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Why (and how) to teach sensible History?

The fear that history as a school subject may disappear from European schools seems real to me. I think that after long centuries when it used to be casual to write and learn history, we have reached a dangerous turning point. I feel the utmost need to make the main sense and purpose of European school history teaching clear: Historical education might help understand the present. Besides questions about our “present” and our “future” that we as a society face, history provides a third, a “past” dimension of the functioning of the human society.

Some studies written recently seem to agree with this. In the last five years, at least two books and two major scholarly studies were written in Slovakia and Hungary, which deal with the fundamental question “Why do we teach history?” (Kmeť 2018; Knausz, 2015; Kratochvíl, 2019; Tomka, 2018) The mutual origo for all these studies has been the scientific observation that school history education has somehow lost its way, and has shown signs of uncertainty. Some authors refer to their direct experience that pupils often see no point in learning history; i.e. they often consider it as “useless” for their future personal career. Their desperation should be understood within the frame of a general utilitarianism of our modern times: What does history give to me? Will I get rich quickly by knowing it? Will it help me to find a well-paid job? Pupils’ questions are legitimate, and it is our task to give them sensible answers.

If someone asks, “Why should we teach or learn history?” then I regard it legitimate to open up a more general question. We may get closer to the core of the issue if we *do not restrict* the scope of the question to one particular school subject: Why do we learn other subjects such as maths, biology, or languages? How can we benefit from them? Pupils learn biology, but not all of them will become doctors. We learn physics, but we will not necessarily become astrophysics. Imagine European states erase history from their school curricula. How would it affect tourism where millions of tourists worldwide are attracted by visiting historical places of cultural heritage? How would it affect museums and art galleries, especially where museum pedagogy has been involved in the business model of the museums?

Further, why do we teach and learn specific historical topics while we do neglect others? To what purpose do we teach/learn the Holocaust (Shoa), the First World War, the process of colonialism, etc., while omitting other topics? Do we teach/learn history in order “to remember” or “not to forget” or in order “to learn from it”? Learning history to remember is a double-edged sword because “remembering” may be a platform both for confessing our mistakes as well as for expressing “our national pride”. If we teach history to remember “our heroes” or simply the deeds of our predecessors, then where will “our villains” have a place in our cultural memory? – should they have a legitimate place in it at all? Do we teach/learn history to improve ourselves? Do we study “old stories” in order not to repeat previous mistakes? Are we able, and do we want to learn from our earlier mistakes? Let me express my personal scepticism and say that I think it was not just Winston Churchill, who believed that human mankind can not and will never learn from its own mistakes.

Why do we write and study history then? Of course, neither the question nor the problem itself is new. For Herodotus from the ancient Halicarnassus, the answer to this question was very simple. In his famous “The Histories. Book One”, in the very first lines, he writes: “This is the display of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that things done by a man not be forgotten in time, and that great and marvellous deeds, some displayed by the Hellenes, some by the barbarians, not lose their glory, including among others what the cause of their waging war on each other was.”

Without giving clear answers to these fundamental questions, the confusion over the “sensitivity” of teaching history will stay. My own survey, which I have been conducting since 2009 on the aims and

purposes of history teaching among undergraduates at our History Department, confirms all annoying notions described above. The following answers are our undergraduates' preferences: We learn and teach history in order...

- to know the deeds of the past to know our present better;
- to gain skills of abstract thinking such as comparison and analysis;
- to gain a sense of self-identity and/or patriotism;
- to be able to research events from different perspectives;
- and to learn general human values.

These have been our undergraduates' firm top-five preferences since 2009 when they are anonymously polled about their top choices from a list of twelve options. (Some answers from the rest of the list: in order to be socially more responsible people; in order to strengthen democratic society; in order to gain skills for arguing and public debating, etc. – however, these answers are seldom selected.) And even though the exact order of our undergraduates' preferences have been altering from time to time (e.g. "identity/patriotism" in some student groups get to the very front of the list), in the last decade altogether, some 400 respondents, would-be history teachers seem to have agreed with the smart definition of Michael Oakeshott: "My first answer to the question 'What is history?', is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past." (Oakeshott, 1964, 35)

So why do we teach history today in a rather utilitarian 21-century world? What is the meaningful and socially sustainable purpose of history teaching in 21-century Europe? It seems to me that the community of historians, as well as teachers, is confused and weak to answer this fundamental question.

