

REVIEW ARTICLE

MEASURING THE OUTCOMES OF HISTORY TEACHING: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS*

by
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The first comprehensive attempt to measure the outcomes of history teaching for adolescents was published in Hamburg in 1997. The research is based on the assumption that the development of an historical consciousness is the most important long-term life skill that history teaching imparts to students.

The project

This extraordinarily ambitious project, undertaken simultaneously in 26 countries during 1994/5 (the Netherlands in 1996), is a result of the keen interest in the concept of historical consciousness that has developed in Europe since the late seventies. The driving force behind this interest was not the historians involved in historical research, but historians and academics with a keen interest in the didactics of history. The development of a historical consciousness as the main aim and purpose of the study and practice of history has received increased attention in European educational and historical circles over the last two or three decades. It represents a shift away from the traditional association of didactics with teaching methods to a new focus on the role of history in society in general and in education in particular. Central to this re-evaluation of history is its functions as a social and intellectual manifestation, its role in giving direction to individuals and societies, and in the identification of the determinants that shape these functions and purposes.

The book under review is Magne Anvik and Bodo von Borries: *Youth and History. A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents*. Körber-Stiftung. Hamburg, 1997.

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Karl-Ernst Jeismann refers to these functions of history in society as historical consciousness.¹ Initially the focus was a rather theoretical and hermeneutical one, with very little attention devoted to empirical studies. The simultaneous rise, particularly in the United States, of a new interest in public history, a study of the public manifestations, understanding, use and applications of history, stimulated the growing interest in the social functions of history.²

Although there is no generally accepted theory of historical consciousness, a number of small pilot empirical studies on the nature of historical consciousness in different societies, especially in Germany, has been undertaken. Historians interested in the more theoretical aspects of their discipline, and historians who became educationalists, took a keen interest in studying the value and meaning attached to historical knowledge amongst those regularly exposed to it. It is against this background that the project *Youth and History. The Comparative European Project on Historical Consciousness among Teenagers* was born. Magne Angvik (Bergen College of Higher Education, Norway) and Bodo von Borries (University of Hamburg, Germany), both originally trained as historians and history teachers, but since engaged in educational research, initiated a project aimed at an empirical "measurement" of the extent to which youths of 15 years of age, display a definitive influence that the study of history and history teaching may have had on their way of thinking and the manner in which they evaluate events and issues. They obtained financial support from the Körber-Stiftung in Hamburg in 1991 and managed to assemble an international team of historians, educationalists, statisticians and other social scientists.

A questionnaire was drafted and put through a number of pilot tests before it was fine-tuned. The questionnaire was standardised for all 26 countries and translated into the local languages. Permission was obtained, where necessary, from education authorities to conduct the survey amongst a random selected sample of 31 000 15-year olds from the participating countries. In some cases, at the insistence of the authorities, a few questions had to be altered or left out because of local peculiarities and sensitivities. The list included all Western European countries, the majority of Eastern European countries and a number of countries/peoples on the periphery of Europe: Palestine, Israel, Arab Israelis, Turkey. In the case of Belgium only the Flemish part of the population was involved. But in the case of Italy, the Germans, Italians and Ladins of the South Tyrol were subjected to a survey separate from the one conducted in Italy.

Jeismann, Karl-Ernst: *Geschichtsbewusstsein*. In Klaus Bergmann; Annette Kuhn; Jörn Rüsen; Gerhard Schneider: *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, pp. 40-43. Kallmeyer'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Seelze-Velber, 1992.

Wilhelm van Kampen and Hans-George Kirchhoff (Eds): *Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit*. Tagung der Konferenz für Geschichtsdidaktik, 5-7/10/1977. Klett, Stuttgart, 1979.

The project prides itself in the fact that:

for the first time in history, we have got a representative sample of data in history concerning a full age group of young people and their teachers on a national level in most countries in Europe.³

The results were published in 1997 in a unique way: a two-volume publication entitled *Youth and History* and a CD-ROM. The publisher is the Körber-Stiftung. The second volume is a very extensive record of the statistical analysis of two questionnaires: one completed by the students and the other by their teachers. The almost 400 pages of this volume does not, however, represent all the statistical data available. The CD-ROM contains a complete database of available statistics. Any one interested in exploring new issues and comparisons can utilise the tables in volume 2 and the CD-ROM to do so.

