

Historical consciousness and future concern

Abstract

The experiences of the 20th century and foremost the Holocaust as the major crime in the history of men are reason enough to see the future with concern. Historical consciousness and future concern are inseparably linked with each other. If learning from history is supposed to take place, how then should history be taught in schools? This is the leading question of the outlining presentation that among other things comes to the conclusion that it is not efficient for the students to learn only historical facts, which is doubtlessly very important. However, often enough students are forced to take the positions or perspectives of the perpetrators, which should clearly be overcome. An appropriate topic for history lessons with future concern is the Nuremberg Trials (1945/46) that could be an example of comparable trials of the present time.

1. *Historical consciousness*

Geschichtsbewusstsein, historical consciousness, is the crucial category of didactics of history in contemporary Germany, referring not only to history lessons in schools but also, more generally, to the society and its cultural activities connecting past, present and future (example: commemoration days).

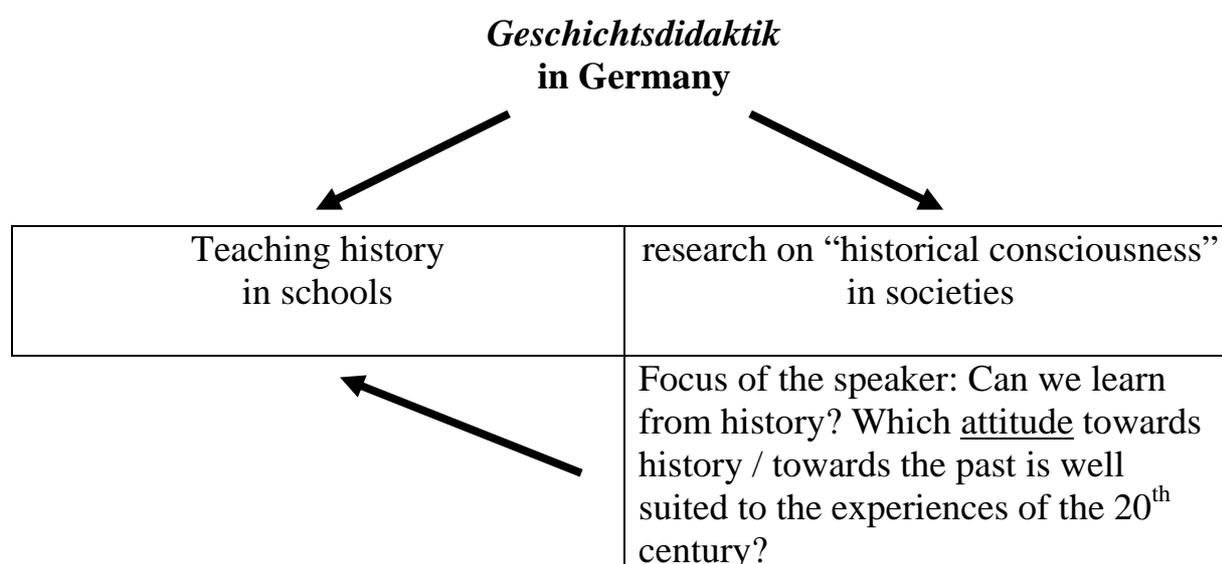


Fig. 1: *Geschichtsdidaktik in Germany – a simplified sketch*

The structure and the profile of this connection depend a) on the themes investigated and taught (idiomatically speaking: there is no knitting without thread) and b) on our political and moral attitude towards life, men, past, present and future. Further research on these political and personal presuppositions is

urgently needed, and they need for their part additional clearing up by psychoanalysis, because *consciousness* is a blind concept if from the start we exclude the *unconsciousness*.

The following remarks will add some more references to this approach.

2. Field of research in progress

The front page of a book, which I have recently published, summarizes the main research intentions in the field of *Geschichtsdidaktik* in terms of my definition: historical consciousness and *future concern*. The Holocaust, in my opinion, is a powerful spur for this future concern. Education as well as politics should focus their efforts on making sure that something like this will never happen again, but we should remember at the same time, that the devil of history - so to speak - never enters a room through the same door for a second time. What are the greatest dangers in the 21st century? I discuss this question with my students and ask them to integrate their personal answer in their didactical outlines.



Fig. 2: Here are the main research intentions of the author.

It is beyond reasonable doubt that individuals and collectives as well as history and historians are full of repressions (*Verdrängungen*) which need to be lifted. The repression of personal guilt in German history is only the tip of an enormous iceberg of repressions. The first subtitle on the front page - 'unconsciousnesses in historical and educational discourse' refers to that field of problems which cannot be tackled without psychoanalytical help particularly when our own repressions make themselves felt.

History teaching, particularly teaching on the Holocaust, should not only be concerned with the truth of facts guaranteed by research and historical science but also with working through historical experiences and human values which lead us into the field of philosophy and psychology of self-knowledge. This is one characteristic of my *historische*

Lebenskunde. Men are not only intelligent beings, endowed with love and feelings of human solidarity, with feelings of shame and guilt, but can be also ruthless killers without conscience. Circumstances can transform men quite quickly from one condition to the other that is one lesson taught by the Holocaust.

