like collective memory and historical identity have been successfully used to expand the discussion on history education to wider pursuits than the behaviouristic 'historical literacy'. He is, nevertheless, convinced of the necessity of 'historical consciousness'. Arguments for this necessity are derived from various disciplines in the chapters of the book.

Today, collective memory is an important focus in both social psychology and cultural studies. It is considered a part of the shared life-world of a community. People derive elements for their historical identity from their collective memory. Through collective memory history turns into an asset

for the choices in life. However, in their chapters, Chris Lorenz, Mark Salber Phillips, Christian Laville, and John Torpey express scepticism about the value of memories as such. A memory can be an empowering, but also a risky resource if not submitted to an informed judgement.

The requirement of intellectual sanity in the popular reception and use of history is well articulated by Rüsen's idea of a hierarchy of the developmental levels of historical consciousness. His critical and genetic modes of historical thinking parallel the standard methodological criteria of historical interpretation and explanation. Historical consciousness is considered by him a rational, intellectually honest way of using history.

Thus, Rüsen contends in his chapter that more history education does not simply mean more history lessons. The cultivation of historical consciousness aims at a structural change in consciousness. The hierarchy of *tradition*, *exemplariness*, *critique*, and *genetic understanding* gives an idea of the stages in the structural change that should result from learning. The lower stages of *tradition* and *exemplariness* are present also in historical literacy and identity, but *critique* and *genetic view* are higher achievements, and indicate an educated historical consciousness.

On the personal level, the achievement of historical consciousness also means an expansion of the temporal self beyond individual birth and death. The view of life becomes trans-generational. As an intellectual competence, a historical consciousness appears as a construction of stories of consecutive events and acts. Such stories are a necessary asset in the orientation to life.

Historical consciousness is also a social construction, which may be stated without any direct adherence to the sociological theory of social constructionism. A shared experience and its interactive procession form the historical consciousness of the members of a community. While historical literacy and identity may well be harmonized from above by those in power, historical consciousness is a critical process. Therefore, it inevitably becomes differentiated, and leads to variations in historical orientation within a community.

The authors in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* acknowledge this, most concretely in the territorial accounts by Tony Taylor of Australia and Jocelyn Létourneau and Sabrina Moisan of Canada. As a result, Rüsen's advocacy of a common historical consciousness as a cultural common currency for Europe has puzzles for Christian Laville. Laville observes numerous examples of public historical culture emerging, e.g. in France, as a direct rejection of supra-national identity politics. James Wertsch, having observed the break up of the grand uniform historical narratives of the former communist countries, focuses on the common structures in the stories. However, even if substantive elements ('narratives around mid-level events') differ, certain universal schemes, like the contrast of victory and defeat, tend to structure people's processing of their historical experience. What is a victory for one group of people is a defeat for another.

The main answer to the question of the necessity of the concept 'historical consciousness' may be that only a recognition of historical consciousness as an idiosyncratic mental construction of a person or a group helps the acceptance of multi-perspectival orientations in a society. Many history wars around school education would have been of higher intellectual quality if

there had been a common understanding of the nature of historical consciousness as the starting point.

Intellectual defences around historical consciousness

Historical consciousness is not a spin-off of scholarly historical research. Still, the construction of it is not an arbitrary process, at least not on a sophisticated level. Thus, Chris Lorenz, John Torpey, and Mark Salber Phillips defend a requirement for intellectual rigour in education for historical consciousness. Lorenz points out that multi-perspectivity does not mean relativism. All stories are not equally good. Historians have to justify their perspectives, and some perspectives are more relevant than others. Among accomplished presentations, those that encompass more relevant perspectives than others, in a coherent and balanced manner, are to be preferred. A free methodological eclecticism does not make for good history, and an easy voluntarism in the reception of history will not make sound historical consciousness.

Thus, John Torpey's chapter, 'The pursuit of the past: a polemical perspective', is wary of the expanding memory industry. Resorting to memory as a therapeutic alternative to proper historical discourse can be a lapse to a tabloid history where perpetrators or heroes are sought instead of offering a study of pivotal changes in life and society. Torpey is not pleased with the growing memory industries which he considers an indicator of the collapse of the future in people's minds. Instead of seriously looking back and forth in time, people practise a cheap voyeurism in regard to the past. Torpey echoes Lasch (1978) who, in his *The Culture of Narcissism*, castigated his contemporaries for a trivial nostalgia in their relation to the past.

