History and the Shaping of Civic Culture

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Hoping to avert what was to become the deadliest war in American history, Abraham Lincoln appealed, in his First Inaugural Address, to both a people's memory and to their basic sense of human decency. In one of the most famous passages in American rhetoric, Lincoln entreated his "dissatisfied countrymen" with this moving imagery:

> *Though passion may have strained it must break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and heartstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*[1]

Lincoln was neither the first nor the only thinker to recognize the critical role of memory in the life of a nation. The nineteenth century French savant, Ernest Renan, dismissed all other justifications for the existence of nations such as blood, geography, language or religion. "A nation" he insisted "is a great solidarity created by the sentiment of the sacrifices which have been made and those which one is disposed to make in the future." A nation is "an imagined community"—a very large family united by collective memories and/or its history. The shared celebration of a nation's great achievements—and the shared sorrows of its defeats sustain and foster it.[2]

More recently, the American scholar Samuel Huntington came to a similar conclusion. He wrote:

> *People are not likely to find in political principles the deep emotional content and meaning provided by kith and kin, blood and belonging, culture and nationality. These attachments may have little or no basis in fact, but they do satisfy a deep human longing for a meaningful community…. A nation is defined by the common history, tradition, culture, heroes and villains, victories and defeats, enshrined in its 'mystic chords' of memory.*[3]

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[1] Abraham Lincoln. First Inaugural Address. Washington, D.C.: March 4, 1861.
[2] Ernest Renan. ""*What is a Nation*?" *in Geoff* Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 42-55.
[3] Samuel P. Huntington. *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 339.*

The Complex Entanglement of History and Memory

Scholars have long recognized a complex entanglement of history and memory that comprise "the mystic chords of memory." While academic historians strive to understand the past and the emergent present as truly and impartially as possible, nations, tribes, ethnic groups, politicians and other factions often have other agendas. They may seek to confirm identity, reinforce tradition, imprint memory, inculcate loyalty or affect value choices. They also may attempt to turn myth into history. A recent example of such an attempt occurred in 1989. Slobodan Milosevic appeared on The Field of Blackbirds to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. He openly and chauvinistically embraced the cause of the Kosovo Serbs claiming that what had been celebrated in centuries-old epic poetry was in fact history.

Interest in the relationship of memory and history has prompted a spate of recent research. Sam Wineburg and his colleagues found that historical memory is highly selective.

> *It is not just that the details of historical events become less acute as time goes on. Rather what is remembered or forgotten from the past is constantly being shaped by contemporary social processes, acts of state commemorate certain events and not others, decisions by novelists and film makers tell one kind of story and not another, and an amorphous set of collective social needs that draws on some elements from the past while leaving others dormant.*[4]

The distinguished Canadian historian, Margaret MacMillan, confirms what psychologists also tell us: "Memory is tricky business. We mistakenly think that memories are like carvings in stone; once done, they do not change." But that is untrue. "Memory is not only selective, it is malleable." People edit memories over the years partly out of a natural human instinct to make their own roles more attractive or important.[5] Humans also polish memories in the recounting. As Primo Levi explained, "A memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in stereotype … crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of raw memory and growing at its expense."[6]

Constance Flanagan has focused her research on the effects of historical events on youth. Among her cross-national findings are these:

- Historical events that occur during one's youth have a greater formative influence than those events occurring in one's adulthood.
- The amount of political stability vs. political change is determined in part by the degree to which the younger generation adopts the views of their elders or crafts a distinct generational perspective.

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[4] Sam Wineburg. "Making Historical Sense" in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives.* Peter Stearns, Peter Stearns and Samuel Wineburg eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 321–322.
[5] Margaret MacMillan. *Dangerous Games: The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2009), 45.
[6] Primo Levi quoted in *Dangerous Games. op. cit*., 47.

- The younger generations have a "fresh contact" with their society. They see (objectively) similar issues from a perspective distinct from adults.
- If the period of one's youth intersects with an historical time of social discontinuity, it increases *within generation* identification.[7]

Distinguishing Nostalgia from History

Memory can become nostalgia, and it is important that nostalgia be distinguished from history. Nostalgia, or *Ostalgie*, as it was known in Germany swept across Europe in the last years of the twentieth century. The British historian, Tony Judt, describes that as "an era of wistfulness."

