

Sharon Macdonald (ed) (2000) *Approaches to European Historical Consciousness - Reflections and Provocations*, Eustory Series: Shaping European History, Vol 1. Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung. ISBN 3 89684 015 0.

This remarkable collection of essays not only highlights issues associated with European Historical Consciousness but also gives valuable insights into how similar are many nations' approaches to the teaching of national history. The aim of the Körber Foundation to foster a cross-border dialogue on history and identity in Europe has been actively pursued in these challenging and perceptive academic essays. Sharon Macdonald, assisted by Katja Fausser have done an excellent job in presenting so creatively the work of a contributing team who evidently know each other's ideas well, and cross-referencing is conducted almost at a conversational level. Jörn Rüsen's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (KWI), in Essen co-operated with the Körber Foundation in sponsoring this project on European Historical Consciousness.

The notion of the 'self' and the 'other' is a theme running through the book, and the glorification of the self at the expense of the other is one feature of the taught history of many nations. One can see a somewhat horrifying vision of history teaching across Europe consisting of the re-affirmation of many separate tribalisms, each blind to how similar it is to its neighbour. The experience of colonialism, the promotion of slavery, and pursuit of imperialism are common features of many (especially the seaboard) European countries, but is often taught without sufficient recognition of the similarities. Industrialisation, democratisation, the growth of capitalism is to some extent pan-European with some notable exceptions, or perhaps differing interpretations in some periods.

The notion of diverse communities within nations, and the long-term and short-term memories of those communities are issues examined by Sharon Macdonald (pp. 86 – 102), who looks at how memories can play tricks with 'taboo' periods of history. These taboos can play a key part in creating national or communal identities, and can influence political and possibly military action even today.

Heritage can exclude, as David Lowenthal (quoted by Svein Lorentzen in his chapter on Key Aspects of European Historical Consciousness) expresses so wisely:

History and heritage transmit different things to different audiences. History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose. History is enlarged by being disseminated; heritage is diminished and despoiled by export. History is for all, heritage for ourselves alone. (Lowenthal in Jensen, 1999, p 59)

The negative aspects of European historical consciousness, for example the Holocaust, collaboration, and the Gulag, should not be side-lined or overlooked. These events, indeed these crimes, must be studied and understood. Collaboration in its many forms shows that the Holocaust was not just the initiative of the German nation. Other communities share the burden of guilt.

The history of historiography needs to go into the equation. As Michail Boytsov reminds us, there is a temptation to ignore generations of the Marxist interpretation of history both in eastern Europe and elsewhere, but this too has contributed to European historical consciousness and cannot just be brushed aside. He half-mockingly juxtaposes two approaches to historical thinking in Europe: the countries, mainly in Western Europe for whom the path seems to be the creation of a 'super-national' way of imagining history as a way of overcoming national prejudices; and those, mainly in Eastern Europe who still have irritating national ideas that currently play an important role. But he decides that these states of mind are not geographically divided, they co-exist everywhere:

Maybe one should assume that groups representing both 'progressive' and 'regressive' types can be found (in higher or lower concentration) everywhere. Therefore the relations between

these two groups are better described with the help of the Augustinian metaphor of two 'cities' (*civitates*), that exist everywhere in close proximity and even intermix. (p. 70)

The idea of a centralized European curriculum is discouraged by Joke van der Leeuw Roord, who thinks that differences as well as similarities should be celebrated, but she urges a more inclusive curriculum where the deeds, lives and memories of ordinary people are taught as well as the great public events. The lives of women, both common and heroic, should also have a higher profile. Different parts of Europe have been from time to time Catholic and Protestant, communist and capitalist, fascist and liberal.

The power of national and regional myths was the topic of Michael Ignatieff's 'Blood and Belonging' (1994), but it is not ignored in this publication. Even in national curricula powerful and potentially dangerous myths can be sustained, especially in the area of one nation's attitudes towards its neighbours. The current Eurosceptic debate in the Conservative Party in England reflects this. Indeed, so do some of Margaret Thatcher's recent outbursts about Britain's role in the second World War and her linking of this glorious isolationism against tyranny to her own reluctance to approve of Britain being involved in a single European currency, or moves towards greater European integration. To follow Joke's vision, history teaching would benefit if it embraced the notion of examining national myth making as an objective study. The power of myths to foster and promote long-standing hatreds and to convert the word into flesh and blood can be seen in most European countries, but perhaps especially in the histories of Ireland, Spain, Germany, Russia, and Yugoslavia. The history of the British Empire in the early and even middle 20th century shows that it also is not without sin.

