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## **Between Cosmopolitanism, Europeanism and Nationalism: the shifting focus in the teaching of history in Europe**

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'The concept of an educational project must be cosmopolitical' Immanuel Kant

### **From the World to Nation-states: the teaching of history in Europe from the 18th century until the end of World War II**

The eighteenth century can be considered the beginning of modern teaching of history in Europe. Until then the Jesuit model had prevailed, in which history was not a discrete subject in the Collegium (equivalent to the secondary school), but only in the Academia (University), and in which the history which was taught was basically holy history, largely following the model of the Four Monarchies of Daniel's prophecy and with the addition of dynastic histories.

The biblical model, already criticised by many scholars after the discovery of the New World, was first thoroughly attacked by Voltaire, who in his *Essai sur les moeurs* (1751) shaped a new pattern of profane history going beyond the limits of the traditional Christian western and Mediterranean boundaries. In the German Enlightenment Voltaire's historical revolution was translated into a didactical program, primarily by historians of the University of Göttingen like Schlözer and Gatterer, who wrote exemplar history textbooks. The history they sketched was a world history, a history of mankind in which every people was represented, based on recent scholarly acquisitions which were disseminated all over Europe in the huge English collection *A Universal History* and its many translations. In the foreword of his *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* (1772) Schlözer expressed his view of the meaning and sense of world history:

World history takes into account all the states and all the peoples in the world. Without fatherland, without national pride, it covers all the countries where human societies dwell and embraces with its eyes all the scenes where human beings played their role. All parts of the world are equal to it. It has no predilection for the Four Monarchies, which pettily put aside about thirty more, nor for the people of God, nor for the Greeks and the Romans. Its interest reaches the Huang He river and the Nile, just as the Tiber and Vistola; Ilidschuzaj is for it more important than Maecenas; Alexander the Great, Caesar and Gustav Adolf are not more important than Attila, the Incas and Timur Lenk (Schlözer, 1772, p. 28).

But this cosmopolitan ideal of a history 'without fatherland, without national pride' did not last long. Soon came a new age, that of European nationalism, which replaced this pedagogical ideal with a new one: patriotism.

All over Europe the nineteenth century was the age of nationalist teaching. The new national states used the teaching of history as the most important tool - together with language - to create a national identity and a consensus among their citizens. The teaching of history became an *instrumentum regni*. The good patriot was moulded by being taught the biography of the nation. World history was expressly withdrawn because it did not fit this purpose, and it was replaced by national history placed on a general European

background. I quote as the antithesis to Schlözer the official *Istruzioni del Ministero della Pubblica istruzione* of 1856 for the Kingdom of Piemonte, future core of the unified Italy:

We believe that, instead of a world history too difficult to teach and to be learned, the history of our nation fits much better for these pupils. This choice is reinforced by the consideration that through history lessons pupils must learn the events of ancient and modern Italy, must get useful examples of patriotic love and conform themselves to the highest spirit of nationality and of civic dignity (di Pietro, 1991, pp. 189-190).

Similar attitudes were to be found all over Europe. In France the *Tribune des Instituteurs et des Institutrices* wrote 1884: 'Our aim in teaching the history of France is to build up good patriots' (Ferro, 1987, p. 20), and in German schools the nationalist and German-Christian model of Friedrich Kohlrausch was taught (Mütter, 1995, pp. 24-25).

### **Europeanism and the teaching of history after World War II**

This nationalistic pattern has continued until the present day, although with an interesting modification. After the Second World War, with the development of European unification, the nationalistic view has been replaced with a Euro-centric one. Nowadays, in the countries that have signed the Treaties of Rome, the focus of history in the school has shifted from the single nation-state to Europe<sup>1</sup>. This is not a Copernican revolution, but a spatial enlargement of the same ethnocentric mental pattern. Previously there was state nationalism; now there is European ethnocentrism and nationalism. In history textbooks the rest of the world remains on the margins and is dealt with according to when and how Europe becomes involved with it. Thus, the view of history that European schools present to students is a rather deformed one. Europe stands as a swollen body, to which a series of stumps - the rest of the world - are attached.

The activity of the Council of Europe deserves close attention in this evolution in the teaching of history. One can distinguish its engagement in the field in three phases, from its foundation to the present. In the first phase the Council concentrated on the revision of textbooks and on shaping a common framework for European history. Between 1953 and 1958 six conferences were devoted to this project, and at the end of the first, held in Calw in Germany, the program was presented as follows:

Our purpose is not to use history as propaganda for European unity, but to try to eliminate the traditional mistakes and prejudices and to establish the facts. ... It is especially necessary to avoid any interpretation of historical development which might be used in the particular interest of one state, or which might disturb the friendly relations between peoples<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See Pingel F., *Befunde und Perspektiven – eine Zusammenfassung*, in Pingel F. (ed.), *Macht Europa Schule? Die Darstellung Europas in Schulbüchern der Europäischen Gemeinschaft*, Diesterweg, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> All the following quotations from the transactions of the conferences of the Council of Europe are taken from the online edition of *Against bias and prejudice. The Council of Europe's work on history teaching and history textbook*, at [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int).

