FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN

POLICY PAPER

European issues
n°613
16th November 2021

Europe and the challenge set by history

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Irrespective of the beatification of Robert Schuman by the Church, many consider the greatest achievement of European construction to be a miracle

A FRAGILE MIRACLE

Contrary to what is often said, the first success of this process is not peace: it would be childish to claim that, without the Treaty of Rome, a third world war would have started on the Old Continent. Instead, the real success, which can be described as a miracle because it has no historical precedent anywhere else in the world, is the reconciliation between neighbouring peoples who had considered themselves hereditary enemies for centuries.

European peace, a profoundly original *pax europeana*, is not simply the absence of war. It is indeed peace of mind. Our fathers hated each other's guts, our children are now getting married. Not only can no one imagine an armed conflict between our countries, but a kind of informal pacifism has become so natural to the present generations that the mere association of 'Europe' and 'peace' makes them yawn with boredom. To the point, moreover, of complicating the establishment of a European defence system, which we need ... because the rest of the world is not at all resistant to war.

But nothing lasts forever in this world, especially not miracles. It is our duty to consolidate and root it. Firstly, this requires handing down the narrative and the lessons to the younger generation. Therefore, by teaching history in school.

HISTORY IS BORN WITH THE NATION

The introduction of history as a school subject coincided with the birth of nations in the 19th century. This is no coincidence: to inflame, exalt or at least consolidate the feeling of belonging to the same national community, there is nothing like a founding story, that draws willingly on legend or even myth. Exalting the heroes born of the ancestral land or those resting there forever. A story that demonstrates the exceptional character of the nation's fortunes. Was it a great power? The narrative showed how it had dominated Europe, even the world, and how its decline was due only to the jealousy of its coalition opponents and/or internal treachery. Was it a small country? The nation suffered centuries of imperial domination, sometimes to the point of unparalleled Christlike martyrdom, saving European civilisation from barbarism by its sacrifice. The exaltation of past glory or the exaggeration of victimhood would inspire the edification of the nation's youth.

Unfortunately, this terrain has proven fertile for the transition from good-natured patriotism to the most extreme nationalism. Two world wars later, both of which began in Europe, with their trail of unspeakable tragedies, followed by decolonisation, the end of the Cold War, a world order built has been established as best we could on the great universal values of peace and respect for human rights, but the narrative of the past can no longer be the same.

TELLING THE PAST IN THE AGE OF PEACE: THE DILEMMA

The very conception of the discipline and, of course, the content and spirit of the curricula has had to be completely revised. This was the case in the aftermath of the war in Western Europe, then after the disappearance of dictatorships in the South and totalitarian communism in the East. It was then realised that teaching history in a world that wanted to be at peace, and particularly on a continent that had reconciled its peoples, was infinitely more complex than at the time when war appeared to be an incurable evil inherent to the human condition. Although many international organisations offer advice and recommendations - UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the OECD and the OSCE

- responsibility for education remains entirely a national competence: if there is one area in which the word "national sovereignty" still has meaning, it is that which concerns the transmission of knowledge to the next generation.

When it comes to teaching the past, each of our countries now faces a fundamental dilemma.

On the one hand, we want to consolidate the miraculous achievement of European integration: peace of mind, reconciliation between our peoples. Not for a second do our children imagine fighting anyone and they see the Erasmus area as their natural playground. The narrative of the past must obviously be designed to reinforce this feeling. There is a strong temptation to erase painful episodes, controversial figures and even the dark side of the past, whether national or European. This is even at the risk of losing the thread of the narrative for fear of not being able to convey the varying contexts of the different periods, which is the very essence of history.

But on the other hand, in the age of globalisation, the need to belong to a familiar group, to affirm a collective identity, to search for one's roots, to know and recognise one's 'own', has never been greater. Now, not only does everyone need to know his or her ancestors, but, somewhere along the line, he or she also needs to be proud of them. They at least need to have some reason to be proud, even if the most recent past has not always been blameless. And here comes the temptation of a somewhat chauvinistic narrative, even gently driven by national narcissism.

In Europe, the nation remains the most natural community of kinship. For those who do not recognise themselves in it, the quest for another ideal community - religious, ideological or neo-national fundamentalism - takes on passionate, even violent forms, which challenge the idea of 'living together'. How can we hope to make Europe live as a family of peoples if each of these peoples is itself torn apart? For if reconciliation has been achieved, if national war is indeed dead in Europe, its first birthplace, the true original evil, has not been exorcised: that of the instinct for violence, that of the search for a scapegoat, the mistrust of the "other", the search for a collective identity in the hatred of a common enemy.

From there, how can we find the right balance between training citizens and training patriots? And are they citizens of national democracy, citizens of Europe or citizens of the world? Are we training regional, national or European patriots? How can we balance the pride of the light hours and the remorse of the dark side when recounting the past? Between the dry reminder of the facts and the invitation to judgement, which obviously has a moral dimension, should we resort to the standards of the time, to what historians call 'contextualisation', or to our contemporary ideals, which are almost unlimited in their demands? Since, implicitly, history is a past taught today to prepare a better future. However, whose future, and how is it better?