I personally think that the main reason why the question about the *sense of history education* was raised has been directly correlated with the increasing number of "actors" involved in the teaching process (teaching history and teaching in general). Until the early 20th century, when there was typically one single entity or dominant actor running its own school (in Europe, typically the Christian churches or the State), none doubted the meaning of history teaching. Of course, history teaching (as teaching in general) at that time was ideologically motivated, and at these schools education process based on firm, principles given and required by the needs of the founder of the specific school. Up until the 1940s, the actors, the means, and the purposes of teaching/learning had been determined, quite understandably, by the particular church, or the private entity, or the state itself – whoever the founder of a school was.

School history teaching had come under pressure when more and more "actors" became involved in the education process. Today, except for the parents, pupils and teachers, numerous other "participants" are involved, such as authorities (state, county, local, etc.), foundations, commercially oriented entrepreneurs, NGOs, and several others. All these "actors" got used to the right that they have their own way in the teaching process. Some actors have a say in the content; for instance, state or regional authorities normally possess the right to regulate the core curriculum of the schools they finance. Some actors have had their decisive share in the methodology of teaching, for instance, through being involved as schoolbook publishers or as providers of the IT hardware that schools need, while the main driving force behind them is not education per se but commercial interests. Also, some actors enter schools in order to fulfil their specific mission statement, let them be banks that are interested in spreading the "financial awareness" of young adults or NGOs pushing forward their particular social agenda. Even if their presence might be desirable occasionally and at different phases of the education process, they make the situation very complex, sometimes even extremely complicated. Further, we can mention the "instrumentalization" of history teaching in order to reinforce political or other purposes (e.g. nationalism, political or social indoctrination) for which purposes the school as an organized and "fertile" environment is an ideal terrain. Without bringing up too many details, shortly, it seems to me that the wider these different actors open the door of the school, the greater is the disorder and confusion there.

And these are just the outside factors that have had an impact on school history teaching. Heavy questions pop up at teacher training programmes when undergraduates ask me: What is the point in learning history? What does it give to me? This question is also sometimes raised during in-service teacher training programmes where the participants, active teachers, express their desperation over the purposelessness of history as a school subject. They refer to several practical factors from the real school environment, such as that not only maths is a much more “important” lesson than history but often “green and environmental issues” seem to them much more important than their own beloved school subject. They often complain that for them, it is hopelessly difficult to compete with “alternative forms of history knowledge” such as “historical” computer games, or “historical films” as part of edutainment easily available on television and smartphones etc., even if they very rarely follow thoughtful educational purposes, but more often entertainment or commercial gain. Very briefly, when I speak with active teachers, the sense that they are left down in confronting everyday challenges, which at the end of the day undermine the classical school history knowledge and undermine teachers’ credibility as professional representatives of historical knowledge.

On the one hand, in different places in Europe, history teaching is instrumentalized for reinforcing nationalism. For many Europeans, national identity is an integral part of their individual as well as group identification. “History is still considered the main apparatus for the social production of national identities” (Repoussi, 2009, 75) and an important tool for “social cohesion” (Haydn, 2014, 35) “Nationality is a proof of the stability of their personality, and it is a frame for their belonging to a particular group. The existing social need “to belonging somewhere”; the differentiation of “my own group” and the “different group”; the sense of the local or regional identity and so forth – all these are important aspects when we consider that cultural spaces can only be created by cultural inhabitants, i.e. by the people who create and use cultural spaces.

As far as national history curriculum is concerned, it is quite clear that many European countries, including the Slovak and the Hungarian curriculum, consider “national remembrance” to be one of the main purposes of history teaching, and that the “nation” is the overall context for the “knowledge” which representatives of the state consider the proper “glue” for national cohesion. This is our story. This is our unique history. *Alea iacta est. Sola Fide, Solus Christus.* William the Conqueror. Mathias Rex; Tomas Garrigue Masaryk and Dr. Beneš; The Battle of Somme; The Declaration of Right of Human and Citizens; Marshall Kutuzov, etc. History is a cultural code: Many of us know what we are speaking about. Dates, names, places, and events from history form our collective memory that might create cohesion. Two centuries ago, nationalism was unanimously a positive phenomenon. It was a mutual national feeling, a common “language”. (Báthory – Falus, 1997, 572) Since human identity consists not only of cognitive/rational but from emotional/irrational elements too, therefore sometimes extra “emotions” are added to history teaching. In my understanding, this is the psychological motivation when “nationalistic” history teaching is concerned. “Our common history” presented in a “positive manner” in history schoolbooks that are subsequently distributed to all pupils free of charge (as a socially motivated gesture) is rather a well-known phenomenon in several European countries.