The Council's interest was expressly only for European history. The rest of the world was taken in account only as a function of it:

It would be well to bring out the main aspects of the part played in the world by Europe in modern times, particularly the universal diffusion of its population, of its ideas and of its techniques. A study of the formation and evolution of the different empires should be treated within this general framework. At the same time, the characteristics of other civilisations and their contribution to European civilisation should not be neglected, for one should never lose sight of the fact that European history is an integral part of world history.

During the five conferences that followed a set of recommendations was issued for textbook authors on how to deal with different themes of European history. Interestingly these included attention to Byzantine history, often neglected in the western European viewpoint, and to Turkish history. As the participants stated in Scheveningen 1957:

When treating the Eastern Question, it is desirable that the Ottoman Empire be studied in its own right and not merely as a factor in the policy of the powers; care should be taken to avoid implying that Turkey is a non-European country

It is perhaps not insignificant that Turkey, whose place in Europe is today matter of debate, was not only a member of the Council of Europe but also of NATO.

After this first phase, in which the main aim of the Council of Europe in the field of history teaching had been attained, the Councils' activity lost considerable momentum. In the second phase, which lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the activity was predominantly the consolidation of results, with initial attempts to widen the European horizon on the world, probably connected to the increasing awareness of it due to de-colonisation. For instance, the final document of the conference in Braunschweig in 1969 on 'History Teaching in Lower Secondary Education', focused on the teaching of contemporary history, stated

There should be no attempt to 'compartmentalise' history into local, national, European and world: all these aspects of history are inter-related and inter-dependent. ... There is a real problem of finding a proper balance between national, European and world history, keeping in mind the age range of the pupils. Whenever the opportunity is presented, the national and the European horizons must be widened to a world perspective. In a developing world, problems which do not assume universal significance are few and far between. It is therefore essential to refer to all civilisations, including non-European systems. These latter should also be examined from the standpoint of their original nature.

The recommendations of the conference 'Teaching about the Portuguese Discoveries in Secondary Schools in Western Europe' held 1983 in Lisbon, followed a similar direction and blamed the usual way of presenting the discoveries:

In the past, the European Discoveries were often taught in a chauvinistic or Eurocentric way. In view of the multi-cultural character of many schools in Western Europe, and of the need to educate young people for life in an interdependent world, it is essential that teaching about this topic should not lead to feelings of racial or cultural superiority.

Even the word 'discovery' itself was denounced for having a Eurocentric bias:

The term 'Discoveries' needs careful consideration because it might be taken to imply that the rest of the world was a blank before the European Voyages of Expansion, and teachers and textbook authors might wish to use such alternatives terms as "European expansion overseas" or "The Age of Encounter".

It was therefore considered necessary to avoid any unilateral presentation:

The European Voyages of Exploration and Expansion should be placed in ...the general context of contacts and exchanges between peoples throughout history. Here teachers might wish to refer to Arab and Chinese travellers and voyages and to the Franciscan missions to the Mongol Empire and North Africa. ... Pupils should be helped to understand:

- (i) the background to, and reasons for, European expansion;
- (ii) the overall consequences of this phenomenon for Europe and other parts of the world.

These proposals had no follow-up, either in history curricula or in school practice. This was because they did not constitute an homogeneous plan for world history, but were solely an attempt to broaden the European horizon, always from an European standpoint and above all only in connection with two peculiar moments of history (the 'age of encounter' and contemporary history) and not to all human history from its beginnings to the present. This cultural lack prevented these first steps from becoming a reform in the teaching of history. And soon - after 1989 - the Council of Europe ceased to pay any attention to the rest of the world and concentrated on how to introduce its vision of European history in the countries beyond the no longer existent 'iron curtain'.

The very important first of a new series of conferences was held in Bruges 1991 and based on the theme 'History Teaching in the New Europe'. Participants made a list of 'values ... as a basis for defining Europe in relation to the other continents'. The list was confused, both boastful and embarrassed, and indeed useless, demonstrating how difficult is the discourse on European identity:

- '(i) a developing civilisation;
- (ii) different cultures suggesting an image of multi-lingualism;
- (iii) the land of the partial achievement of human rights;
- (iv) a civilisation capable of preserving and transmitting knowledge;
- (v) a civilisation which maintains close links between the sciences and technical skills;
- (vi) the importance of a critical mind;
- (vii) a painful dimension (Europe is also the theatre of conflict and oppression);
- (viii) a civilisation which is expanding, to the detriment of others'.