Volume 1 is divided into three main parts. In the first part the method of research and a descriptive comparison of the main findings per question or group of questions are provided. In the second part the different national participants on the research team provide a brief analysis of the main findings as far as their particular country is concerned. In the third part historians and academics from other disciplines, especially psychology and political science, take a closer look at the significance of the European results for particular issues. Historiography, national identity and political socialisation are the three main issues reviewed.

The nature of the questionnaires

The students' questionnaire lists five optional categories as responses to statements: totally disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, totally agree. The 48 questions cover a variety of issues that are in one way or another linked to four main areas. The major area of research is the students' understanding or interpretation or evaluation of past events. Closely linked to this area is their attitude to history as a discipline or a school subject. Current issues that measure the influence of the first two areas on their value system and attitude to society and its problems, are intended to provide empirical data on the role of historical consciousness in present-day affairs. Historical consciousness as orientation toward the future, is represented by a set of questions dealing with their hope for or expectations of the future. The questions are all intended to measure knowledge and understanding of the past, its relevance for the present and its significance for the future. These answers may then be correlated with a number of variables: gender, income, country, language, social status, etc.

3. *Youth and History*, p.A19.

The four areas are not organised numerically but are randomly spread over the 48 questions. Arranging them according to the main subdivisions of the four areas they can be grouped as follows:

- Questions 1, 2, 4, and 24 deal with philosophy of history;
- 21 to 23 and 3 deal with motivation for and interest shown in studying history;
- 5 and 6 are intended to establish students' historical socialisation;
- 19, 20, 32 and 33 try to measure their chronological knowledge and skills;
- 26 to 30 represent interpretations of periods, processes and persons;
- 45 to 47 aim at measuring understanding or interpretation of historical-political concepts;
- 41 to 43 are questions on moral conviction, while 40 is intended to measure empathy;
- 31, 39, 44 and 48 ask for their views on current political controversies;
- 25, 36, 37, 31 and 38 are intended to provide some indication of their future expectations;
- 34, 24, 25, 35, 36, 37, 31 and 38 deal with their perception of the role and significance of change over time.

The teachers' questionnaire is a very short one intended to establish the nature of the school, a general profile of the students' attending that school, including their intellectual standards, and the teacher's qualifications, experience and political and religious interests.

What is historical consciousness?

To reach general agreement on the type and content of the questionnaire amongst representatives of 26 different educational systems, ethnic groups and cultural manifestations was an achievement in its own right. The objective of the research, to map the role of historical consciousness, represents an even bigger challenge to such a diverse group. There was agreement amongst them not to try and reach a consensus on what historical consciousness is. They agreed to work with an operational rather than a theoretical definition of historical consciousness. In reading the national representatives comments on the national data of the 26 countries, it becomes apparent that they do not emphasise the same things. In some cases historical consciousness is almost directly associated with political or religious awareness, in other cases with political socialisation and in some with social psychology and group behaviour.

What the group did agree upon is that historical consciousness is characterised by a complex correlation between interpretation of the past on the one hand, perception of present reality and future expectations on the other hand, and that this correlation is constantly changing.⁴ To meet the criticism of objectivists and postmodernists, the question on what constitutes historical consciousness was eventually rephrased thus:

Is there any relation between “knowledge of facts”, “historical ideas”, “political attitudes” and educational styles?⁵

What the questionnaire thus represents is an operationalised theory of historical consciousness rather than a clear definition. It is based on Jeismann and Rösen’s definition of history as “a mental construct, making sense out of the past in narrative structure and providing for orientation of the own life in the changes from the past to the future”.⁶

The successful implementation of such an ambitious project generated a wealth of information that cannot be utilised in one or two, even though voluminous, reports. It is therefore envisaged that the first two volumes will be followed by a number of additional studies. Four main longer-term projects are envisaged. They are:

An evaluation and diagnosis of teaching methods, on the basis of the Report, to improve history teaching;

Using the operational theory of historical consciousness to determine the basic dimensions and elements of historical consciousness as an educational, theoretical and social phenomenon;

History teaching and its possible role and functions in the process of integration and peaceful development in Europe; and

Establishing an international network for continuing discussion, promotion and implementation of the research and its results.

Interpreting the results

How reliable is the picture presented of what European adolescents think of history and its functions in society? When discussing the reliability of the research three early warnings are necessary.

Firstly, there is some doubt as to whether 15-year-olds can be used as a norm to measure adolescent views and attitudes. It is understandable why they were selected. In most of the participating countries it represents the last year of basic education in which history is studied by almost all students involved.

Volume 1, p. A20.

Volume 1, p. A36.

