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SCHOOL HISTORY, NATIONAL HISTORY AND THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract *National history has an important place in school history in all countries because it is perceived as contributing to a sense of national identity. Many other things help to create a sense of identity, but if this is over emphasised school history easily becomes a matter of myth and nationalistic propaganda.*

Keywords School history, National history, National identity

Introduction

I want to suggest that the three conceptions in the title of this article do not fit as neatly together as is often assumed. The teaching of national history in schools is a recurrent topic of academic and public discussion (Phillips, 1998). It is a sensitive issue, as the media long ago discovered, but is this because it is so often conflated with the issue of national identity? Lurid headlines in newspapers readily suggest that the national identity has altered because there has been some change in the national history selected for teaching in schools. Can these concerns be separated, and should they be distinguished, especially in relation to school history?

In recent decades a vast literature has developed on the issues of nationalism and national identities. It has also become clear that within societies there are different sorts of history: academic history, folk history, social memory, heritage history, and perhaps to these might be added identity history, and media history, i.e. popular dramatised fictions in various media and especially in film and television (Jenkins, 1991). Of course they overlap, but the genres can be recognised, and all may contribute to a sense of national identity, some more than others.

Like these others, *school history* is to some extent a distinct form, marked for instance by much more direct government control and influence, through both the curriculum and examinations. But it is also under other pressures: there is very little time for history in the English school system, which severely limits what can be done, and means that it is usually a highly selected version of the British national story which can be covered in school. There is competition from other subjects for space in the curriculum, many of which at the moment are seen as more immediately relevant and useful. Another pressure is that the pupils are young and the study of the subject compulsory, so that considerable pedagogical skills are required which in turn shape the form of the history in schools – it is not presented in the same ways as the history of historians, nor even in the forms of folk history or heritage history.

School history and the 'National Story'

School history and the teaching of national history, at least a version of 'the national story', have been inextricably entwined since the subject first came into the British school curriculum for all pupils in the late nineteenth century at the same time as basic elementary education became universal, and the franchise for voting was enlarged (Marsden, 1995). This has been the case not only in Britain but also in other European countries, and it is national history which is promoted in newly independent countries everywhere (Berghahn & Schissler, 1987). It is usually the case that the teaching of national history is at the centre of school history courses.

It is useful to see the British experience in a wider context. For almost 50 years the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 1986) has taken a particular interest in the teaching of history across the continent, sponsoring many conferences and seminars for teachers. International research carried out for the Council from the late 1950s showed that national history predominated in school courses everywhere. More important but less obvious, was the fact that a national perspective influenced the choice of topics in European and world history courses too: for instance, 'the geographical discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a European phenomenon but each country gave disproportionate prominence to its own explorers' (ibid.) Projecting our current national perspectives backwards particularly distorted the teaching of medieval history, and made religious history partisan; for example, the very existence of Orthodox Christianity was totally ignored in Western school texts. Courses on European history, where they existed, were usually seen from a markedly national or regional perspective. When aspects of world history appeared in school courses they paradoxically had a Eurocentric perspective and were rarely studied in their own terms. Aspects of Chinese, Indian or African history came into courses because of European colonial or national connections, very rarely for any other reason.

And, of course, this continues: most school history is from 'our' perspective. At a recent international seminar on the teaching of the peace settlements at the end of World War 1 that I attended it became clear that the focus of teaching, and the selection of significant treaties, was filtered in each country through a national perspective. The teachers present had not been clearly aware of this until the delegates compared approaches.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this position has not greatly changed: national history still predominates and influences the basic school history curriculum everywhere. This is the conclusion of research done across 12 Western European countries in the 1990s (Stradling, 1993) and of recent reports from Council of Europe meetings covering a much wider range of countries. This does not mean that there has

been no change over the last fifty years. For a time, in the 1970s, there was less emphasis on national history and there were experiments with wider world history courses, and attempts at interdisciplinary courses. By the mid-1980s however, there was a reaction against this and a reassertion of the need for national history in schools. This change began before the advent of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, and it has continued. There have been curriculum reforms in a number of Western countries, all strengthening the amount, and the coherence, of the national history taught. In other parts of Europe the fall of communism led to a re-discovery and re-assertion of national history in schools in those countries where the national perspective had been suppressed under the previous regime.