Another peculiar feature of this conference was the presentation of an unofficial textbook for European history, sponsored by the tycoon Frédéric Delouche and written by a group of European historians<sup>3</sup>. This initiative was generally appreciated by the participants, who prepared a list of themes or chapters for future history textbooks. It was a very delicate initiative, which was in a way the consequence of the efforts by the Council of Europe to use the teaching of history as a tool for moulding a European identity, but which could give rise to reactions against a possible political bias in history teaching. The idea was soon abandoned. Two years later, at the conference in Leeuwarden on 'The Teaching of History since 1815 with a special reference to changing border', the delegates decided that:

Although teachers and students throughout Europe need appropriate textbooks and educational materials on European history, steps towards the development of European History textbooks could prove counter-productive - and would be educationally inappropriate - if they seek to present a uniform, common history.

### **From Nation-states to the world: the recent debate on the teaching of history**

Whilst the Council of Europe concentrated on the European vision of history, since the beginning of the 1990s scholars all over the world (with particular attention from the International Society for History Didactics) began discussing the necessity of dropping any ethnocentric approaches in the teaching of history in favour of a world view. The reasons proposed in the debate are various: social, didactic, cultural and scientific.

These can be examined, starting from the social viewpoint. Increasing extra-European immigration presents a serious question for many countries: how to shift from an ethnocentric to a more multicultural view of history in schools, given that world history will have a decisive role in this process. To augment the knowledge of both past and present of non-European countries is believed to be a very effective way to reduce prejudices, to increase mutual understanding and facilitate immigrant integration in the hosting country. As far as the cultural and didactic motivations are concerned, it is frequently said that it is necessary to teach a world history in order to understand the process of globalisation. This process, so widespread in public opinion thanks to mass-media coverage, encourages us to question the past on a global scale so as to be better able to answer the problems of the present.

These motivations are surely valid but ultimately partial, and are therefore unable to determine what history ought to be taught. The choice, in fact, cannot be based upon cultural, social, and/or political changes but only on the scientific demands inherent in scholarly practice.

Since the 1960s historians have been increasingly concerned about the study of world as a system. Among the many vicissitudes of historical science from micro-history to

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<sup>3</sup> This textbook has been translated in many European and non European states. The Italian version has been published as *Storia d'Europa*, Milano, Edizioni scolastiche Bruno Mondadori, 1992. A report on this enterprise is given by Dieter Tiemann, *Das Europäische Geschichtsbuch. Erfahrung eines Mitautors*, in 'International Society for History Didactics. Information, Mitteilungen, Communications', vol. 14. n. 1 (1993), pp. 71-79.

postmodernism this trend has survived and has become strong enough to assert itself as the reference point for historians, as happened during the 2000 International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Oslo. Historical research is also pushing the teaching of history into a new alignment which replaces the ethnocentric point of view (which is not only an European peculiarity but also can be found in almost all states world-wide) with a global vision of history. That in turn has led to a revival of the cosmo-political educational ideal of the Enlightenment - the development of a self conscious individual with a plural identity in a society of his/her choice, not obliged to belong to a community - as opposed to ethnocentric and nationally biased patterns. An important statement in this sense has been made by Jacques Delors in his report on education to UNESCO, in which he denounced the nationalist misuses of the teaching of history: this text which is has become a reference in the debates on school reform;

Education should ... seek to make individuals aware of their roots so as to give them points of reference that enable them to determine their place in the world, but it should also teach them the respect for other cultures. Some subjects are of crucial importance in this regard. History, for instance, has often served to bolster a sense of national identity by highlighting differences and extolling a sense of superiority, essentially because history teaching was based on a non-scientific outlook. Insistence on the truth, on the other hand, which obliges one to admit that 'human groups, peoples, nations and continents are not all alike, forces us by this simple fact to look beyond our immediate experience, to accept and recognise people's differences and discover that other peoples also have a history that is rich and is instructive'<sup>4</sup> (Delors, 1996, pp. 49-50).

The struggle has already begun with a success - the establishment of National Standards for World History in 1996 in the USA - and with a defeat - in 2001 in Italy, a new world history curriculum was attacked by both the right and the left and then defeated in favour of teaching an Italian identity. As the historian Rosario Villari claimed

The study of history coincides with the need to understand deeply the identity of one's culture, of one's nation, and of the civil community to which one belongs' (in Cajani, 2002, p. 28).

The way out of ethnocentrism and towards a teaching of history not as an *instrumentum regni*, but *juxta propria principia* is likely to be a very long and difficult one. But I think that we have now reached a turning point.

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