

## **Introduction**



# Teaching beyond the National Narrative

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Education has been one of the most important tools in the short but determined career of the nation-state as the organizer of collectives (Anderson 1992; Assmann 1993; Gellner 1983). Historically, subjects were transformed into citizens through the teaching of history, geography, and the language of the nation. People were anchored in illustrious pasts, in particular territories, and in the grammar of (national) self-recognition and the logic of collective reassurance. Thus, peasants were turned into Frenchmen (Weber 1977); Bavarians, Hessians, or Westphalians were turned into Germans; English, Scots, and Welsh into British; and Irish, Germans, Mexicans, and Chinese into Americans.

### **Creating Citizens: Education and National Narratives**

The nation-state and historiography traditionally have an intimate relationship. This is true for historiography in general, but school historiography in particular. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, schooling for the general public and state control of curricula and textbooks were part of the process of nation-building and the creation of social cohesion in the interest of the emerging industrial society (Assmann 1993). Academic historians everywhere enthusiastically entered the service of the nation-state, thus creating and legitimizing national narratives. The education of their citizens is something that states take very seriously. School textbooks in history and in the social sciences convey a knowledge that has been subordinated to particular control mechanisms by the state and/or dominant elites in the process of nation building and the creation of loyal citizens. Indeed, in schools, the production of knowledge was from the outset closely connected to national objectives. No nation-state can afford not to dedicate resources to the general education of its citizens and to authorize the provision of teaching materials. The steady expansion of institutions of mass education throughout the twentieth century, even in the regions of the world where ideological and material sources pose a severe hindrance to

its implementation, is yet another indicator of nation-states' dedication to the idea of forging collective meaning and establishing common values through education (Meyer et al. 1992).

Attributing to education the role of "the forum through which citizenship is shaped" naturally invites struggle over its content (Hein and Selden 2000; see also Graves 2001). Creating citizens requires attention to the scientific and moral content of education. No aspect of education is immune to these struggles and quarrels. In particular the teaching of the collective past, the shaping of spatial and temporal memory, has been loaded with meaning. The subtext of historical instruction most often conveyed the importance of the nation. Struggles over these issues have been especially fierce in nations where the past has been difficult and where memory is disrupted, in other words, where the past cannot easily be made amenable to linear and uplifting narratives.<sup>1</sup>

Teaching history has thus been a priority for modern nation-states. It carried and continues to carry the burden of identity-building of citizens. Crafting an account of the nation's origin, its past, and its evolvment has been of the utmost importance for the nation and the state-building process (Anderson 1992; Hobsbawm 1990). Such an account would justify the nation-state's claim to authenticity and legitimacy as well as to its boundaries. It would provide a rationale for the national parameters of society. It is no coincidence that the rise of academic history is concomitant with the institutionalization of the nation-state as the dominant model of political organization (Frank et al. 2000; Novick 1988). In the course of the twentieth century, however, the very model of the nation-state itself has changed and with it the modes of nation-states' narration of their origins. What is taught as a nation's history in schools is no longer simply bound to a preordained national narrative as it used to be the case in the nineteenth century and (in most countries) up to the 1970s. Although national history continues to be "history by default" practically everywhere, historical accounts nowadays go beyond the national narrative.<sup>2</sup>

## **National Narratives under Siege: Pressures on Textbooks and Curricula**

As far as textbooks continue to be national narratives, they provide a key through which national and citizenship identities are projected and constructed vis-à-vis a wider world. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that what textbooks teach is always political (Stein 1976). What is true for textbooks also pertains to curricula: the era after the Second World War witnessed major curricular changes in Europe, in the United States, and in other parts of the world, through which canonized understandings and representations of the nation and national history have been transformed. David J. Frank et al. (2000)

have identified major trends in curriculum development. Curricula have tended to become similar all over the world in the last one-hundred years, as well as becoming more strictly focused on contemporary history. National history has lost in importance practically everywhere (not just in Western Europe and in the United States). The histories of social groups below the national level on the one hand, and transnational entities on the other, have gained in importance. Finally, curricula seem to stick to social-scientific approaches rather than promoting ethnoculturalist interpretations. It has to be stressed that Frank and his coauthors mainly examined higher education and curricula in colleges and universities. Nevertheless, we think that some of the trends that this study identifies also hold true for school curricula and textbooks.

In the period after the Second World War, the pressure for change in school textbooks and curricula has come from a variety of sources. A series of interlocking changes in the post-war era that complicated the national order of things (Malkki 1995) underlie these changes.