6. Volume 1, p. A36.

But 15-year-olds are rather insecure and unstable early adolescents. Their views are not well formed or properly articulated and they tend to react in a more naive and emotional way to stimulating experiences. Could the project not be inclined to make too much of their answers? How sure can one be that the students did not simply choose the easy way out to complete a rather long and very challenging questionnaire? The type of school or the peculiarities of a local community are most probably strongly reflected in their responses, and could go a very long way to explain answers to particular questions. The survey may be relying too much on the assumptions that there is a standardised uniformity in history teaching and experience. To compensate for these problems the national interpretations are meant to explain local peculiarities and important differences from or similarities to the "European norm". The fact that national researchers were often surprised by some of their student's responses, is an indication of how difficult it is to measure values and attitudes.

This is the basis of the second problem to which the commentary on the Flemish responses draws attention.⁷ The comparative study of the responses of different countries is based on the European average or mean. National co-ordinators were asked to comment on whether their country's adolescents represent responses above or below the European average. The five options to each statement or issue are used to develop the European mean, between 1 and 5. The concept of an average student as represented by the European, or any national, mean is something that the Flemish regard as "monsterlijke nonsens", although they agreed to use it for comparative purposes.

The concept of a continental or a national mean leads to the third problem. This type of empirical research can so easily develop into a game of statistics, often making the report a rather boring statistical analysis. This applies especially to pages A180 to A234 where the exercises in statistical calculations completely overshadow any attempt at presenting a picture of historical consciousness. For historians the report is not easy reading.⁸ Even the national commentaries, which are much more interesting and readable, are also often clouded in statistical details. There are exceptions. The most interesting interpretation of the tables is provided in the Portuguese commentary.⁹

The best way to form some idea of the data produced would be to select a few issues that would be of particular interest to historians.

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7. Jos van Doorn: Weinig amusement in de Vlaamse geschiedenisles. *Hermes*, 3/1997, pp. 11-29.
 8. Wolfgang Hasberg in *Mitteilungen Internationale Gesellschaft für Geschichtsdidaktik*, vol 19/1, 1998, p. 85.
 9. Vol. 1, pp. A328-336.

What do the students think of history?

Question 1 is intended to establish what the students think of history. They are given eight statements to respond to, ranging from a very low evaluation (something to get over and done with, a school subject and nothing more) to a very positive appreciation of the significance of history for their personal development and society's progress (explains today's problems/a means of mastering my life). The idea that history has no relevance is strongly rejected by the students. History is generally valued as a means of obtaining knowledge about the past and understanding the present. On the other hand, the more ephemeral concept that history plays an important role in their orientation for the future is also rejected. An important and revealing exception must, however, be noted. In countries presently experiencing huge changes such as Russia, Lithuania and Turkey, history is viewed as an important guide for the future.¹⁰

The students show a strong preference for contemporary history. Question 21 lists five periods to choose from. Regional peculiarities are striking. The more modernised countries all seem to indicate a convincing preference for the study of contemporary history. Countries with a long history of domination and instability - Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Portugal - view history as an important manifestation of their identity. They prefer studying older periods that reflect the glory of their respective countries.

Historical periods are less popular than types or specialised areas of history or themes from history. Taking into account the intense debates of the sixties and seventies on Marxist, structural and radical history, one would have expected the newer generations to be keenly interested in these interpretations of history. The students, however, show very little interest in history from below or in structural history. Their own history, especially family history, the history of adventures and great discoveries and of the effects of humans on the environment, are ranked above average.¹¹ Does this perhaps reflect the more idealistic and romantic approach of the early adolescent?

Studying the history of one's own country is highly preferred, which is perhaps understandable at the age of 15 years. Interest in European history is in the second place, above the average, while the world outside Europe is in a third position below the average. Important exceptions are Sweden, Finland and South Tyrol, whose students prefer European and world history to their national histories.¹²

10. A66-A69.

11. A74.

12. A81-A83.

Questions on the teaching of history show that the traditional instructional method of dialogue between teacher, textbook and student is predominant and well established in most countries. The students are particularly keen on the use of films and visits to museums and places of historic interest.

What do students expect from their history lessons? The first place is taken by “We seek knowledge about the main facts of history”, a strong endorsement of teachers’ belief that they are not there to entertain but to instruct and develop the abilities and the levels of knowledge of the adolescents entrusted to their care.¹³ Although the use of a textbook is the dominant mode of instruction, students are clearly very sceptical about the trustworthiness of textbooks. They rely heavily on teachers providing guidance and presenting different interpretations. This is especially true in the modernised countries, less so in the new states or in states in the process of transformation.¹⁴

What should be the main aim of history teaching?