> *The final decades of the Century had seen an escalating public fascination with the past as a detached artifact, encapsulating not recent memories but* **lost** *memories: history not so much as a source of enlightenment about the present but rather an illustration of how very different things had once been. History on television—whether narrated or performed; history in theme parks, history in museums; all emphasized not what bound people to the past but everything that separated them from it. The present was depicted not as an heir to history but as its orphan: cut off from the way things were and the world we have lost.*[8]

The British turned to nostalgia almost immediately after World War II. They established a National Land Fund to acquire sites and buildings of "beauty and history" to be administered by a National Trust. In British folk memory the evacuation of the beaches of Dunkirk was a triumph. German newsreels more accurately depicted it as a humiliating defeat.

World War II had a profound impact on the outlook of an entire generation of Russians. Soviet propaganda had dubbed it The Great Patriotic War. That War cost the lives of some 20 million Russians or about one-sixth of the total population.[9] The sacrifices and heroism of the war period remained a powerful symbol of Soviet pride and unity until the collapse of Communist power. Then nostalgia set in. In Russia and in Eastern Europe nostalgia drew upon regret for the lost certainties of Communism, now purged of its darker side.

A Vogue For Historical Guilt

Interestingly enough, at the same time that spates of nostalgia were sweeping across Europe and the United States, there began what David Lowenthal calls "a vogue for historical guilt.[10] It valorizes presentist spins on past events and attempts to set the past to rights, often through compensation and/or apologies.

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[7] Constance Flanagan. "Young People's Civic Engagement and Political Development" (University Park, PA: The Network on Transitions to Adulthood, February, 2008).
[8] Tony Judt. Postwar: *A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 768.
[9] *Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary World History* 3rd edition. Jan Palmoibshi ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 740.
[10] David Lowenthal. "Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History" in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives.* Peter Stearns, Peter Stearns and Samuel Wineburg eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 70.

In 1988, the United States government issued a national apology to Japanese Americans who had been placed in American internment camps during World War II. Each victim was also paid $20,000. This prompted some African-Americans to ask for similar reparations. Cited as grounds for compensation were the unfulfilled Civil War promise that each newly freed slave would receive 40 acres and a mule. African Americans also cited the millions of dollars in aid paid by the Germans to Jews following the Holocaust.[11]

In 2004, three United States Senators introduced a bill for an official apology to all Native peoples for "the long history of official depredation and ill-conceived policies by the United States."[12] Cynics pointed out that in an election year the senators who sponsored the bill may have been motivated by the fact that the Native American vote was key in the states they represented. The bill failed of passage, however.

Failure to apologize can also poison relationships between countries. A continuing issue among Japan's neighbors in East Asia is that country's failure to acknowledge and express regret for atrocities committed during the twentieth century. The Chinese government objects to the way that Japan's role in the 1937–1945 war is presented in government sanctioned textbooks. The Chinese also want Japan to acknowledge the "Rape of Nanjing," chemical and medical experiments on Chinese prisoners of war and other atrocities.[13]

Korea, a former Japanese protectorate and colony, also has grievances. Until Japan was defeated in 1945, the Koreans claim that it exploited them, kidnapped their citizens and deprived them of "even human rights." During World War II almost a million Koreans were deported as virtual slave labor for Japanese firms, while others were forced to fight in the Japanese armed forces.[14]

Korea split into two countries, North and South, in 1948. The South Korean government has continued to press Japan for apologies and reparations on behalf of the "comfort women"—a tidy euphemism for the Korean girls and young women forced to serve as prostitutes for the Japanese Imperial Army troops. In 1995, Japan reluctantly set up a fund for the aid of tens of thousands of surviving comfort women. The fund, however unraveled and the apologies which were to accompany compensation awards were not forthcoming.[15]

While some countries acknowledged responsibility for their past actions, France sought first to deny any wrongdoing during World War II. Following its liberation, France for all the vituperation heaped on Henri Philippe Pétain and his collaborators, the regime's contribution to the Holocaust was hardly ever invoked. One quarter of the Jewish population of France (about 76,000) was rounded up and sent to Nazi slave labor or extermination camps.[16] French authorities, historians and the public alike—all contended that Vichy was a betrayal of their

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[11] Africana*: The Encyclopedia of the African and Africa-American Experience*. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louise Gates, Jr., eds., (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2003), 798.
[12] Margaret MacMillan. *Dangerous Games. op. cit., 2*5.
[13] Frances Rosenbluth and Michael F. Theis. "Politics in Japan" in *Comparative Politics Today* 9th edition. Gabriel Almond, et.al., eds., (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 340.
[14] *Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary World History. op. cit.*, 373.
[15] Patrick Smith. *Japan: An Interpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 269.
[16] *Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary World History. op. cit.*, 713.