In his chapter 'History, memory and historical distance', Phillips contends that a distanciation from the object of study is necessary for any history student. In social and human studies 'the object' is in fact not an object, but a meaning-constructing subject. An encounter with the past is inevitably a dialogue between two subjects, both attaching meaning to the event or act to be studied. A certain detachment is necessary for a student to be in an active command of the process of building her or his historical consciousness. When looking at the past, a person should become distanced from the object, both affectively and intellectually, in order not to be too involved in it. Thus, Phillips is wary of museums inviting visitors for empathetic experiences, where the visitors are exposed to emotionally-provoking scenes. A visitor might lose the opportunity for an informed choice in front of the past. Posterity should not be neutral about the past, but the encounter with the past should start with an opportunity of confronting its traces.

There is an interesting contradiction between Phillips and Roger Simon's chapter 'Pedagogical insistence on public memory', where Simon advocates immediacy and intimacy in encounters with history. According to Simon, a student should, at the start of an inquiry, recognize her or his own inadequacy for undertaking a fair, symmetric encounter with the past. An encounter with the past can never be authentic, but it can be open. For that the student needs to start by reconsidering her or his own education

and re-opening the existing present to reconsideration. In this way she or he will be able to practise transformative attentiveness to the traces of the past. Simon seems to warn a student against a rushed construction of her or his own narrative; such a rush hinders the task of making sense of the stories of the others, e.g. of ethnic or social minorities. Simon requires a similar approach to social memory: social memory offers a pedagogical space for students to work on history, but one must bracket one's education and preconceptions in front of a memory. The more immediate the encounter with the voice of the past, the better and fairer story will result. The historical consciousness of the student will lie on a socially broad foundation.

Peter Lee's chapter, 'Understanding history', provides the most detailed intellectual defence for historical construction. He rejects the idea of historical thinking as an intuitive commonsense activity. The concepts operating in history are, he suggests, counter-intuitive. His criteria for historical thinking are epistemological: historical knowledge is constituted above all by the concepts of evidence, explanation, and change. Lee calls these 'meta-historical' concepts in contrast to 'substantive' concepts like war, revolution, and economy.

Like Rösen in his theory of hierarchic types of historical consciousness, Lee regards the learning of history as a progress of formal thinking. However, his theory of learning historical thinking is based on a body of empirical data from adolescent students. For instance, concerning historical 'facts', Lee has observed a progression from a notion of 'a given past' to a notion of 'testimony', and eventually to a 'concept of evidence'. The higher forms are results of education, not spontaneous choices.

In his research project *Chata* ('Concepts of History and Teaching Approach 7–14'), Lee did not refer to historical consciousness. Here he emphasizes the close relation between historical scholarship and history education. While Simon trusts the immediate encounter with history and Rösen regards his hierarchic types of historical consciousness not as much levels of learning but as various overlapping relationships to history, Lee advocates a progressive learning of formal historical thinking. While Rösen regards an interactive living community as the context for the growth of historical consciousness, Lee stresses the role of formal schooling in helping young people achieve an intellectual command of their relation to history.

Historical consciousness and moral lessons

While advocating a respect for an authentic experience of past, Simon defends the right of minorities to have their stories recognized. His point is ethical and his example is Canada, where he regards minorities as justified in making claims on Canadian public memory. The relationship between Canadians and the native peoples of Canada needs to be redefined in the name of social justice. Not only an intellectual requirement of authenticity but also social equality is at stake. Historical consciousness incorporates an ethical dimension. The element can be called historical justice.

Simon assumes inter-generational debits and credits. In particular those who have been subjected to mass violence are legitimate creditors to the aftermath. Historical memory as a human construction incorporates a responsibility not to forget but to pursue justice for past sufferers. For Simon, a reckoning as well as a recording is required. His conclusion for the planners of school curricula is that encounters with the authentic stories of the past have a pedagogical potential to transform and broaden public memory. A pedagogy of listening to the mediated voices of the past is required.

Simon is not the only author in this book who suggests that history eventually becomes a moral craft. Rösen, who operationalizes historical consciousness as 'narrative competence', advocates narratives as lessons in ethics. Narratives provide historical acts with moral dimensions and actors with morally loaded roles. Needless to say, Rösen is aware of the pre-modern idea of history as a *magistra vitae*. However, with this claim he actually joins the post-modernists, who claim that history can be a moral or an aesthetic as well as an intellectual craft. Thus, Rösen goes as far as to equate narrative competence and moral consciousness. Multi-perspectivity, which he regards as a criterion of developed historical consciousness, is compatible with the requirement of a moral reconciliation between the winners and losers of the past. 'Historical consciousness can be conceptualized as a synthesis of moral and temporal consciousness' (p. 78).

Simon's and Rösen's positions are post-modernist in the sense of defying the traditional 'modern' epistemology of history, with its rules of reliable interpretation and trustworthy explanation. Simon and Rösen reject the views of Lorenz and Lee, who do not see history as a moral craft, but find support from Phillips, who recognizes the ethical dimension, even if he advocates a detachment from it during the process of inquiry.

Post-modern history education?

