Invited introduction

Why we teach history: A contesting view

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AS I SAT DOWN TO WRITE THIS PIECE, A MESSAGE ARRIVED announcing the formation of a new network called “Historians Against the War.” Initiated at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, HAW intends, among other things, to provide “accurate scholarly rebuttals to the mendacious historical distortions of the Bush administration” and to create “a ‘virtual speakers bureau’ to aid the growing antiwar movement” (<http://hnn.us/articles/1200.html>). Here, in another moment of crisis for the global community, is a clear statement that historians are obligated to serve as socially responsible public intellectuals. One part of their task is to help fellow citizens assess the historical claims of politicians, journalists and social scientists; another is to promote a critically conscious understanding of our shared history in the world. It is a large project redolent with pedagogical possibilities, not only for history teachers in the schools, colleges and universities, but for all those who teach history in less traditional ways in archives, museums, art galleries, non-governmental organizations, unions, or community agencies and for those who teach their fellow citizens by writing letters to the editor or preparing media commentaries.

Hobsbawn (1994), in his book, *Age of Extremes*, argued that at the end of the second millennium historical memory was dead in the West. As he put it,

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century’s end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in. (p. 3)

But if many of us might have grumpily agreed with this assessment when it was written in the early 1990s, we are forced now to re-consider how a collective historical memory can re-surface and challenge the mass amnesia of the post-modern condition.

In North America, what the anti-globalization movement began, the resurrection of the anti-war movement is completing. Across the generations, the protestors of the Vietnam War join with the young and together they share their understandings of the past to make sense of the present and create alternative possibilities for the future. Across the globe, the older anti-imperialist movement retains its relevance for those now confronting globalized capital and neo-liberal monetary policies. History has become important again as resistance mounts. “Which side are you on?” becomes a less morally ambiguous question and talking about “truth” is no longer seen as hopelessly naive, even in academic circles (see, for example, Bruno-Jofré and Schiralli in this issue).

Several contributions to this collection forcefully demonstrate that history teaching is political (see, for example, Laville). Whether it is used for nation building, for re-inscribing loyalty to traditional hierarchies, norms and values, or for creating a commitment to a new political structure such as the European Union or a trading bloc, history teaching is situated within wider social struggles. Indeed, the debate about history teaching is part of the debate about the kind of world we want to live in, the beliefs we have about human nature, and the position we take on social relations. An argument for a politically engaged history and a politically conscious pedagogy of history simply makes explicit what is happening anyway, and demands an examination of how history teaching confirms the existing relations of rule or opens up possibilities for change.

Debates about the uses of history and the purposes of history teaching are not new. We have those who support the conservative impulse, who argue that teachers should transmit the canons of knowledge from one generation to the next to support social stability and the existing order. On the other hand, we have those who argue that teachers should be transformative intellectuals committed to using the classroom as part of a larger strategy for creating a socially just world. Admittedly, my description rather over-simplifies complex debates and creates an explanatory binary that is cleaner than any reality. Nevertheless, we can recognize that in some general way this categorization is useful, that history and history teaching are value-laden, and that memory, a topic much addressed in this volume of *Encounters*, is no more neutral than history itself.

In his classic text, *The Politics of History*, Howard Zinn (1970) plumped for a history that would “extend human sensibilities ... into the going conflict over how people shall live, and whether they shall live” (p. 35). He argued that our acknowledgement of history as value-laden did not determine “answers, only questions” (p. 35) and went on to suggest that history could be used to move people in humanistic directions, and towards race and class equality. In the midst of the political struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s—the anti-war, civil rights and women’s movements—Zinn outlined a five-point agenda for historians who wanted to be of use in creating a better world for the poor and the dispossessed. Historians can, he said,

- 1 intensify, expand, sharpen our perception of how bad things are, for the victims of the world;
- 2 expose the pretensions of governments to either neutrality or beneficence;
- 3 expose the ideology that pervades our culture—using “ideology” [to mean] rationale for the going order;
- 4 recapture those few moments in the past which show the possibility of a better way of life than that which has dominated the earth thus far; and
- 5 show how good social movements can go wrong, how leaders can betray their followers, how rebels can become bureaucrats, how ideals can become frozen and reified. (pp. 36-54)

These guiding principles are as pertinent for teaching as they are for research, as relevant to history teaching in the schools as they are in the universities, as important today as they were three decades ago. And a practice based on these principles moves us as history teachers into an active engagement with life and with social change.

Of course, this is all easier said than done as several contributors point out. From concerns about the inadequate historical knowledge teachers bring to their work to discussions about teaching methods, classroom discourses, unexpected consequences, and individual and collective memories of race and ethnic relations, the papers in this collection point to the special challenges of teaching history in different cultural contexts and in settings where state governments prefer an official history of patriotism and commemoration. Nonetheless, as Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us, our job is more than teaching a subject, history. While teaching requires competence, “it also requires our involvement in and dedication to overcoming social injustice.” Indeed, Freire argues, teachers must be “political militants” (p. 58).

References

- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Trans. D. Macedo, D. Koike and A.M. Araújo Freire. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
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