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# Counterfactual History and its Educational Potential

Bernard Eric Jensen

My approach to the theme *History in Education* differed significantly from what turned out to be the prevailing norm at the conference. Whereas other speakers approached questions concerning history in education mainly from a starting point within philosophy, I came to such questions from a background within academic as well as public history<sup>1</sup>.

As far as the Western world is concerned, we have never been as well-informed about history education as we are today. This is due to the fact that during the last decade there has been made several in-depth surveys about how Westerners have experienced being taught history at school. It does not mean that we are able today to answer all relevant and interesting questions about the teaching of history in schools. But it does mean that the factual knowledge about history teaching is today much more detailed and refined than it ever has been. I therefore consider it important to try to take the available knowledge into account when reflecting on how to approach history in an educational setting.

I will therefore take as my starting point a few of the more eye-opening findings from these surveys. The first of these was *Youth and History: a Comparative European Survey* (1997) in which more than 30.000 students and teachers in almost thirty countries were questioned about their views on history and history teaching. This survey did not only show that there was a major disparity between what history teachers and their students thought was taking place during history classes - this disparity was in fact so manifest that the resear-

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1 The term 'public history' is nowadays used as a name for a special kind of history education and research. It is concerned especially with how history is represented and used in a public setting, and it therefore focuses its attention upon how one approaches history in schools, at museums, on films etc. There are moreover journals specifically devoted to this field of research - e.g. *The Public Historian*.

chers felt obliged to raise the question: do teachers and students actually attend the same history classes? The same survey also highlighted to a rather widespread dissatisfaction among the students about the kind of history teaching which they were taking part in. This latter finding was summarised by Susan Barschdorff in the following way:

"Today's history teaching does not really meet student's preferences. (...) Teaching methods, the use of media and the goals of teaching history, as observed by the students, are rather traditional. Dominating this are the storage of facts, textbook use and the narrations of the teacher. Empathy, the reconstruction of past situations, project work and modern media is really seldom encountered. This is not in harmony with the students' wishes. They prefer by far audio-visual media, sources and documents, and museums to their textbooks. This gives the impression that history teaching is not up to date and has not taken account of the innovatory debates of the last decade."<sup>2</sup>

The other survey worth mentioning is the one carried out by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen; it appeared in 1998 under the title *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life*. It was based on in-depth phone interviews with a sample of app. 1.500 adult Americans; they had been selected in such a way that the results could be considered to be statistically representative of contemporary American society. Through this survey Rosenzweig and Thelen were not only able to show that a history class for most adult Americans actually constituted the social setting in which they had felt the least connected with the past. History classes were in this instance compared with other settings such as: family gatherings, visits to a museum, being on holidays, reading books, watching movies or television programs. They also discovered that in the minds of adult Americans the words 'history' and 'the past' have very different connotations indeed. When asked if they were interested in history, most Americans tended to say 'no', whereas when asked if they were interested in the past, most of them tended to answer: 'yes, very much so'. Rosenzweig and Thelen sought to explain this finding of theirs in the following way:

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2 S. Barschdorff in J. van der Leeuw-Roord (ed.), *The State of History Education in Europe: Challenges and Implications of the 'Youth and History' Survey, 1998*, p.85 & 90.

"After listening to 1500 Americans we understand how a generation has grown up to say that something is 'history' when it is dead and gone, irrelevant, beyond any use in the present. That is how many of the people we interviewed described their classroom encounters with the past. While some praised individual teachers, their stories only underscored how deeply respondents felt alienated from the structure and content of history classes."<sup>3</sup>

Today there is ample evidence to show that the teaching of history in schools is not all popular in the minds of those people who are obliged to participate in such a teaching - that is to say among those who may be classified as the 'captive audiences' of history classes. There are some exceptions to this general rule. History teaching is, for instance, less popular on a primary and lower secondary level than it is on a higher secondary level.

Yet, it should also be noted that there is some evidence indicating that we are seemingly not dealing with a problem, which is specific to contemporary Western societies. Thus, Sam Wineburg opens his book on *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001) by pointing out that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century American authorities have known that surveys showed that history teaching was not achieving the desired results. When the pupils' and students' knowledge of historical facts were tested, the result was very disappointing indeed.