The German word *-kunde* includes a mixture of information, narrative and explanation calling into question the contrived logic of the national chronology

which still prevails in most of the European curricula. According to my didactic outlines history offers possibilities for actual life-orientation. Orientation means: there is no direct lesson to be followed, but a clearing up of alternatives (example: religion in the Middle Ages and life-orientation today; compare the picture which shows a medieval map with Jerusalem in its very centre). It depends on the teacher, on *what* he teaches and on *how* he teaches.

Historische Lebenskunde means not at last a culture of communication.

3. Personal motivation: the shadow of National Socialism

I was born in 1939 and thus belong to the generation of war-children, to whom a huge congress in Frankfurt 2005 was dedicated.¹ My contribution to this congress was not the headlined ‘war childhood and historical consciousness’ but ‘NS-childhood and historical consciousness’,² because this personal experience



Fig. 3: The son of an NS-actor arguing in hindsight with his father

was and still is much more difficult to integrate than the other one, limited to war experiences.

My father served with the Waffen-SS. Despite intensive research I have never succeeded with finding out what he really did. As long as he lived, there was never a direct discussion of anything. This typical silence and the negative result of archive research did not reduce the burden of problems but diffuses it to incomprehensibility.

This personal experience had an important impact on the building of my didactical theory, where trusting relations between teachers and pupils, authenticity, human values, understanding human condition by studying selected historical examples (*historische Lebenskunde*) play a decisive role.

Unfortunately the danger of hidden acceptance of the National Socialism is not over. The next point is devoted to this danger.

4. Learning the facts is not enough (criticism on schoolbooks - a counter-concept)

¹ ‘Die Generation der Kriegskinder und ihre Botschaft für Europa sechzig Jahre nach Kriegsende’ (The generation of the war children and their message for Europe sixty years after the end of the war). International congress, April 14th - 16th., in Frankfurt, organized and supported by several university and non-university institutions.

² Cf. Website www.schulz-hageleit.de online-publications (a report on the congress including the lectures will be published soon).- Ibd: ‘A path to freedom’. Humanism, Education and the Unconscious (2003).

Due to an unbalanced and one-sided concept of historical knowledge, the teaching of history is often - all too often - satisfied with purely outlining power and event history, something by which the upcoming historical-critical way of thinking is not encouraged but channelled in an authoritarian way. Let us take the example of the *rise of National Socialism*. Already the word *rise* suggests success, splendour, strength, and satisfaction, things which nobody likes to miss and nobody is completely able to miss. Everybody wants to *rise*, no one wants a decline or likes to be a loser. If then this *objective* rise is provided with subjective demands for understanding the process in a self-identifying way ('How did the Nazis succeed with this?'), the lesson mutates into the uncritical repeat of Nazi-delusional self-justification.

Thus, it is not enough to have the Nuremberg Laws repeated as such according to their ideological self-understanding ('name the most important regulations...') without a critical awareness of the nature of injustice and the social pathology of these regulations being mentally existent. It is misleading to demand from students a so to speak one-dimensional emphatic understanding of youths in those days and to give them e. g. the homework: 'Name reasons why many youths joined the HJ.'

But this is *the* history, I am contradicted when I complain about such a teaching in lessons (e. g. when I am sitting in classes during terms of practical work). We must let the facts speak and must not in a moralizing way distort real history from today's point of view.

Indeed: false moralizing without a knowledge basis would be as wrong as facts-fetishism on the track of the history of violence. But this is not what is recommended here. Much more, interweaving of a critical way of thinking and knowledge of real history is recommended, which can be achieved in the practice of lessons if *right from the beginning* the disastrous rise is viewed at from the *critical point of view* of people who even in those days were concerned and sceptical. Fortunately, evidence of this kind is meanwhile at hand in masses.

Unfortunately, the uncritical understanding of the murderous NS-history is not contradicted by accepted publications and media but - quite the reverse - it is driven forward, maybe without bad intentions, but from the didactic point of view this cannot be used as an apologize. In one schoolbook there is e. g. the following title and sub-title: 'Rassenwahn und Führerprinzip - Womit rechtfertigen die Nazis ihre Politik' (Race-Delusion and the Führer-principle - How Do the Nazis Justify their Politics). Ibidem, the students are supposed to deal with the question: 'Why do the Nazis erect concentration camps?' If the students answer these questions the way they are asked here, they are so to speak forced to step into the Nazi way of thinking, and this is, to have it politely, a more than *risky procedure*.

Empirical investigations on the spot confirm - unfortunately - the here presented results. Irit Wyrobnik observed the fourth form of a primary school and recorded how the topic of the Holocaust was communicated: the result is

deeply distressing.³ For answering the question of what NSDAP means and how this party arguments, in blind repeat of Nazi historical ideology there appeared on the blackboard: ‘unemployment and poverty, the Jews are the guilty.’ It must stay open here in how far this one example is representative for other structures. Anyway, as a symptom for subliminal irregularities and serious dangers the result deserves attention and requires counter-concepts.