The fact that students regard the acquisition of knowledge as the main aim of teaching confirms the status of history as a basic discipline in the school curriculum. They prefer concentration on the “traditions, characteristics, values and tasks of their own nation and society”, a confirmation of the much maligned national history or history of the fatherland. In the early adolescent stage this is an understandable priority: the need to get to know one’s own surroundings, local situation, own culture and identity. This should not be interpreted as xenophobia. The fact that “fascination and fun” as the purpose of history teaching is placed last indicates the seriousness with which the teaching of history is approached.¹⁵

A set of questions on three basic elements of what content should be studied, confirms this serious and rational appreciation of the value of history as a school subject. Students regard chronology, historical association and the use of historical-political concepts as important parts of studying history. For example, the Middle Ages is not regarded as either a “dark and superstitious era” nor as a “glorious time for my country”, both placed at the two lowest rankings. The majority regard the Middle Ages as a period characterised by the “domination of peasants by church and king”. Another example: industrialisation is identified as a period of inventions and mechanical improvements. The two opposite ideological interpretations - the socialist view of the period as a struggle between workers and factory owners and the capitalist view of improving living standards - were evenly positioned but at a lower ranking. The Marxist interpretation of the industrial revolution as the

13. A96-98.

14. A87.

15. A98.

accumulation of big capital is placed even lower. A final example: on the issue of colonisation there is no clear and generally accepted interpretation. The responses are more or less evenly divided between the different options. "Exploitation" and "racism" receive more support in countries like Italy, South Tyrol and Germany but not in Great Britain. Colonisation as adventure is more strongly supported in Czechia, Portugal, Spain and Belgium, while Russia, Norway, Bulgaria and Turkey tend to associate it with empire building. The Ukraine, Spain, Portugal and Turkey are also inclined to view colonisation as the "Europeanisation of the world".¹⁶ If read with the answers to question 46 it seems reasonable to conclude that, while students recognise the exploitative nature of colonisation, they do not regard Europe as a club of rich white exploiters.¹⁷

Nationality and identity

Governments are traditionally inclined to view history as an important means of developing a sense of civic responsibility, national cohesion and pride. To what extent do adolescents share this view, especially in the light of the important changes brought about in the curriculum and the teaching of history by such developments as history from below, people's history, social history and skills development?

Question 45 asked the students "What are your views on nations and the national state?" The students were given statements ranging from a traditional view of the state and the nation to the current emphasis on the declining role and significance of the nation and the state in the face of rising supra-nationalism and globalisation. The most favoured item is the Herderian view of the state and the nation as "natural entities, created by common origin, language, history and culture". It achieved positive mean values in all countries, with particularly high scores in Czechia, Greece, Russia, Bulgaria and Turkey, and a low mean average in Belgium and Slovenia. The Renanian conception of the state and nation as created by the common will, thus not requiring homogeneity, was placed second. The highest scores for the latter view were achieved in Italy, France and Greece. What is surprising about the result in a Europe that is in the process of greater integration is that the item "National states should yield an essential part of their sovereignty to supranational organisations" received so little support.¹⁸ As far as the 15-year-olds are concerned, the world is not on the threshold of a new age in which the national state will no longer be important!

16. A123 and 119.

17. A143.

18. A137.

Linked to this issue is European integration and what it means to adolescents. Question 46 raised the issue directly: What do Europe and European integration mean to you? Six statements ranging from very negative to very positive were provided. From the answers it is clear that Europe means something important to the students. They reject the idea that Europe is only a geographical expression. The most favoured item is the status of Europe as the birthplace of the basic characteristics of modernity (democracy, enlightenment, progress). A positive appreciation of European integration as the only way to peace is placed second. The belief that integration will solve economic and social crises is placed only in the third place. This reflects not too optimistic expectations of integration. Scandinavia, Britain and Belgium were the most reserved on integration.¹⁹