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE CENTURY

To this original dilemma new difficulties specific to the historical discipline in the 21st century have been added.

First of all the time available is scarce. In a teaching schedule that is obviously limited, with the inevitable priority given to exact sciences and the development of other social 'sciences' (economics, law), it is difficult not to give history a congruent portion in terms of hours of lessons and/or marking coefficients. Not to mention the increasing expectations of families with regard to education: introduction to first aid, environmental protection, tolerance towards minorities, prevention of addictive practices and transmissible diseases, not forgetting politeness and sociability.
In the face of this scarcity comes the tsunami of information sources. The internet revolution is overwhelming everything from the most advanced historical research to classroom debate. Through the explosion of written, filmed and digitised documents, and through remote access to all the world's libraries; and through the multiplicity of narratives themselves: from the best European, but also American and, in the future, Asian and African universities, outside views are coming to scrutinise our national histories, with other ambitions, other requirements and, no doubt, other prejudices than our own. The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia alone has sent Dad's primer and dictionary back to the Jurassic Age.

Another embarrassment comes from the relationship between what is taught in school, in content and spirit, and

what is shown in the 'school of life': family memories, political speeches, the media, cinema, civic commemorations. All of the schools in France invited to participate in the commemorations of 11 November for the past hundred years is a history lesson that speaks stronger than any textbook - and let us rejoice that republican instruction has gradually shifted from the praise of 'revenge' to the plea for peace. Authoritarian regimes, for their part, have shown that brainwashing is powerless against the deepest feelings of a people; but are there not more subtle ways of guiding minds from their heartfelt emotions?

There is also confusion about how much has to be forgotten for there to be appeasement and reconciliation when a painful contemporary history is told. All peoples need a period, if not of forgetting, then of tactful fog, of sfumato - which should not be translated as "smoke and mirrors": the Russians, in terms of the darkest side of the communist period, the Spaniards concerning the torments of the civil war. After the Liberation, the French first needed a phase, let's say of modesty, regarding the period of Occupation, then the Algerian War, and today the consequences of decolonisation. Just as an individual needs a "mourning period", a people must be able to rest from its sufferings, to distract itself, to look elsewhere, to live, to forget. But how? For how long? And how best can it be left behind? It is never simple. Each case is different. Forgiveness from oblivion can only come with the change of generation, but it is not uncommon for the third generation to want to reopen the graves covered by the flowers of the previous one.

Some views from outside France

These difficulties are common to all states. In addition, there are the particularities of the past of certain countries. In France, we are fortunate to have inherited a long national history, full of noise and fury, but whose retrospective presentation is relatively linear, despite the most varied accidents along the way. The presentation of the even quite distant past, raises much more complex questions for some of our partners. Just a few examples.

Like its Baltic neighbours, Lithuania became an independent state in the 20th century before it was even a nation. Should it today emphasise the glory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea in the 14th century, or its own national history, which is certainly valiant but more modest, and with elastic borders? Its current capital, Vilnius, was historically the 'Jerusalem of the North', the Jewish city of Vilna, before it became the Polish Wilno, where no one spoke Lithuanian until after the Second World War, and its promotion to the national capital of a country born without it.

How can Poland escape a long narrative of victimhood - thrice butchered between its overly large neighbours in the eighteenth century, twice destroyed and bled dry in the twentieth, and successively occupied by the two great modern totalitarian systems? When I talk to a Pole about the Second World War, my counterpart "weighs up" the 6.5 million dead, i.e. ten times as many as died in France, even though our countries started and ended the war on the same day: which of us is in a position to give lessons to the other about that period? Yet this does not give any patent of legitimacy to the narrative of the Polish ruling party.

How can Serbia and Kosovo reconcile the story of their birth in a simple manner, with the Serbs considering the defeat of the "Field of Blackbirds" (Kosovo Polje) on 15 June 1389 as the mystical founding sacrifice of their nation, while the Ottoman victory led to the settlement of Kosovo by 90% of Islamicized Albanians?

There are peoples who are 'burdened with history'. For contemporary Greece, the challenge is to appear as something other than the museum of the illustrious Hellas. Since its unification, Italy is in quest of a contemporary political model that is not unworthy of imperial Rome, nor of the urban republics of the Renaissance; and for a leader who will give it back a Euro-compatible national pride, which this original parliamentary democracy needs as much as we do. For its part, Ireland will only be at peace with its long and painful past when the question mark hanging over it is removed i.e. when the doubt regarding a reunited island is removed. At the other end of Europe, the same applies to Cyprus, even though it is hard to imagine pasts as different as those of the green Erin and the island of Aphrodite.

Other peoples have been buffeted by successive and contradictory lies imposed by totalitarian, or simply authoritarian regimes in the telling of the past. For decades, periodic 'revisionism' of the curriculum was the rule. Dead heroes followed one another in the symbolic pantheon at the

same pace as national leaders on the throne: people, this is your new master and the only ghosts you must sing to from now on! For a people, the free choice of heroes is at the heart of a regime of freedom. A free choice as difficult to conquer, and then to keep, as this regime itself.