Nonetheless, courses in national history have changed in the period between the 1950s and the 1990s, although 'the national story' has remained dominant. Today the story is no longer mainly political, much more social and economic history is included, and more about the lives of all groups in society. The national history taught in schools is more selective, less authoritarian and monolithic than it used to be, partly because of changes in methods of teaching too. British schools in particular have developed source-based rather than textbook-based learning, intended to get pupils to think about the evidence for history, and to look at it from different perspectives. The overall structure of school history courses in Europe is chronological, with older pupils studying modern history, and whilst twentieth century history is less nation-centred and more world-centred it is frequently only the most powerful nations which are studied.

The conceptual complexities inherent in the idea of a collective national history are recognised and reflected in many school curricula in a number of ways. In the British Isles, as in Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Spain, for instance, there are different regional versions of the national story (Phillips *et al*, 1999). In the early twentieth century, the nation was viewed more monolithically. Unless they move around, however, pupils may not be aware that there are different versions of the national history, seen from different perspectives.

The framework of national history in England makes a rather clear separation between 'national' history and 'foreign' history, a reflection perhaps of a continuous history and an insular geography. In many countries national history overlaps with a broader regional history, and this is so in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. In France with a strong tradition of national history, the school curriculum specifically introduces a broader comparative framework at several points. In a number of countries, pupils learn about the development of parliamentary democracy, or constitutional monarchy, or industrialisation, by reference to Britain, but British children are rarely given a comparative framework.

In many ways, school history is a kind of official history. In most countries the content of the curriculum is eventually decided by governments, and teachers are legally required to teach topics, which always include the national history, specified in greater or lesser detail. In democracies decisions are made in a context of relatively open debate, which makes the school version of the national story the one best known to the public – although television series now have perhaps greater impact. The version which appears in school textbooks is frequently criticised as inadequate or unworthy. It is hardly ever praised. Yet despite this, some version of the national history is a ubiquitous element of the school curriculum everywhere, and it is always limited by lack of time.

National identity and school history

Why is national history so emphasised? To many the answer is obvious – it is ours and it must be handed on to the new generations. It is an essential aspect of ‘our identity’. The teaching of national history in schools is usually linked, in statements by governments, with the hope that it will contribute to strengthening a sense of national identity. Dr. Nicholas Tate, for example, when Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Assessment Authority, was, for a long time in the 1990s, outspoken on the link between the teaching of history in schools and the strengthening of a national sense of identity. He attempted to stimulate public discussion because ‘A society which is not passionate about its past is in danger of losing its identity’ (*The Guardian* 27.7.99; see also Tate, 1996). Civic purpose and national identity have been an important reason for the inclusion of history in the school curriculum from its inception.

On the other hand, as the issues surrounding the ideas of collective identity, or identities, have of late been increasingly debated, some historians have been issuing warnings. Most recently, and most trenchantly, this issue has been taken up by Eric Hobsbawm in several essays, particularly in one entitled: ‘*Identity History is not enough*’ (Hobsbawm, 1997, p.357). Here he warns that:

all human beings, collectivities and institutions need a past, but it is only occasionally the past uncovered by historical research. The standard example of an identity culture which anchors itself to the past by means of myths dressed up as history is nationalism.

School history is singled out as one of the places where myth most easily takes over from history:

Why do all regimes make their young study some history at school? Not to understand their society and how it changes, but to approve of it, to be proud of it, or to become good citizens of the USA, or Spain or Honduras or Iraq. And the same is true of causes and movements. History as inspiration and ideology has a built-in tendency to become self-justifying myth (ibid.).

There is now a growing literature on conceptions of national identity, and general agreement that it is made of many ingredients of which past experience, even history, is only one: religion, language, symbolic rituals and monuments, celebratory days and sacred places are others. Today the influence of sport and film on television are considerable, and everything from familiar architectural forms to food and drink, may contribute to a changing national culture. It is also widely accepted that the national past, as an element in the sense of identity, is usually viewed, as Smith (1995, p.53) puts it, in ‘mythic’ terms, which:

contain kernels of historical fact, around which there grow up accretions of exaggeration, idealisation, distortion and allegory ... stories told, and widely believed, about the heroic past, which serve some collective need in the present and future.