country. “They successfully corralled ‘Vichy’ into a corner of national memory and then they mothballed it.”[17] It remained for two foreign historians to write a more honest history in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Eberhard Jäckel in Germany and Robert Paxton in the United States were the first to use German sources to demonstrate how much of Vichy’s crimes were undertaken at French initiative.[18]

Educating Citizens and Instilling Values

Educating citizens, especially the young, and instilling them with “the right views” and shared values is something that most societies take very seriously. Because so many countries, especially in the West, have received large immigrant populations, these concerns have taken on increased importance. European countries, the United States and Canada have begun to look more critically at the ways in which they are integrating or failing to integrate new arrivals. As a result there are repeated calls for greater emphasis on the teaching of democratic values and on the need for instilling a sense of national identity. Critics, however, allege that schools are not doing enough.

Diane Ravitch contends that schools in the United States have forsaken their role as principal purveyors of deeply cherished democratic values. Instead schools “have relinquished their historic role as agencies of civic assimilation.”[19] They have actively fostered policies that “encourage students to identify with their race or their ethnic or cultural origins rather than with the overarching civic ideals of the American community.” Multiculturalism—and its handmaiden, multicultural education—Ravitch claims has become “an ideology.”[20]

In the United Kingdom, leaders in the two major parties from Margaret Thatcher to Gordon Brown have worried that schools have not done enough to teach “core British values.” Education Secretary Alan Johnson recently commissioned a review of how schools were teaching citizenship. The report found that there “was not enough emphases on UK identity and history.” As a result, Johnson announced that it would become compulsory for secondary school pupils up to the age of 16 “to learn about shared values and life in the UK” in their citizenship lessons. “Youngsters should be encouraged to think critically about issues of race, ethnicity and religion with an *explicit link* to current political debates, the news and a sense of British values.”[21] New lessons packaged in a unit called “Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK” were to include the following topics:

- Immigration
- Devolution
- Slavery
- British Empire’s Legacy

[17] Tony Judt. *Postwar. op. cit.*, 817.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society.* Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteretti eds., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] BBC News. “Schools Must Teach Britishness” January 25, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/6294643.stm

- The European Union
- Democracy
- Equality

The government's aim of promoting shared values, equality and diversity has been generally well received. Alison Johnston, from the Professional Association of Teachers, did add a cautionary note. He said "It would not be appropriate to promote an imperial British myth by teaching that values such as democracy are exclusively British or by implying that Britain is superior to other countries."[22]

While agreeing that the teaching of core democratic values is desirable, if not essential, some scholars have become wary of the growing tendency to define education with reference to diversity, or as it usually put, multiculturalism. David Lowenthal is particularly critical of multicultural education that emphasizes the mistreatment or "victimization" of certain groups in the past.

> *They lump present groups as sole inheritors* **en bloc** *entitled to receive, or required to yield up, this or that ancestral good. Heritage so viewed exalts group purity, continuity, single mindedness to the detriment of commingling, creolization, flexibility. It encourages people to essentialize history, giving particular groups special claims on <u>their</u> past and privileging <u>their</u> interpretative views. When every entity is privileged to interpret <u>its own</u> history, consensual truth succumbs to minority credos. History thus becomes a cluster of separate pasts … instead of the chronicle of mixing it actually is.*[23]

Jean Bethke Elshtain is equally wary of emphasizing diversity and multiculturalism. She laments:

> *We are asked to become sensitive to groups exclusivities and grievances. Too often, however, rather than making us aware of the wondrous variety of idioms and voices in a plural civic world, such concentration results in an inappropriate politicization of education and the triumph of a discourse of victimization.… Schools are … or ought to be places of refuge, a kind of civically sacred place at their best where young people come together and learn—among the many things they learn—how to live with and among one another by respecting distinctions and eschewing destructive devisions.*[24]

Rethinking the Teaching of National Histories

Searching for ways to "eschew destructive divisions" and to inculcate a sense of the oneness and shared fates of humankind, some educators favor decreasing, if not abdicating, the teaching