In his introduction to *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, Seixas asks whether the contemporary memory industries foreshadow a return to the pre-modern or offer an entrance to grapple systematically with the question of whether or not history education has entered a post-modern era. If post-modernism is crudely defined as the death of both epistemology and, in regard to substance, the death of grand narratives, post-modernism can be seen hovering in the background of several chapters. Post-modernism provokes questions around the nature of history as a moral and rhetorical, instead of merely intellectual, craft.

Thus, in his chapter 'History, memory, and historical distance', Mark Salber Phillips suggests that an 'age of sentiment' has arrived. He refers to the abundance of non-scholarly, aesthetic presentations of history, but also, within scholarly practice, to the revival of the narrative form and micro-history. In micro-history the focus is brought close to persons' lives in order to create an experience of an intimate encounter and, in so doing, provide an opportunity to ask existential questions from history. The post-modern situation implies that history is no more about big topics and overarching structural explanations. However, Phillips defends history as knowledge

rather than as a voyeuristic experience or rhetorical pathos. A student can get close to a past person or group, but the pre-requisites of the encounter are still cognitive. 'Distance', the methodological tool Phillips favours, is to a great extent a cognitive concept.

Rüsen and Simon are, among the authors of *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, closest to a post-modernist stance, even if many of their ideas are different. In the book's dialogue-chapter, 'A dialogue on narrative and historical consciousness', Rüsen questions the border between history as an academic pursuit and history as a search for ethical life-orientation, i.e. between knowledge and morality. He wants to see historical consciousness as a synthesis of moral and temporal consciousness, which means a rejection of some epistemological constraints. Simon, for his part, deals with history as a kind of rhetoric when he advocates an immediate, non-cognitive encounter with the traces of the past. He wants schools to become public spaces where learning from remembrance can take place. The rhetorical approach makes Simon into a post-modernist in the manner of Hayden White, who approaches the use and reception of history in terms of aesthetic categories. Such an approach can be applied to school classrooms. For instance, in Aho's (2002) study, Finnish students' historical writings were categorized as tragedies, romances, or farces.

In regard to school education, a post-modernist approach means giving up the ideas, first, of school history as a spin-off of scholarly history, and, secondly, of learning only occurring in school. In regard to the form of knowledge, Rüsen's 'narrative competence' is a move away from the traditional criteria of 'modern' history lessons as practices in analytical interpretations of sources and positivistic cause-effect explanations. Moreover, he recognizes the informal settings of learning outside classrooms. However, 'Historical learning can be explained as a process of structural change in historical consciousness' (p. 81). A structural change is a cognitive requirement, and likely to happen through an expert-novice interaction, i.e. in a formal learning situation. Rüsen seems to regard the informal encounters with memories as compatible with a structured process directed towards a structural change in cognition. Furthermore, Rüsen's contention, that historical consciousness eventually is moral consciousness, is another step away from history as a Cartesian craft of rational thinking. The recognition of the moral aspect detaches history from a scientific positivism and indicates a post-modern turn towards a rhetorical approach.

In this final discussion in the book Rüsen and Simon take the lead. As well as addressing epistemological post-modernism, they tackle the question around the post-colonial claim of the death of the grand narratives. Adopting an educational standpoint, they come to the existential issue of 'hope'. In the 'modern' grand narratives of nationalism and socialism there was plenty of hope and Rüsen and Simon set out to search for a post-modern perspective on the future. Rüsen seems to worry about the pessimism embedded in post-modernism and stresses the organic role of the future in the construction of historical consciousness; Simon wants to incorporate the idea of an inevitable rupture in the course of time in his view of history. Both the necessity of a future perspective and the acceptance of drastic changes have, as ideas, great relevance in the development of school curricula.

The post-colonial side of the post-modern situation is dealt with in the chapters mentioned earlier, by Tony Taylor on Australia and by Jocelyn Létourneau and Sabrina Moisan on Canada. In both cases a historical linguistic or ethnic minority has pursued recognition of its rightful history. History is expected to work as a courthouse, to rehabilitate and pass sentences. In Australia there is a judicial claim for reparations, but these claims also concern school curricula. History in the classrooms is expected to be a part of the courthouse.

Claims for rehabilitation or reparation are most often based on memories. Memories of past injustices tend to be passed from generation to generation and affect vernacular historical consciousness. As soon as a minority succeeds in acquiring power, public spaces open to foster the memories. Historical identities become reinforced through narratives of victimization. Eventually public apologies are presented and monuments challenging the hegemonic identity are raised.