"Considering the vast differences between those who attended high school in 1917 and the near-universal enrollments of today, the stability of the students' ignorance is amazing. The whole world has turned on its head, but one thing has stayed the same: Kids don't know history."<sup>4</sup>

It can thus be said that there is a marked contrast between the fact that politicians and educational authorities consider a solid knowledge of history to be of major importance and the actual state of knowledge prevailing among pupils and students. When politicians and educational authorities have been confronted with findings such as these, they not only have tended to decry the low level of historical literacy found within their respective societies, they have also set out to amend this existing state of affairs by seeking to proscribe more of the

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<sup>3</sup> R. Rosenzweig & D. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life*, 1998, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts. Charting the future of Teaching the Past*, 2001, p. viii.

very kind of history classes that most ordinary people find to be without much meaning or perspective. Yet, as I see it, there is no good reason to assume that such a recommendation will be able to change the present state of affairs within history teaching in any significant way.

For those scholars, whose task it is to analyse and reflect on the state of history education in Western societies, one of the central challenges consists in trying to find out why ordinary people tend to experience the prevailing forms of history teaching as a rather uninspiring and tiresome affair. But before indicating what existing research says about this issue, there is one possible misunderstanding that I would want to guard against. At the present time there is no evidence to indicate that ordinary people - young, middle-aged or old - lack an interest in what happened in the past - i.e. that they should be disinterested in issues relating to their own heritage. What the available evidence indicates is that many people are not very interested in those aspects of the past which politicians and educational authorities have been stipulating should constitute the core of a history curriculum. Thus, there exists today a significant disparity between what is presented in schools as the officially and publicly sanctioned heritage and the kind of heritages that concern ordinary people. Moreover, such a disparity can help to explain why surveys frequently show that most people remember rather little of what they had been taught during their history classes.

Rosenzweig and Thelen's survey also shed some light upon the reasons that people tend to give when asked to explain why they had felt less connected with the past during history classes than in any of the other social settings about which they were asked. Here I will limit myself to three of the reasons given. First, most people experienced their history classes as a place where they primarily were 'forced-fed' with a series of facts which they were obliged to memorise. The appropriate section of *The Presence of the Past* (1998) was for that reason given the following sub-heading: "*It was just a giant data dump*": *The Sad Story of History in Schools*. Second, many people experienced their history classes as a place where there was little or no room whatsoever for having an intense discussion or a heated controversy about the issues being treated during such a class. On the contrary, they saw themselves as being obliged to learn a history curriculum which they were not given any opportunity of actively shaping. Third and finally, most people found that they were unable to link their own life stories to the overarching stories which were presented to them during history classes in meaningful ways.

In light of such a set of experiences it becomes comprehensible why ordinary people by and large have viewed their history teaching as a rather uninspiring and tiresome affair. When one is considering how to approach history education, it is therefore important to remember that it is a type of teaching which very easily indeed can de-generate into forms of rote learning - that is the kind of learning processes which rest more on the memorisation of prescribed information rather than upon an active process of inquiry where one is seeking to raise interesting questions, generate some new insights and thereby try to come up with one or more plausible answers to the questions posed. One of the main challenges that history educators have to face today consists in a deliberate attempt to transform the existing forms of history teaching - to transform it from being a place of learning where one is obliged to reproduce some officially prescribed course material and to make it instead into an active and stimulating place of learning. It is in this context that it becomes relevant to reflect on the educational potential of counterfactual history.

When I studied history at Copenhagen University in the 1960's, one of the prevailing norms stipulated that academic historians were never concerned themselves with What-If-Questions - i.e. with what is known today as counterfactual history. One would, in other words, disgrace oneself in professional terms if one began to indulge in that kind of speculation. As a student it was therefore not surprising to learn that a prominent British historian such as E.H. Carr considered counterfactual history to be nothing more than 'a parlour game' in *What Is History?* (1961) and later to find that E.P. Thompson classified it as outright 'unhistorical shit' in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978).