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[22] *Ibid.*
[23] David Lowenthal, *op. cit.*, 70.
[24] Jean Bethke Elshtain. "Civil Society, Religion and the Formation of Citizens" in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society.* Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteretti eds., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 271–272.

of national histories. They contend that a rapidly globalized world necessitates such a change. The prestigious American Historical Association undertook such an effort, concentrating on internationalizing teaching and learning at colleges and universities in the United States. A task force began its work in 2004 and published its report, *Rethinking America in Global Perspective* in 2008. The report was followed in 2008 by publication of *The AHA Guide to Re-Imaging the U.S. Survey Course.*[25] It argued that American history must be globalized because:

> *The commitment to write and teach national histories began in the 19th century, in Europe and the United States and soon beyond, as governments saw in such histories a means of forging not only a shared identity but also (they hoped) some active loyalty among populations that were socially, and in the American case, religiously and ethnically highly diverse. Not surprisingly, given these purposes, the focus of the teaching program was inward: forces within the nation caused most of the developments the national history course should focus upon; when the nation had a foreign impact it would be noted but largely in terms of autonomous actions upon a wider world, not any kind of interactive process that might complicate the national power to move.*[26]

The AHA report also recommended rethinking world history and Western civilization courses. "Though international in one sense, such courses sometimes encourage narrowly ethnocentric thinking." They need to avoid "their insular, exceptionalist orientation" and "to open out to wider comparisons and wider consideration of the interactive nature of contacts."[27]

The *La Pietra Report on Internationalizing the Study of American History: A Report to the Profession* was sponsored by the Organization of American Historians and New York University. The report reflected the work of many historians from a number of different countries over a period of four years. They agreed that:

> *If historians have often treated the nation as self contained and undifferentiated, it is increasingly clear that this assumption is true in neither the present nor the past. A history that recognizes the historicity of different forms of solidarity and the historical character of the project of nation-making promises to better prepare students and the public to understand and to be effective in the world we live in and will live in.*[28]

The report not only suggested ways to rethink the teaching of history in a global age, the report also identified six teaching objectives.

1. Better prepare students to understand the contemporary world by learning about its historical development.

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[25] *Globalizing American History: The AHA Guide to Re-Imaging the U.S. Survey Course.* Peter N. Stearns and Noralee Frankel eds., (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2008).
[26] *Ibid.*, 24.
[27] *Ibid.*, 8.
[28] Organization of American Historians. *The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession.* Full report available at http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/index.html.

2. Develop a fuller sense of the historicity (historical actuality) of nationmaking.
3. Enable students to recognize the multiple spatial and temporal contexts of history.
4. Help students to understand better the processes of identity formation, exclusions, boundaries and different forms of solidarity.
5. Enrich students' understanding of how others perceive their own society and promote in students a more informed sense of and commitment to a global human commons.
6. Develop in students' habits of historical analysis sensitive to context, interrelations and interactions, comparison and contingency, always with an awareness that such sensitivity might well require rethinking assumed or traditional historical categories and narratives.[29]

The La Pietra report concluded with the agreement that "there is a general societal need for such enlarged historical understanding." It hoped that "the history curriculum at all levels, not only in colleges and universities, but also in the K–12 levels" will address itself to the issues related to internationalizing history.

Human Rights and Building A Democratic Culture

When the United Nations launched the "Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004),"[30] it drew on the work of two earlier important conferences. The World Plan of Action on Human Rights and Democracy was developed in March 1993 at a gathering in Montreal, Canada. The World Conference on Human Rights, held two months later in Vienna, endorsed The World Plan and issued The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

The World Plan of Action was based on the body of international human rights and humanitarian law. It called for "a global mobilization of energies and resources from the family to the United Nations, to educate individuals and groups about human rights so that conduct leading to a denial of rights will be changed, all rights will be respected and civil society will be transformed into a peaceful and participatory model."[31]

The Plan made it very clear that its goals went far beyond the acquisition of knowledge about human rights.