These versions of the national past are:

...characteristic of most cultural communities in all ages, whereas scholarly, dispassionate history is a minority phenomenon peculiar to certain societies and civilizations (ibid.).

This suggests that the use of 'the past' to construct national identity is usually not historical. Lowenthal (1997), who has written extensively on the view of the past as heritage, suggests that it should be distinguished from history, though the two are often confused, because:

heritage is not history at all: while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith (p.x).

Heritage begins to sound like a homely version of the mythic past essential to a sense of identity. And indeed this is one of his conclusions, especially in relation to school history where 'civic allegiance is still the main aim.' These distinctions are not clear-cut, but the purposes of history and heritage are different and Lowenthal concludes that much of school history is more heritage than (pp.110-111).

The school situation

There has always been pressure on schools, especially by governments, but also more widely from public opinion, to see that the teaching of history contributes to the teaching of social and moral values of various kinds at different times. But in the current climate teaching history for other purposes has become perhaps the main way in which some teaching of the subject in school can be justified at all. The current pages of *Teaching History* are full of discussion of this issue, not least because the time for history is very tight. The influence of the heritage industry reaches into schools, the teaching of civics has now been introduced and history must justify itself by being socially 'useful'. In a recent issue, on the theme of *Citizens and Communities* the editor begins by saying: 'The idea that the discipline of history might be used in order to serve some other moral, social or simply curricular agenda has always made us jumpy.' She points out that the issue was debated ten years ago, and that the opinions of teachers are divided. This is reflected in recent issues in 1999 on the theme of *History, Identity and Citizenship* and in 2001 in some very thoughtful articles on experience of *Teaching about the Holocaust*. Some teachers show how in classrooms, moral and other issues inevitably come up in discussion. Others take a stand – insisting that in the end the discipline of history must have primacy.

There is little empirical evidence as to how far the history learnt in schools does actually affect a sense of national identity. A research report (Brindle, 1997) in *History Today* suggested that the national story, as conveyed in schools, has always been problematic. Patrick Brindle (1996) shows that even in the early twentieth century the traditional national story was criticised, and that what was conveyed in the classroom by inexperienced teachers might be different from what was in either the curriculum outline or the textbooks. In Scotland several articles have shown that there has been very little teaching of Scottish history in schools. Yet, despite this, a sense of Scottish national and cultural identity has grown apace.

It seems likely that if the main purpose of school history is to contribute to a sense of national identity then it will readily become not a historical, but a semi-mythic or heritage version of the past. This may be what tends to happen with younger pupils. But the teachers of older secondary school pupils were trained in history by the same university historians who are critical of school history. These teachers have repeatedly expressed considerable reservations about developing a sense of national identity in pupils as the prime aim of school history teaching. This is particularly true for older

pupils studying for A Level examinations, but what about pupils doing GCSE? Or those who drop the subject before this, at 14?

Conclusion

Perhaps the time has come to rescue school history from the conception that it is primarily about fostering a sense of national identity, or teaching civics, or handing on a heritage. Much of this purpose is now achieved outside school through heritage history in its many different forms. Lowenthal (1997) points out that since about 1980 much that was once thought of as history or tradition has now been absorbed into the growing activities of the heritage industry.

There are other school subjects which may contribute to a sense of national identity, literature, music, geography – but encouraging a sense of national identity is not the main reason for teaching them. It is rather to gain some understanding of these forms of knowledge and to enlarge cultural horizons. Government control of school history makes it especially vulnerable to being turned into a form of nationalistic propaganda. History in its many guises is most easily perverted in schools. The study of 'national' history in schools, is a universal practice but can best be defended as an introduction to the 'history' of the society in which pupils live and the skills through which historical understanding is achieved. A sense of identity, either personal or national, is something which in the end, pupils will forge for themselves, and it is fashioned from many sources.

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