Yet, since the 1980's things have started to change within the world of academic history. During the winter term of 1983-84 Alexander Demandt, professor of Ancient History, gave a course on counterfactual history at the University of Berlin, and he has described it retrospectively as being one of the most significant turning points ('ein geistes Ereignis') in his professional career. The students were given the task of having to play through a series of realistic, yet alternative scenarios in conjunction with actual historical events in European history, but as far as the students were concerned, their participation in this course turned out to have an unforeseen and rather unfortunate consequence. After they had sat their exams, the exam commission at Berlin University ruled that it was not willing to recognise their exam papers, and they had thus to face the fact that they had partaken in a university course for which they could not be given any credits. This provoked Demandt to declare: "The first born have

been sacrificed", but this set-back did not hold him back. In 1984 he published his book *Ungeschehene Geschichte. Ein Traktat über die Frage: Was wäre geschehen, wenn ...?* - i.e. History that never happened. A treatise on the question: What would have happened, if ...? - and he became subsequently the most prominent German advocate of what he himself terms: *The-What-If-School of Historical Studies*. It is worth noting that Demandt's treatise by now has appeared in a third and extended edition, and it has been followed by a whole series of books on counterfactual history written by academic historians.

How can it be explained that academic historians have begun to change their thinking about counterfactual history during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Many factors play no doubt a role in such a change but I will only focus upon one such factor. Until the 1970's many academic historians and social scientists worked on the basis of the assumption that historical processes, to a significant degree, were governed by laws, and they could therefore be said to be upholding either a strong or a weak variant of a historicist conception of history. It was this kind of thinking that constituted part of the background for Karl Popper writing his book on *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). In the present context, the important point is, that as long as historians were working on the base of a historicist conception of history, it made little or no sense to start considering questions about what would have happened if this or that had been different, since a historicist conception is based on the assumption that historical processes are governed by a set of underlying regularities.

Since the 1970's many academic historians and social scientists not only have begun to question such an assumption and have started in stead to view history as a series of contingent processes - i.e. processes that only will take place if specific sets of conditions have been fulfilled. They have also become more prone to view history as the outcome of the aggregated effects of human actions - including the unintended consequences of these actions. In other word, they have become much more inclined to take the notion that people are the agents of history much more seriously than was the case during the first three-quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As soon as one begins to work on the basis of a notion of history as the aggregated effects of human actions, then it begins to make a lot of sense to ask questions about what would have happened, if specific persons or groups had opted for another of those alternative courses of action that had presented themselves at the time.

In this setting counterfactual history no longer appears to be, a mere parlour game' or a lump of ,unhistorical shit', it will in stead be seen as an inherent and

central dimensions of any historical process. As soon as one begins to stress the notion of human agency and thus start to take seriously the idea of people partaking in the making their own histories, then the working assumption will be that a historical process never will appear to be fully determined and that the future must therefore be seen as more or less open at any given point in time. Yet, it should be stressed that the degree of openness may differ from one epoch to another and from one type of situation to another.

This kind of a re-assessment of counterfactual history has opened up new possibilities when the question of how to teach history in schools comes up for consideration. If counterfactual history became an integral part of history teaching, it would become possible to move away from the type of rote learning that has predominated and to establish in stead a more creative and productive approach to history teaching. To the extent that one includes the counterfactual dimension in history teaching, there will always be a fair scope of the use of one's imagination and creativity when one seeks to generate insight into what were the actual alternative courses of action at a given place and time.

Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, counterfactual history does in no way encourage a sloppy and superficial attitude towards historical analysis. On the contrary, counterfactual analysis only becomes a stimulating intellectual challenge to the extent that one seeks to establish what constituted a set of probable alternative scenarios in a specific setting, and this will in turn demand that one has become familiar with the culture and thinking of the people in question - including of course their norms, habits, knowledge, desires, expectations, technologies, living conditions, divisions etc.

To pursue counterfactual history in a serious way will require that one starts to study in some fair detail the mental horizons of the people who were seeking to make history at a particular place and time. One of the central challenges will consist in seeking to understand how the people in question sought to establish links between their memories of the past, their understanding of the present situation and their expectation with regard to the future. Thus, it will demand generating insight into what the German historian Reinhart Koselleck has termed *Vergangene Zukunft* - i.e. the ways in which the future actually presented itself to a set of actors at specific times in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Working with counterfactual history thus requires that one set out to generate insight into those forms of historical consciousness that shaped the actions

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, 1979.

of people at the given time and place. This will only be possible to the extent that one can gain insight into the actual forms of historical consciousness that were operating in the past. Moreover, by working in such a way one will have to achieve an understanding of the temporality or historicity of historical process – i.e. the ways in which people's perception and understanding of history has undergone some very significant changes in the course of human history. In sum, one will have to seek – in Koselleck's terms – to discover the actual temporality of history ('Zeitlichkeit der Geschichte').



*Peter Kemp (Ed.)*

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