1. There is what we would like to call individuals' increasingly authoritative actorhood and rights, which are conceived as independent of and going beyond the national collective (Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Soysal 1994, 2000). This trend correlates with the broadening of the human rights discourse and the creation of instruments to enforce individual rights within a transnational framework. As human rights ascribe a universal status to the individual that is not associated with belonging to a particular national collective, it thus *de facto* limits the importance of national narratives. This trend is not only legitimized by legal and scientific discourses, but also adheres to popular conventions.
2. The process of mass decolonization after 1945, which led to the creation of a multitude of newly independent states that now play a significant role at the international level, also contributed to an awareness and an assertion of the rights of formerly colonized people. With decolonization, peoples of Africa and Asia learned to employ European universals, such as "the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason," and to make European principles work for them in claiming their rights and identities (Bright and Geyer forthcoming; Chakrabarty 2002: 5). Like feminism, postcolonial thought has engaged those very principles that were instrumental in suppression (of women, of indigenous peoples, of colonized populations), in order to overcome the suppressors' ideologies. The Enlightenment idea of humanity has now become part of the global heritage.
3. Not only did all nation-states receive an equal standing on a formal level, but the era after the Second World War also witnessed the celebration and codification of cultural standards that adhered to the principle of "different but equal"—the right to one's own identity and "otherhood." Transnational agencies such as the United Nations and UNESCO were major promoters of

this trend. Codified as “rights,” identities have become important organizational and symbolic tools for creating new group solidarities and for mobilizing resources. This can be observed in the cases of civil rights, women’s, and gay and lesbian movements, in the surge of ethnic and regional identities and interests, and in the collective articulations of indigenous groups and immigrants (Castells 1997). These groups, which were previously excluded from the various aspects of the national collective and citizenry, have raised their voices in demanding that their group narratives and identities become part of national education, among other things. The mobilization of social groups around principles of identity—new or old, progressive or regressive—challenged the master narratives of the Western world on all fronts.

4. Democratization and liberal ideologies have been increasingly codified as “globalization.” The collapse of the dichotomous structure of world politics at the end of what Hobsbawm has called “the short twentieth century,” and the incorporation of the formerly “socialist” countries into the fold of Europe and the West in general, have played a major role in accelerating the globalization of these ideas and expanding their realm. The transformations in Southern and Eastern Europe, but also in Latin America and other parts of the world, while challenging the notions of development, modernization, liberalism, and democratization, at the same time strongly reaffirmed these notions and strengthened their grasp, frequently using Enlightenment principles such as human rights and universalism. In Western Europe, the unfolding of the European Union as a transnational political entity has equally put pressure on the national narratives of collectives and reified the globalization of the same ideals.

To summarize: the process of decolonization, the increasing dominance of the rights discourse, the social movements from the 1970s on, and the end of the Cold War have challenged political configurations on national as well as transnational levels. They have redefined national prerogatives, altered conceptual and real boundaries, and created tensions for existing national narratives that no longer can claim sole validity.

All these developments have laid the ground for important changes in the organization of societies. While the nation-state was affirmed as the universal mode of polity formation, the closure of societies and their definition as purely national collectives has become increasingly difficult to sustain, ideologically as well as institutionally. With these changes, “what counts as history” has also changed (Berghahn and Schissler 1987; Frank et al. 2000). Accompanied by epistemological crises, major changes in the historical and social sciences took place. These changes had to do with two main issues. First, the question of agency: who has subject status and who acts in history? Second, the question of direction: where are we going, is history moving us into a certain direction?

A new cultural relativism became pervasive: nondominant groups such as workers, women, or minorities now also claiming agency, replaced conventional notions of political and military history with their underlying assumption: “Great men make history.” History stopped being only what conventionally had counted as *national* history. Hand in hand with these reconstructive endeavors came the critique of the notion of continuous progress in history as Eurocentric. The idea of a clear upward motion of historical development was discarded. The dominant Western narrative has given way to narratives of different histories with equal value. More of what constituted the world became incorporated either in world history (as is the case in the United States) or was recognized as “valid” civilizational background (as in many European countries). Even though the focus of most curricula and textbooks in Europe and the U.S. continues to be on the West as the widely accepted model of development, other cultures and traditions (e.g., Islam and China, never mind the incongruous juxtaposition of a religion and an empire) and their contributions to world civilization in science, technology, and economic advancement have come to receive greater acknowledgement. Consequently, as the chapters in this volume assert, the expansion and recognition of other civilizational and cultural narratives have necessarily relativized national history as the unquestioned locus of history education.

## Patterns, Trends, Paradoxes

In Europe as well as in the United States we observe trends toward a taming of national history. This taming of national history and the contextualization of history in frameworks below and above the national level reflect the pervasiveness of processes that lead to increased world-wide interaction and communication, to rapid diffusion and standardization of norms at the world level, and to intensified differentiation of identities and belongings. However, when these processes translate onto the national level, we see different trajectories at work. Nation-states continue to follow their own patterns in responding to the particularities of the problems they encounter in various settings.

In Western European textbooks, the nation is being tendentiously recast in a European framework, although the teaching of history continues mainly to be framed in national settings. This means that we simultaneously observe the Europeanization of the nation, and see how the nation is being resituated within a variety of European frameworks. The French Revolution, for example, regains new importance not simply as a national (French) event, but as an important turning point in European history with implications for the self-understanding of all of Europe. This trend towards Europeanization is less pronounced in Eastern and Southern Europe. Particularly in the newly created

nation-states following the break-up of the Soviet Bloc, we see the reemergence of outright nation-centered narratives.