Questions 21, 23, 31, 37 and 44 read together address the issue of national and ethnic identity. Viewed against the background of the current debate in the EU countries on how far European integration should go, a return of new forms of appreciating traditional identity and nationalism, and the strong nationalistic and ethnic identification in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe. The answers to these questions offer a unique opportunity to correlate views on the future of the national state with those on ethnic identity. The Greeks, Lithuanians, Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and Portuguese represent the strongest ethnic identification, and the British, Finnish, Danish, French and Slovene students the weakest. There is an interesting difference between the two groups that could explain their positions. The first group represents people who have a need to explain and legitimate their insistence on an autonomous identity. The second group has such a well-established and accepted identity that they take it for granted and as self-evident. Another interesting observation is that those countries that positively identify with European integration and its envisaged benefits are also the countries with a more positive appreciation of ethnic identity and a keen interest in history. Is it perhaps possible that ethnic groups with a relatively inferior status see European integration as a means of upgrading their own status and achieving some position of influence or some benefits?²⁰

Lazló Kéri²¹ discusses the implications of the student's positive evaluation of Europe as something more than just a geographical expression and definitely not a rich whiteman's club. It implies that Europe must represent some form of a collective symbol or idea or experience. European integration as represented by the starred flag could be regarded as such a symbol by the member states, but not by the majority of the participants who are not members. Kéri then raises the question whether it is possible that Europe's

19. A139-A143.

20. Cf. Essay by Thalia Dragonas and Anna Frangoudaki, A417-A423.

21. A424-A429.

history could represent a common symbol. He considers the role of Christianity, discovery and conquest, the Industrial Revolution and the great wars and settlements in Europe's history which forced Europeans to develop a common understanding. A number of similarities in their historical development are also reviewed: equality of sexes, the democratic system, the paradox of socialisation embedded in the contradictions created by unity and diversity. He concludes:

As yet we do not have a genuine symbol, one acceptable to all of us. Just as we have no collectively experienced history. A minority of intellectuals does endeavour to construct a European wholeness out of this diversity.

But the diversity will never disappear. There will never be a common or universal language of culture:

neither the success of shaping a common European consciousness of tasks lying ahead, nor the success of concomitant solutions for socialisation will make dents in cultural diversity... Europe will not, however, forge unity by uprooting the foundations of diversity in the process.

From the responses of the adolescents it is clear that history has to accommodate both the forces of unity and the power of diversity. The research has established that there is as yet no unanimously accepted goal for the development of a European identity, European historical consciousness and European integration. The experience with a common European history textbook seems to fail in both purpose and method.²²

With the positive approach to history shown in this survey, it is indeed a challenge and an opportunity for history to find this role. The current work done by EUROCLIO in co-operation with the Council of Europe is an indication that the intellectual will to define history's role within these parameters does exist.

Implications for South Africa

What is the significance of this study for South Africans? Firstly, the uniqueness of the entire process involved. This study is the result of a long process of mutual engagement and understanding through dialogue and openness. The process in itself is not the work of the project. The project may well be a product of the process, but the process was in turn enhanced by the project. Many role players contributed to the process through societies

22. Jacques Aldebert (et al): *Europaisches Geschichtsbuch*. Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1992; Joke van der Leeuw-Roord: A textbook for Europe: Could the "History of Europe" avoid the traditional European mirror of pride and pain? In *Internationale Schulbuchforschung*, 18/1996, pp.85-106.

for history teaching, academic research and exchange, official involvement of education departments and the facilitating role of the Council of Europe's division for Education, Culture and Sport. The regular seminars and conferences, the personal contact between individuals and national societies and the co-operation represented in EUROCLIO, the European Society for History Teaching, all contributed to encourage a creative sense of acceptance of each other and tolerance of the diversities of their historical experiences. Is there any hope that such a process can be initiated in South Africa?

The active involvement of practising teachers in Europe is noteworthy. Their interest and practically minded approach was a very important factor in ensuring that the profession did not regard this as an isolated academic enterprise. Their willingness and ability to participate in a high-level project such as this is an indication of the scholarly standards and professional quality of the teachers' commitment to their discipline.

The European tradition of fundamental theoretical analysis and advanced empirical research created an infrastructure that plays a vital role in developing the study and teaching of history at both secondary and tertiary level. One only needs to read the published material produced during the eighties, when intensive public discussions on the future of history as a school subject were the order of the day, to realise that, in spite of great differences on the interpretations of history, the case for history was well and convincingly presented.

Research on history teaching is currently a low priority in South Africa. The HSRC project on history teaching completed in 1992²³ was not followed through. The hope and expectation that this would stimulate public or at least professional debate and involvement never materialised. The work done by a handful of researchers on curriculum development, assessment, and principles and criteria for selecting content, did not receive the attention of education authorities or the historical fraternity that it deserved.

23. *The Teaching of History in the RSA*. HSRC Education Research Programme number 27.