

History Education and the Claims of Society: An Historical Approach

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The political use and instrumentalization of history is a central theme within the historiography of history education. Neither history nor education is a politically neutral domain; history education is and has always been a highly politicized phenomenon. For his recent article on the development of history education in England, Germany, and the Netherlands throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Dutch history didactician Arie Wilschut chose the significant title, “History at the Mercy of Politicians and Ideologies.” History education, Wilschut argues, has, in all three countries, continually—with a short break in the 1960s and 1970s—been instrumentalized by national politics to the detriment of unbiased interpretations of the past.¹

Considering history education as a field “at the mercy of politics” is therefore characteristic of historiographical practice within history education in at least two respects. First, the concern, engagement, and—in this case—negative judgment that come from such an approach reflect the active involvement of its authors, often history didacticians who participate in actual debates on history teaching. Presuppositions about what history education *should* be quite often seem to inform historical narratives on what history education *has* been (and hence turn into narratives on what it has failed to be). It is a tension characterizing the history of education as a field.² Second, the historiography of history education has a sharp eye for the many ways in which history education and “the political” are intertwined.

Several strands of research can be distinguished within this field. First of all, studies on the history of how significant and polarizing political events such as the French Revolution are represented have been a popular translation of this interest in history education as a school subject dealing with politics in ways evolving over time.³ Analyses of the impact of more recent regime changes on the representation of past political events in countries of the former Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe continue in this vein.⁴ A second strand of research deals with the history of educational policies, the role of pressure groups, the public debate they generate, and their impact on the content and didactics of what is taught. The



recent global interest in “history wars” connects with this tradition.⁵ A third field of enquiry deals with the way in which history education reproduces and produces racial and gendered stereotypes and stereotypical images of other nations, especially in the wake of conflicts as a nationalist form of identity-building.⁶ Related to this issue are analyses of the bilateral and international efforts since the First World War to overcome these divides and to use history education as an instrument of reconciliation between former enemies or as a means of peace education.⁷ A recent special issue of *JEMMS* (2[2]: 2010), *Contextualizing School Textbook Revision*, edited by Eckhardt Fuchs and Yoshioka Tatsuya, explored this theme. These three somewhat artificially distinguished approaches to the history of history education from the point of view of its political significance have in reality been combined and increasingly integrated into comparative approaches.⁸

As rich as this historiography may be in terms of the societal demands vis-à-vis history education, its premise—the conviction that history education should in the first place be considered an effect or an instrument of specific policies or ideological agendas—is hardly questioned. History education is without a doubt more politicized than both professional historiography and most other school subjects. Nevertheless, its dynamics are also autonomous to a certain extent. History education rests upon broad narratives which are certainly not apolitical but which might be relatively immune to small politically inspired adjustments. Different generations of curricula or textbooks might dictate new interpretations of past events, which, however, may not necessarily imply completely new narratives. The power of historical narratives should, in other words, not be underestimated.⁹ Generally speaking, researchers tend to focus on representations of the past that have changed as a result of new political contexts, with the danger of overlooking the many aspects of historical discourse that did *not* change. Similarly, the role of individual teachers, their creative approaches to regulations, and their potential unwillingness to go along with every new requirement or suggestion should not be ignored.¹⁰

The real political impact on history education may, in other words, be too easily taken for granted. Perhaps the conclusion is merely a translation or repetition of the presupposition. We believe that history is political because we, as historians, tend to see (and fear) political interference everywhere, and therefore work to prove this point. Anyone seeking political interference will find it in large quantities. The focus on new, nationalistic, and totalitarian regimes and their discourses and initiatives concerning history education therefore tends to validate such beliefs. Do all political authorities indeed consider the historical ideas of the population and their history education of vital importance? Are the latter really at the heart of their concern, or are they in fact a minor issue? And if the authorities attempt to control and dictate history in schools, to what de-

gree do they succeed? If we take a closer look, do the historiography and production of history textbooks perhaps possess greater autonomy than is generally assumed?