History wars, often fought around school syllabi, are ubiquitous: there is no nation-state without a minority. On the other hand, a hegemonic state tends to first impose and then defend its integrity. A history war breaks out when the official narrative, often maintained from nursery school to university, is threatened. Politicians come onto the stage. In the 1980s, when 'new histories' of minorities spread to school curricula, Ronald Reagan wanted the 'good' story of the US from the Pilgrim Fathers to the Cuban Blockade returned to save American children from being foreigners in their own country. Margaret Thatcher did not like too much in the way of critical skills in school, but wanted Britain's heroic sons and glorious moments back. Helmut Kohl was worried about the growth of Holocaust studies; it was not good for citizens to be ashamed of their history.

What is a history teacher to do in a case of a history war? A teacher determines the discourse of a classroom. Jocelyn Létourneau and Sabrina Moisan's chapter, 'Young people's assimilation of a collective historical memory: A case study of Quebecers of French-Canadian heritage', outlines some of the narrative patterns that support the old hegemonic history and hinder the broadening of perspectives. They tell of the plight of iconoclastic teachers, but nevertheless risk recommending a deconstructionist and multi-perspectival approach to history. In his chapter, 'Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates', James Wertsch goes deeper into the deconstruction of narratives through a disclosure of their underlying patterns. A history curriculum would benefit from an inclusion of such deconstructionist studies of the meaning of forms of narratives. Students could be expected to develop a rational command of the process of the construction of their historical consciousness.

What next with historical education?

I do not hesitate nominating *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* as the most rewarding book about history education since the early 1990s. At that time I was involved in the all-European research project Youth and History and was inspired by Rüsen's work. Before that I had been stimulated mostly by

the British history didactics. As a Nordic history educator, I have been pursuing a synthesis of the British analytical empirical and German social-philosophical approaches. However, the work of Seixas and his colleagues offers a new relevance: it brings in the post-modern situation where history is no longer an academic discipline, with school education as its spin-off. In their work, the social world of memories and remembrances is present, not only as a second-class material useful to refresh lessons but as history itself, as experience and presentations. From a history educator's viewpoint, such an approach solves many problems. It offers a relevance for history lessons for 'ordinary' people, but it also creates problems by, for example, blurring the concept of universally-valid knowledge.

The concept of history education provided by *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* is broader than just school history. Education is a lifelong process that takes place in both formal and informal contexts. Historical consciousness is by no means a product of school alone. It is, rather, a process of individual spiritual growth, called *Bildung* by the 19th-century humanists who had not yet invented 'human capital' or utilitarian 'literacy'. Today, the process of *Bildung* takes place in a reflexive relation with society. The authors of this book bring together socio-psychological, historical-theoretical, pedagogical-empirical, and cultural-anthropological perspectives. The aim is to know how human beings experience time, make their future, and take responsibility for the making.

The inventory of what we derive our history from has led the authors to consider the significance of memories. Collective memory, and the controversies around it, are dealt with as a challenge to historical consciousness. They ask whether historical experience can be dealt with in terms of critical consciousness, and history wars eventually diminished, or even solved. They recommend detachment without cynicism and multiperspectivity without relativism as educational tools that would suit the school, public history, and inter-generational dialogue.

With my trust in the discipline of history didactics greatly strengthened by *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, I am tempted to ask for more reflection on the social and educational use and reception of history. Thus, in addition to the concept of 'historical consciousness', the 'culture of history' would be another useful theme to explore. By this I mean the different forms of production and consumption of history in public and in everyday life. Such issues are already gaining a prominent place in the German and Nordic discussions—to the extent that they tend to be more popular as research topics within historical didactics than the actual classroom teaching and learning of history. In North America, Rosenzweig (2000) is an outstanding representative of the study of historical culture. His empirical study on the ways Americans use the past shows that history is ubiquitous, at least if activities like looking at photos in a family album are included in the culture of history. The authors of the chapters in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* repeatedly refer to 'memory industries', e.g. to the contemporary culture of public apologies, but do not systematically survey all the different modes of history around us. The culture of history is a strong shaper of people's historical experience and consciousness: the structure and meaning-attribution in the culture deserve a co-ordinated study.

A request to Seixas and his colleagues: Could their next symposium deal with the culture of history? If that could come to pass, history educators would have three stimulating works for their use: the empirical *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History* (Stearns *et al.* 2000), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, and *History Around Us*. That last volume could provide some exciting international comparisons. Who in fact are less ‘historicidal’ (Rosenzweig’s term), Americans, one-third of whom help to run museums (according to Rosenzweig), or iconoclastic Europeans, e. g. in Berlin?

Notes

1. Rösen’s typology was not based on empirical studies of learning. It is ‘theoretical’, founded in psychology and historiography. The typology was applied in the comparative research study *Youth and History* (Angvik and von Borries 1997) where, however, the range of research interests and themes was too broad to enable more than a limited number of focused conclusions on the growth of historical consciousness.
2. Marxism, with its historical dialectics, was actually one mode of historical consciousness. Because of this, it would be interesting to discuss historical consciousness with representatives from the post-communist countries.

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