States (in fact, experts paid by states) in the 21 century are still aware of peoples’ basic need for self-definition; they are aware of the cultural components of human identity; and the states (in fact, its schools) possess the means that may lead to desired social constructions. “Nationalistic education” may seem harmful, nevertheless it raises some aspects worth considering when we deal with an education that takes place in a nation-state environment. What is the extent of state authority over its citizens: Is it the task of the school to create links between individual pupils and their community? Is it legitimate to influence pupils as prospective citizens? “Education in national spirit” raises the question if any state has the right to pursue to educate loyal, disciplined, and cooperative pupils, its will-be-citizens. If the answers to these questions are “Yes”, then I see no way how “nationalism” could be eliminated from European schools. If the answers are “No”, then I wonder what are European states entitled to if comprehensive and compulsory school education is concerned?

In some West European societies, this problem over history teaching was discovered some time ago. One significant turn (or change in direction) took place in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in West

Germany, but also at other places in Western Europe, where there had been serious steps taken to shift school history from historical knowledge to historical skills. The same movement aimed at bringing in “skills” into school history by focusing on the analysis of carefully prepared multiperspective primary historical sources. In my understanding, this was an attempt (and a powerful one) to overcome the first crisis of history teaching. It was an effort to pull back school history to its roots, and it was an attempt to re-launch history teaching on a new or renewed basis.

However, the attempts concerning teaching/learning history through skills and sources did not bring a breakthrough; definitely not in Eastern Europe. And what makes the situation even messier is that recently a new phenomenon has further aggravated the prospects of history education. It is the “cultural fight” over the true or dominant interpretation of so-called “contested historical events” and “disputed historical legacies”. One of the most visible and palpable results of this “cultural war over memory and history” (this phenomenon was described by, among others, Liakos, 2009, 57), mainly in the United States but in European countries too, are different “debates on historical statues and monuments” (on public debates in the UK see Dargie, 2008, 13-25) which sometimes result in removal or even in the erasure of historical monuments and statues, or end up in erection or creation of counter-statues. I think it is probably not an exaggeration to say that this “cultural fight” is causing serious confusion over the meaningfulness of history teaching. Removal of statues and erasing historical personalities is neither confronting the past nor its re-evaluation, but it is a very radical (sometimes irrational) attempt to completely overwrite and totally erase selected figures or whole sets of historical events from the “past”. Is the historical re-evaluation of the slave trade, colonialism, communism, etc., legitimate? Of course, it is. Is critical thinking massively needed when dealing with challenging/problematic/conflictual historical events at a place? Of course, it is.

However, sudden and forceful overwriting and total erasure of selected historical events is inconsistent with European history teaching, based on empathic and multiperspective sources. It is incompatible with school history teaching that we have been practising and experiencing since 1989 (when Eastern Europe began to catch up with the West). Recent “cultural fights”, whatever is their social goal, do undermine the core meaning of school history teaching. Putting now apart from the impact of the ICT technology on teaching (both in general and on history in particular) (“*Historical culture in passing through cyberspace* [...] is an active agent in determining how historical images are going to be constructed”)(Liakos, 2009, 69), it is a serious question if in “traditional” school environment is there time and space for such debates, not to mention the lack of teachers’ skills to guiding skillfully such debates. Is it a wonder, under these circumstances, that “basic uncertainty concerning the aim and sense of history education” have arisen? – as Peter Gautschi and Markus Furrer put it recently. (See the Call for Papers written by P. Gautschi and M. Furrer as a call for “Why History Education?” International Workshop at the University of Teacher Education Lucerne of 4 and 5 May 2020. Du to Covid-19, the conference was postponed to Autumn 2021.)