The articles in this issue do present indications and examples of political interference. Nadine Ritzer investigates how during the Cold War in Switzerland history in schools was enlisted for the battle against communism and towards the reinforcement of the “Swiss spirit.” In his contribution, Terry Haydn analyzes the discourse of British politicians, who, over the course of the last decades, have criticized history education in English schools and advocated adjustments. In both cases, the pleas for a more relevant history education lead to historical narratives characterized by nationalism and progress. The kind of history promoted by politicians is often a Whig interpretation of history. National history is seen and promoted as a popular story of an ascent to freedom and democracy, featuring the principal characteristics and glory of the nation. Haydn finds this discourse mainly among conservatives, who accuse the young of ignorance and blindness to the greatness of the (nation’s) past, and blame history education for belittling the proud Albion and its history.

The studies in this issue do, however, also present arguments to support the idea of a certain autonomy. Willeke Los examines how King William I, after the founding of the monarchy in 1813 and the reunion of the Northern and the Southern Netherlands (now the Netherlands and Belgium), expected history education in primary schools to contribute to the development of a national identity among the inhabitants of the new united Kingdom of the Netherlands. Los concludes that these books reveal a striking variety of historical ideas and images. At some point the texts were adjusted to the new regime and the new national situation, but, she writes, “the government did not take advantage of the list of compulsory schoolbooks to make a clean break with the past and completely rewrite history.” Not all textbooks used in the schools of William I’s Netherlands supported the official aims; some allowed for diverse interpretations of the national past. Apparently, history education was not the main priority of the King and his government. The interference of the communist regime in Poland, analyzed by Joanna Wojdon, was no more successful. The regime’s efforts to seize control over school history were undermined by several factors, Wojdon states. Many history teachers simply ignored the official guidelines or did not use the obligatory handbooks because they were “rather boring and difficult.” In practice, the Polish classroom provided spaces for alternative narratives and study materials.

In his article, Haydn not only maps out the opinions of British politicians regarding the role of history in schools; he also opposes them to the ideas common to those working in education themselves. He thus explicitly examines the relationship between authorities/politicians on the one hand and the field of education on the other. This approach also empha-

sizes that what happens in the classroom is not at all a direct outcome of what politicians think or want. The fact that authorities make decisions concerning history education does not automatically imply that these decisions are implemented (completely) in the everyday practice of the classroom. The discussions in Britain bear witness to the politicians' discontent with what happens in schools, and therefore also to the (at least partially successful) resistance of the educators against political pressure.

There is, however, also a political background to this resistance, and to the choices made by many in the world of education. The twentieth century saw the ascent of the international community as a new player on the field of history education, with institutions such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe. As Thomas Nygren discusses in his contribution, here another sort of authority is at stake and another top-down mechanism at work, promoting a progressive and international—even anti-national—history education, and thus legitimizing an approach to history in schools that is rejected by conservative critics.

With this special issue we hope to avoid some of the common pitfalls, primarily a simplistic version of this history in which the history education of earlier periods is either presented nostalgically or rejected for being “traditional.” It is important to study history education in the past without being implicitly normative and without the dichotomies which not only color the debates surrounding history education nowadays, but which also too often have been projected onto historical evidence. Research with a long-term perspective has the potential to uncover—and dismiss—these dichotomies. The “old” history education has not always been as “traditional” as it is often supposed to be. The conviction that history education should first and foremost develop the ability to reflect critically and autonomously, for instance, dates from the late eighteenth century, not from the 1960s or 1970s.¹¹

Even though we believe that the historiography of history education would benefit from being less informed by our present opinions about “good” history education, we do think that actual debates on history education might gain from a historical perspective. It is this perspective which Ed Jonker presents in the final contribution to this special issue. Jonker's point of departure is the position often assumed by professional historians regarding the instrumentalization of history education towards contemporary societal claims. His is a plea for a “reflexive presentism,” a stance of taking explicitly into account the moral and political concerns which are key aspects of history education and integrating them into forms that do not shy away from being subjected to philosophical and conceptual questioning. It is a call that ties in with the current debates on the pluriformity of historical culture, and parallels to a certain extent Lynn Fendler's recent call for “strategic presentism” in educational historiography.¹²