The risk of an uncritical and facts-obsessed understanding of NS-ideology on the one hand and the history of power and violence as being connected with it on the other hand can be minimized in several ways, a. o. by

- a) including the critical point of view right from the beginning, by
 - b) the chronological anticipation of the terrible results of the NS-ideology, at least in the mind of the teachers; by
 - c) psycho-historically insisting in the delusive nature (‘race-delusion’) which in their own ways respectively must be lamented also for other fields (madness of arms race, mass-hysteria aso.), by
 - d) activating empathy and (real-historical) imagination (e. g. what would be the results of race-delusion and Führer-principle here in our class?), by
 - e) reminding to the basic rights of the Weimar Republic, which as a matter of fact were still valid,
- this only to point out to some approaches.



Fig. 4: *The Nuremberg trials are a key-event in ‘historische Lebenskunde’*

5. *The Nuremberg trials as a key event*

In my (not yet existing) curriculum of *historische Lebenskunde* the Nuremberg trials would allocated a significant place because the relevance of this event for the contemporary world is beyond doubt. The trial has become a model for similar trials in the present. The trial reveals not only gruesome historical facts but also problems of personal responsibility, which are relevant for the present. In the context, which I discuss here, crimes against humanity and the conviction of the Gestapo and the Waffen-SS as criminal associations are particularly important.

³ Irit Wyrobnik, Grundschulunterricht zum Thema Holocaust in Deutschland. Unterrichtsbeobachtungen in einer 4. Klasse. In: Päd Forum: unterrichten erziehen, Heft 01/2006, pp. 21-25.

Some years ago I tried to make history more interesting, more lively by dramatising historical constellations with students and teachers. Maybe the Nuremberg trials with their great significance for world history are too serious a subject for a class at school to be performed. But there were plenty of other trials closer to every day experience (think for example of the ‘denazification’-cases), so that a couple of selected historical facts could inspire a group of pupils to draft some scenes about wrong doing and being called to account. The example of Baldur von Schirach and Richard von Schirach could serve as an example of the conflicts between a son and his NS-father. (By the way: The office in Ludwigsburg, Germany, which investigates NS-crimes, has not yet finished its work searching for wanted persons with no regard to their ages.)



Fig. 5: *The Nuremberg trials reveal not only gruesome historical facts but also problems of personal responsibility, which are relevant for the present*

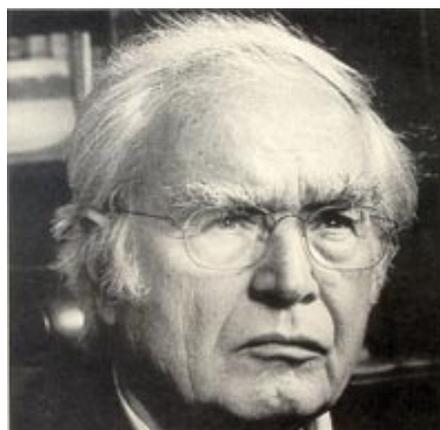
Let us come back to the relation between historical consciousness and future concern.

6. *General conclusion: Think of Bubis when Walser speaks*

During his vote of thanks for the Peace Prize of the the German Book Trade Martin Walser (born 1927) spoke out for finally leaving the ‘Auschwitz moral club’ behind, and everybody applauded - with the exception of Ignaz Bubis (1927-1999), then chairman of the Jewish Central Committee, who - and rightly so - was in the fear of re-staging of a ‘culture of looking away and thinking away’.



Fig. 6 and 7: *Ignaz Bubis (1927-1999)*



Martin Walser (born 1927)

This event had an elucidating impact on me, because I felt for a minute the temptation to approve of what Walser claimed, and I was ashamed being aware of that feeling. Taking into account this very small experience, my general conclusion here is the following:

The Jewish counterpart in public debates will be superfluous only when the non-Jewish Germans (in the future as citizens of a Europe growing to one) have collectively and safely internalized and integrated this part in respect of mentality-history, so that they, to have it personifyingly, **let Bubis think along with themselves when Walser asks to speak**. The time for giving the all-clear has not yet come, not for a long time.

Going beyond the direct consequences of the Holocaust my hope for the future can be expressed by the last picture:



Fig. 8: Like here in London thousands of people worldwide protested against the war in Iraq.

Source: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10.03.2003.

'Future concern' - the very heart of historical-political consciousness.

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Biographical facts (Bio blurb)

Peter Schulz-Hageleit, born in 1939 in Berlin/Germany, Degree in French Philology and History (*Erstes* and *Zweites Staatsexamen* for A-level students - equivalent to British PGCE), in 1973 Doctorate with a dissertation on 'Education of Thinking in History Lessons', since 1980 Professor of the Didactics of History at the Technical University of Berlin.

During research and teaching the author critically analysed the National Socialism and its '*Aufarbeitung*' (working through) after 1945. The way the author perceives the theory and the didactics of history they both need the enlightening cooperation of psychoanalysis in order to be able to understand repressions consciously. However, psychoanalysis is rather avoided by the science of history. For further thoughts on that see the author's online-publication about 'Humanism, Education and the Unconscious'.