> *Learning is not an end in itself but rather the means of elementary violations of human rights and building a culture of peace based on democracy, development, tolerance and mutual respect…. The Plan emphasizes that learning is intended to encompass the concepts that knowledge must lead to action….*[32]

[29] *Ibid.*
[30] See United Nationals General Assembly. United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. A/RES/49/184. 6 March 1995.
[31] World Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy. Available at http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/342-353.HTM. International Congress on Education for Human Rights and Democracy.
[32] *Ibid.*

The World Plan emphasized learning for action in its stated objectives to:

1. *make information available about human rights norms and instruments as well as recourse procedures and mechanisms against violations at the national, regional and international levels. Special efforts should be made to ensure that this information reaches young people.*
2. *assist learners to understand the connections between economic conditions and access to rights and encourage educators to support strategies for change that are non-violent and democratic.*[33]

In 2000, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights conducted a mid-term global evaluation of the progress made towards achieving the objectives of the World Plan. When Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, delivered that year's Human Rights Day message, he lamented "We still have a long way to go. Only a few countries have developed effective national strategies for human rights education. There is a big gap between the promises made under the Decade and the resources actually committed."[34]

A similar finding came from the recent research of Anja Mihr, Chair of Amnesty International, Germany, and Hans Peter Schmitz of Syracuse University. They found that Human Rights Education (HRE) was currently underutilized as a strategic tool by activists and that it was "rarely taken seriously by academics."[35] Not only have states failed to commit few resources, "even their rhetorical support has been generally weak."[36]

Mihr and Schmitz insist that HRE is vital but it should not be confused with other educational efforts promoting goals such as communal peace, tolerance, poverty reduction, women's empowerment, or civic engagement. Although the goals of HRE may overlap with those or other educational efforts, HRE offers a unique perspective targeting three levels of individual development regardless of societal background or levels of economic development. Human rights education aims at a holistic and universal concept of human rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and it is concerned with three levels of outcomes:

1. *The cognitive level* defines and provides basic knowledge and information about human rights standards and an understanding of the history of the human rights struggle.
2. *The emotional awareness level* creates a consciousness for human rights and its violations. A study conducted by the International Red Cross found that people are more likely to support principles of justice and human rights in the abstract, but they are significantly less likely to do so when they become emotionally involved in a violent struggle.[37]

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[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Kofi Annan. Message for Human Rights Day 2000. Press release: United Nations SG/SM. 7648 OBV/185.
[35] See Anja Mihr and Hans Peter Schmitz. "Human Rights Education (HRE) and Transnational Activism, *Human Rights Quarterly*. November 2007, 973–993.
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri. *Trials and Errors: Principles and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice.* Quoted in *Human Rights Quarterly*, November 2007, 980.

3. *The skills level* provides individuals with competencies needed to participate in civil and political society and to prevent and combat human rights violations. HRE should target a variety of social groups, including politicians, activists, security forces, social workers, physicians, children and students, because all need skills to successfully promote a democratic culture.

Outsourcing Responsibility For Protecting Human Rights

Human rights education is especially important now because of the increasing professionalization and media-driven character of transnational campaigns that have demobilized the grassroots level. Transnational campaigns have led to the erroneous belief that human rights promotion is the task of a professional elite of activists. There is a global tendency by governments to outsource human rights advocacy and monitoring to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), thus relieving themselves of responsibility. Certainly NGOs deserve credit for the work they have done and continue to do, but governments as signatories to the International Bill of Rights and to various conventions have solemn obligations to act. They can neither delegate nor abdicate their responsibilities to promote and protect human rights.

Despite the efforts of the media to inform the public of human rights transgressions, its record is mixed at best. Often the humanitarian disasters that need the most attention are the ones that get the least. One journalist asked "Why do we read about Darfur and not Burundi? Why do we focus on illegal immigration but ignore human trafficking?" Some scholars have questioned the existence of a "CNN effect" and warned of "a compassion fatigue." There is undeniable evidence that images can be powerful and engulf people for the moment in the suffering of others. Social psychologists, however, remind us that denial plays a crucial and healthy role for individuals. Humans are accustomed to "the gap between knowledge and acknowledgement." Knowledge alone does not prevent human rights violations; nor does it encourage bystanders to intervene. That is why human rights education must be concerned with all three levels of outcomes: cognitive, emotional awareness and skills.

Conclusion

History has been a staple of the curriculum for a very long time, and it has served important purposes by creating solidarities and helping to shape democratic cultures. Human rights education is a relative newcomer to the curriculum, but it, too, can serve valuable purposes by promoting and protecting the human rights of peoples everywhere.

Given the present preoccupation with identity politics and/or narrowly focused national histories, there is a need to rethink the teaching of history and to enlarge and improve human rights education. The intent is not to weaken democratic countries to which people freely and willingly give their allegiance. It is to enable people to better understand the changing, interdependent, globalized world in which they live and to act in ways that will enhance human rights.