The contributions to this special issue are based on papers presented at a conference entitled *Longing for the Present: The History of History Education and the Temptations of Modernity (1600–2000)*, held at the University of Leuven, Belgium, in August 2010.¹³

Notes

1. Arie Wilschut, "History at the Mercy of Politicians and Ideologies: Germany, England and the Netherlands in the 19th and 20th Centuries," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 42, no. 5 (2010): 693–723.
2. See Marc Depaepe, "The Ten Commandments of Good Practices in History of Education Research," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogische Historiographie* 16, no. 1 (2010): 31–34 (discussion: 35–49).
3. See Rainer Riemenschneider, ed., *Bilder einer Revolution. Die Französische Revolution in den Geschichtsschulbüchern der Welt* (Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg and Paris: l'Harmattan, 1994). The emerging historiography of Holocaust Education could equally be referred to in this context. See, for instance, Thomas D. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).
4. See, for instance, Joseph Zajda, "The New History School Textbooks in the Russian Federation: 1992–2004," *Compare* 37, no. 3 (2007): 291–306; Korine Amacher, "Les manuels d'histoire dans la Russie post-soviétique: visions multiples et nouvelles tendances," *Le Cartable de Cléo*, vol. 9, (2009): 117–127.
5. See, for instance, Maria Repoussi, "Common Trends in Contemporary Debates on History Education" and Susanne Popp, "National Textbook Controversies in a Globalizing World," in *History Teaching in the Crossfire of Political Interests: Yearbook - Jahrbuch – Annales. International Society of History Didactics* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau, 2009), 29–30, 75–90, and 109–122. Specifically for the United States, see, for instance, Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage, 2000); Lynda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts Over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
6. See, for instance, Stuart J. Foster, "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks," *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (1999): 251–278.
7. See, for instance, A.M. Giuntella, "Enseignement de l'histoire et révision des manuels scolaires dans l'entre-deux-guerres," in *Pistes didactiques et chemins d'historiens. Textes offerts à Henri Moniot*, Marie-Christine Baquès, Annie Bruter and Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon, eds. (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2003), 161–189; Elizabeth Cole, ed., *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).
8. Julian Dierkes, *Postwar History Education in Japan and the Germans: Guilty Lessons*, Routledge Contemporary Japan Series (London/New York: Routledge,

- 2010); Gotelind Müller, ed., *Designing History in East Asian Textbooks: Identity Politics and Transnational Aspirations* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).
9. See, for instance, James V. Wertsch, "Revising Russian History," *Written Communication* 16 (1999): 267–295; Bert Vanhulle, "The Path of History: Narrative Analysis of History Textbooks—A Case Study of Belgian History Textbooks (1945–2004)," *History of Education* 38, no. 2 (2009): 263–282.
 10. See, for instance, Evelyne Héry, *Un siècle de leçons d'histoire. L'histoire enseignée au lycée, 1870–1970* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999).
 11. See Matthias Meirlaen, "Reaping the Harvest of the Experiment? The Government's Attempt to Train Enlightened Citizens Through History Education in Revolutionary France (1789–1802)," in *Free Access to the Past: Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation*, Lotte Jensen, Joep Leerssen, and Marita Mathijssen, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 247–276.
 12. Lynn Fendler, "The Upside of Presentism," *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 6 (2008): 677–690.
 13. As Nygren's paper on the growing importance of contemporary history indicates, the conference also addressed topics such as the rise of contemporary history, current affairs, and "societal education" within or in competition with history education. A selection of papers devoted specifically to these issues will be published in a 2012 issue of *Paedagogica Historica*.