“History should [...] explore the *multiple factors* that have shaped” modern world, the American Historical Association stated in 2016, arguing further that history teaching should be fundamentally based on “*reasoned discourse*” combining elements of “mutual respect, diverse points of view, balancing fair and honest criticism with inclusive practices and openness to different ideas”. (Statement of the American Historical Association from November 18, 2016.) While making a firm reflection over a very recent event, a murder of a French history teacher Samuel Paty, the Euroclio, an organization representing European history teacher associations, endorsed the freedom “to address sensitive and controversial topics”, stood up against censorship while encouraged “critical thinking and multiperspective”. (Statement of The Euroclio from October 21, 2020.) I do not see the point how recent “cultural fights” over the true or dominant interpretation of so-called “contested historical events” are compatible with all these above-mentioned principles. On the contrary, I am convinced that they pull us toward “[...] *grotesquely simplified and distorted forms of history* [...]” as our esteemed colleague, Terry Haydn from the International Society for History Didactics argued. (Haydn, 2014, 35)

For some time, we have been observing a quantitative reduction/decrease in the number of lessons for history. Does this reduction threaten the position of our school subject? Why does history need to

be taught as a school subject of its own? Would it not make more sense to integrate history into a larger subject group, for example, into the social sciences? Is history teaching a part of political education, or is political education a part of history education?

Unfortunately, data-based research on the means and ways of history teaching on a European scale is scarce. What we have in hand shows a decreasing number of history lessons in Europe. History as an independent school subject is, in many places, about to disappear from the curricula, or if it is not, then “at the age of 17, in a growing number of countries history becomes an optional school subject”. (Leeuw-Roord, 2004, 91) In an increasing number of countries, history teaching was (arbitrarily) commissioned with the task of carrying the topic of civic education. (See the case of Hungary at Kaposi, 2020, 219-242)

If we look at the Slovakian case, we can discover that here history has already been part of a broader “Educational Fields” (in Slovak, Vzdelávacie oblasti) since 2008. School subject History belongs to the “Educational Field: Man and Society” (in Slovak, Človek a spoločnosť) as one of the triad of school subjects History, Geography, and Civic Education. According to the basic document that determines the purpose of history teaching in Slovakia, we read: “The main function of [*teaching*] history is to cultivate the historical consciousness of the pupil as a wholistic personality, and to preserve the continuity of the historical remembrance, i.e. handing over / passing on historical experiences from local, regional, Slovakian, European or World perspective. Part of the handing over is first and foremost gradually getting acquainted with such historical events, phenomenons and processes in [*historical time*] time and [*geographical*] space, which had fundamentally influenced the development of both the Slovak and the World societies, and which [*events, phenomenons and processes*] were reflected into the picture of our present [*times*]. (In original Slovak: “Hlavnou funkciou dejepisu je kultivovanie historického vedomia žiakov ako celistvých osobností a uchovávanie kontinuity historickej pamäti v zmysle odovzdávania historických skúseností či už z miestnej, regionálnej, celoslovenskej, európskej alebo svetovej perspektívy. Súčasťou jej odovzdávania je predovšetkým postupné poznávanie takých historických udalostí, javov a procesov v čase a priestore, ktoré zásadným spôsobom ovplyvnili vývoj slovenskej i celosvetovej spoločnosti a premietli sa do obrazu našej prítomnosti. „<https://www.statpedu.sk/sk/svp/inovovany-statny-vzdelavaci-program/inovovany-svp-2.stupen-zs/clovek-spolocnost/> (Accessed: 10.10.2020)”

I think that the Slovakian case is a good starting point for arguing for the sensibility and necessity of school history education as well as a good launchpad for improving the efficiency of our school subject. The description above reflects well that beyond “present” and “future”, the “past” is also a very important dimension of our human consciousness of time. Several history didactics have been speaking of several aspects of “historical thinking”, “historical consciousness”, and “historical culture”, putting stress here or there. Whichever of these we prefer, yet the most pivotal position here is that the “past” can not be omitted from our time-consciousness, neither from our private nor our collective time-consciousness.

As a history learning methodologist, in my personal conviction, we should learn and teach history in order to gain four important skills, such as: to gain the ability of deep reading of primary historical sources; to understand historical causation; to get used to the multiperspective character of historical issues, including historical figures and events; and finally to be able to get engaged in civilized argumentation when historical issues are at stake, including being engaged in contemporary public discussions.

When facing the question “Why should we learn/teach history?” it is historians’ and history teachers’ best mutual interest that the ultimate goal of history teaching is to educate or cultivate historical thinking (historical culture or historical consciousness, in other words). This is the best point where both our professional communities can and should depart from. And this is the definition which brings us back to the roots of our science and school subject. Our school subject trains us and equips school pupils with such vitally important skills like “judging reliability”, or “taking into consideration alternating stand- and viewpoints”, or the ability “to discover overt bias” – not only in historical sources but in real-life situations too. (Báthory–Falus, 1997, 571)

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