The most difficult case is certainly that of Germany. On 9 November 1989, a tide of enthusiastic young people from East Berlin flooded Checkpoint Charlie before attacking the Wall with pickaxes. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of German historians: how could we make these young people proud of their country and themselves by teaching them that their fathers were "bastards" - in the Sartrean sense - because they were communists, and their grandfathers were "bastards" because they were Nazis? And yet, there is no identity without pride in oneself and one's own!

It is time to understand that the great dates of our common history cannot be remembered by everyone in the same way. On 11 November, France celebrates the armistice that ended the First World War as a painful victory. Germany remembers it as a stab in the back to its army, which at the time, though outnumbered, still occupied French soil. The Czechs and Slovaks rejoiced at their first independence and Romania celebrated its enlargement to include the previously Hungarian Transylvania a few days later, on 1 December. As for the Austrians, they console themselves for the loss of their centuries-old empire by making 11 November the first day of carnival! Similarly, for Western Europeans, 8 May and for the Russians, 9 May are days of glory, in memory of the surrender of Nazi Germany. But for all the former "people's democracies", these dates only mark the transition from one totalitarian tyranny to another. Should a common narrative be sought? No, not at all, but rather that each person can listen to the other's account. The 'common narrative', in which Paul Ricoeur saw European identity, is not a single narrative, but a symphony of narratives, to which we must attune.

THE STARTING POINT: AN OBSERVATORY

There is hardly a European country where history teaching is not considered to be in crisis. There is hardly a country in Europe where the national community is not experiencing a period of identity disquiet reflected in the emergence of new xenophobic and nationalist parties and the rise of extreme violence in political debate. The concomitance of these two phenomena is no coincidence.

Can our societies be reconciled with themselves, as with each other, by reconciling with their past? But how can this be done, when education is fundamentally a national competence and no country, starting with our own, would tolerate outside interference in this area?

Faced with a necessary and impossible requirement, the best approach is that of the Monnet-Schuman method: to propose a first modest step in the desired direction. A step so modest that no one can reasonably object to it - even if not everyone follows through immediately. But a first step designed in such a way that its success makes a second, then a third necessary: and that is how the journey begins!

The first step was the creation of a European Observatory on History Teaching in Europe. Its objective is simply to take stock of the teaching of this subject in European countries: who teaches what and how, at school, from primary to the end of secondary school? What knowledge is expected of a future citizen at the end of the compulsory education period? The aim is to draw up an objective and complete picture, from the design of curricula to the nature of examinations, including teacher training and the status of textbooks. The Observatory was set up a year ago under the aegis of the Council of Europe by 17 founding countries, on the initiative of France, and in particular of its Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer. Its work is carried out under the supervision of a scientific council of 11 historians, teachers and museologists chosen for their recognised professional credentials and their personal independence. The Observatory has begun to collect all the information, the "pixels", of the overall picture. It will then be necessary to translate them into all the languages and to give a harmonised overall presentation to facilitate comparisons between countries. A complete, accurate, certified picture, but without any critical commentary: the Observatory observes, describes, publishes, it does not judge. The first publication of the full picture will be in 2023.

FROM OBSERVATION TO DEBATE: THE SHOCK OF THE PHOTO

This is when the second step, already in preparation, will begin: the debate. Or rather the debates. Academies, universities, administrations, teachers' associations, parents,

the media, NGOs and, of course, members of the European and national parliaments will be invited to comment on the overall picture and to give their opinions, views, advice or criticism.

The discovery of the enormous differences between the national systems will produce a shock: weekly timetables varying between 2h and 8h; teaching conceived, sometimes as an acquisition of knowledge, sometimes as an acquisition of skills; narrative centred on national history alone, or treatment of major cross-cutting themes devoid of chronology; compulsory subject or optional subject for the final examination; complete freedom to publish textbooks and teaching materials, or a single compulsory textbook; a discipline in its own right or merged with other humanities; teachers trained in the techniques of pedagogy and didactics, or invited to learn them themselves. To give just one example, the European Parliament's reaction should be very strong when it notes that, in half of the Member States of the Union, including some of the founding countries, European integration, its "Founding Fathers" and its basic treaties do not even feature in the contemporary history curriculum.

Beware! The final goal is not to achieve a uniform, sanitised "European novel", presenting a common "politically correct" version of our common past. It should be repeated: education will remain a national competence. But in accordance with the numerous recommendations adopted periodically, both by the Council of Europe and by the Union, and promptly forgotten by their signatories, national systems are required to respect three principles.

The narrative of the past must be based on scientifically verified facts: legends can have their place, but as legends. National narratives must be compatible with each other, each taking into account the narrative of the other, ensuring that the spirit of teaching is to strengthen reconciliation between our peoples, not to foster ancient resentments. Finally, from these dozens of different national narratives, there must emerge an awareness of belonging to a common European whole - Civilisation? Culture? Family? In any case, a common future, certainly.

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