Jörn Rüsen's analysis (p. 81) of aspects of ethnocentricity as an element of European historical consciousness is a stern but enlighteningly perceptive critique. Which European nation in hot pursuit of its national historical self-image is not guilty of at least one of his three deadly sins?

- 1) normative dualism of, or Manicheism of values (where the positive and normative evaluation of one's own history is set against the negative evaluation of the history of others);
- 2) reprojective teleology (an unbroken continuity of one's own development from origins to relevant projections of the future); (*this of course is Whiggism by another name, RG's note*);
- 3) temporal and spatial centralism (a clear location of one's own positive development in the centre of history and the corresponding discriminating marginalization of others).

Joke van der Leeuw reaffirms this view:

The wish to develop a national consciousness of the past also entails a third problem. The building of such consciousness is very much based on those elements that made the nation or state unique, rather than on those elements which were shared with neighbours or other nations. As a consequence, pupils were and are taught about national particularities, even though these may in fact be regional or even global experiences (p. 116)

This theme was developed by Bodo von Borries in his chapter on narrating European history, in which he points out the neglect of Orthodox, Byzantine, and Islamic traditions in the dominance of the influence of Western Europe in European Historical Consciousness. An obsession with the history of success tends to neglect errors, failures and crimes of Europeans.

Therefore, I plead that we dispense with widespread and well-known uniform 'master narratives', especially national ones. History should be presented as 'historical anthropology' of an 'animal not yet fixed and defined'. This is the only way of understanding human beings in their immense capability for metamorphosis, change and alteration in their extraordinary readiness to undertake extreme action and suffering. Therefore, I conclude that history must also – though not exclusively – be approached as micro-history of everyday life. (p. 155)

Gabriele Bucher-Dinç devotes a chapter on how the Eustory project is fostering a historical-political dialogue in Europe. Due to the transformation process in central and eastern Europe caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, there is a growing need not only for debates on national and supranational identity in this area but also for a European-wide discussion about a common awareness of history. This could indeed be one of the keys to a common European future (p. 137).

Ann Low-Ber calls for an elevation of European history as an academic subject in its own right, but complains that the history taught in schools (except in Finland) does little to connect with contemporary issues, especially the changes over the last 15 years. She quotes from the English European historian, Norman Davies:

There is strong reason to believe that European history is a valid academic subject, which is solidly based on past events that really happened. Europe's past however, can only be recalled through fleeting glimpses, partial probes, and selective soundings. It can never be recovered in its entirety. (1996, p x)

Sharon Macdonald, the editor of this most successful anthology, in her chapter throws a fascinating light on how national identity is constructed and expressed in local terms, and gives some examples from Greece and Berlin. She analyses certain ways of conceptualizing collective pasts and of narrating life stories, some of which play tricks with chronology and conscience.

Jutta Scherrer presents a penetrating analysis of perspectives on Russia and Russian history, and gives examples to support one of the commonly-held themes of this book, that the integration of negative historical experience into the historical self-consciousness is fundamental for creating a European Historical Consciousness. In a short chapter, Neville Alexander raises awareness of the southern perspective on 'Europe' – Europe as seen from an African point of view:

We need only list the headlines, as it were, to realize how profoundly ambivalent the African's people's idea of Europe is bound to remain: the voyages of 'discovery'; colonial conquest, transatlantic slavery, racism, imperialism, genocide, neo-colonialism and, in our own day, underdevelopment, xenophobia, structural adjustment programmes and the illusory notion of development aid. (p. 55)

Another theme elsewhere in this collection is the Americanisation of Europe, and the export of Euro-American culture to Asia since the Second World War.

Armin Heinen (p. 111) reflects what other members of the group advise, that European Historical Consciousness cannot be centrally controlled:

This new discourse on Europe can perhaps better express identities at a time when, it is often argued, structures of modernity are being undermined by globalisation, national communities are becoming weaker, individualization ever stronger, and cultural authorities gaining in significance ... European Historical Consciousness can therefore not be directed centrally (from Brussels?!), but must direct itself towards this individual and meaningful level.

I would recommend this book to all politicians, history teachers, and indeed to all thinking citizens across Europe who are concerned about the effect that history teaching can have on regional and national attitudes and on moves towards mutual understanding.

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Robert M Guyver (references updated May 30th 2006)