In the United States we see somewhat different trends. On the one hand, the teaching of world history is much more apparent than in Europe. On the other hand, the national American narrative remains largely intact, since American History and World History constitute separate curricula, and the world history approach hardly affects American history at all. The juxtaposition of the two amplifies the impression that there is “us,” and there is “the rest of the world.” Despite the fact that the introduction of World History curricula was meant to generate a better understanding of the world at large and an incorporation of the national into global developments, this division privileges the specificity of the American national narrative.

It is in the role that “Europe” and European traditions play, where teaching, curricula, and textbooks face a paradox. In European countries, the teaching of Europe would require that we go through a thorough process of reassessing not only national but also European narratives. It would require what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) has called “provincializing Europe,” by which he means that Europe should be treated as *one* world region among others. This does not imply that Europe’s historical impact and significance for the world is being minimized, but it requires narratives that no longer deem progress and humanity as purely and exclusively European, setting the standard for the rest of the world. “Provincializing Europe” would also mean acknowledging Europe’s uniqueness—acknowledging the European roots of universalism, human rights, and progress. However, at the end of the twentieth century, these principles are adhered to by much of the world. They are everyone’s, every nation’s modernity. This is what makes it difficult to provincialize Europe and its uniqueness. At the same time, the universalizing tendencies of Western thought, their continuing claim to objectivity and progress are at odds with a Europe that no longer casts itself as unique and dominating. These dilemmas need to be understood and worked through.

When we look at the United States, we face a dilemma of a different kind. By relativizing the claims of universality and validity of Western thought through the teaching of world history, in contrast, the United States tends to “provincialize” the universal and firmly place it into its original European context. However, a typical American paradox arises when the struggles of minorities are narrated and when postcolonial thought enters the story, as there is “no easy way of dispensing with universals in the condition of political modernity” (Chakrabarty 2002: 5). Particularistic assertions and histories then become universalizing claims to difference—which pose a whole new set of problems and paradoxes that also need to be understood.

These paradoxes point to the fact that canonized knowledge is indeed in flux. Teaching European or teaching world history requires an understanding of the past, the present, and the future beyond national narratives. In this process,

teaching European or world history can only refer to conflict-ridden traditions and challenging futures.

In addressing these challenges, this book pursues various tasks and confronts a number of issues. It investigates some of the ways in which national narratives have been transformed in selected countries. In particular, the book seeks to determine the ways in which concepts of space and time have affected changes in the narration of “our country” and the wider world in which it is located. It explores the ways in which the nation is being resituated within a European or a world context, and within that process how it is being reinterpreted and recast. “Europe” has lost its dominant place to “world history,” at least in the case of the United States, where the effort to offset the Eurocentric perspectives of traditional historical narratives is much more pronounced than in West European countries. The margins of Europe, countries in the Balkans and East Europe, and in some Mediterranean edges of the European Union, have their own issues with the nation. Whether they are prospective candidates for membership or just ancillary players in the European Union, these countries need to readjust their narratives to the unfolding “Europe” and to conform to European standards, not only in their policies and economies but also in their education. Finally, the book looks at the ways in which contemporary conceptions of “the other,” personified as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, and as foreigners (immigrants), are either integrated into the dominant narrative or function as a “disturbance” to national self-perceptions.

Recent developments in the field of textbooks and curricula open fascinating perspectives on the changing foci in positioning societies in the West as well as in the East.<sup>3</sup> The chapters in this book cover both the core and the margins of Europe (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Russia). Occasionally, we take a glimpse at developments in Japan and in the United States, bringing into focus European and global comparisons and perspectives.

Textbooks do not just convey knowledge; they represent what generations of pupils will learn about their own pasts and futures as well as the histories of others. In textbooks, we find what a society wishes to convey to the next generation. Thus, a careful analysis of school textbooks, of school and university curricula, reveals the notions of time, space, and agency that a society aims to instill in its students. The chronologies and narratives of “us” and “them” underscore the moments, events, and developments that are to be celebrated. This is one reason why the analysis of textbooks is an excellent means to capture the social and political parameters of a given society, its social and cultural preoccupations, its anxieties and trepidations (Berghahn and Schissler 1987; Jakobmeyer 1998; Schissler 1989/90).

More importantly, though, textbooks are excellent conduits to explicate and compare classification schemes at work and to locate the shifts in the ways of mapping out the world over time. History, geography, and civic textbooks,

though simplified, lay out for us the basic temporal, spatial, and discursive organization of regions, nations, and the world. Our cognitive maps of understanding and engaging with the world surely correlate with the schemas the textbooks provide for the pupils who read them and for academics like us who study them. They are products of our collective debates and labor. Their effortless rendering of classificatory systems carries the potential for crafting productive analytical inquiries and exposés.

## Notes

1. See Hein and Selden (2000) for the attempts to reform educational content in Japan, Korea, China, and Germany after the Second World War.
2. See the chapters by Schissler and Soysal, Bertilotti and Mannitz in this volume.
3. Although there are numerous studies of textbooks and curricula, systematic empirical research on the topic of textbooks and curricula is rare. For exceptions see Berghahn and Schissler (1987), which is now outdated, and Hein and Seldon (2000). Hein and Seldon's *Censoring History* limits itself to wars and the nation in Asia, and primarily addresses the question of how educational systems come to terms with traumatic pasts.

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