The historical consciousness of European students
Pioneering work by the Youth & History Project

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In March 1997 the Körber Foundation in Hamburg published "Youth and History. A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents", edited by Bodo Von Borries (University of Hamburg) and Magne Angvik (Bergen College of Higher Education, Norway). This two volume work presents the first results of an international, multicultural research at the historical consciousness and the political attitudes of 15/16 year old adolescents. Volume A contains the comparative analysis of the results in their entirety and the articles of the national coordinators about the specific situation in their country. Volume B holds the statistical material in the form of item-tables and combined measures. A cd-rom is included with a complete dataset of Youth and History, for the purpose of further analysis.

The present inquiry was the first attempt ever to make an intercultural comparison of the historical consciousness of youths in a quantitative, empirical description. With this end in view, more than 31.000 students and 1250 teachers out of 26 countries[1] were classically questioned during the schoolyear 1994-95. By studying the results of this inquiry historians, educationists, psychologists, sociologists and politicians will be able to gain an empirically justified insight in the historical and political opinions and the historical consciousness of the 15/16 year old European youth.

In short, the project had the following aims (p. 23) :

1) to get information about how students evaluate history and history teaching, and on this base to work on an improvement of history teaching based on a diagnosis of the situation in different European countries.
2) to determine the basic dimensions and elements of historical consciousness, in order to produce a framework for further theoretical and empirical work in the field of historical science.
3) to draw a kind of map of historical interpretations and political attitudes of youths in Europe, which is of great interest a.o. to learn about the readiness for European integration and peaceful co-operation.
4) to build an international network of researchers to discuss the results of this survey and to promote its consequences.

Father of the international Youth & History-project is Bodo von Borries (University of Hamburg) who does since more than 10 year investigation at historical consciousness, at first restricted to Germany. Together with a.o. Jorn Rüsen he has done pioneering work in this field. A big part of the questions used in the present survey were established by Borries in earlier research in Germany. In the spring of 1992, a pre-test was arranged in nine European countries. Now, with the Youth & History project, this didactical en empirical research at historical consciousness has enlarged its scope to the whole of Europe and even beyond. It is the merit of the Körber Foundation and its managing director Wolf Schmidt to have grasped the importance of this project and

consequently to have furnished – together with other institutions - the means for its execution.

The different operations were carried out by an international workgroup. As a working definition, this workgroup defined historical consciousness as a "complex connection of interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations of the future" (p. 36). It is a mental construct that includes not only historical knowledge, but also the ability to create interpretations of the past in order to make sense out of it and to orient one's own life to future changes. It is formed in the everyday contact with the outside world from all pieces of information that come to us in a narrative and thus already interpreted way. This process involves everyone in society and there is thus something like a collective historical consciousness. But there is also an individual consciousness, that will depend on the persons' own capabilities to adjust the data he is confronted with his inner picture of history and to correct his view on the world when necessary. A developed historical consciousness always integrates the readiness to rebuild its contents. How all this happens exactly, is still subject of discussion, and even the concept as such isn't generally accepted. Nevertheless, the workgroup sustains that it can be measured by means of well aimed questions. These must refer to concrete situations, in which the competence of historical consciousness is really put into performance. This causes a number of methodological problems, not at least because part of the test is about history itself, historical knowledge and history teaching. One might expect that the students will be more enthusiastic about questions that are close to everyday life and that ask them to consider situations which they are more or less familiar with.

In each of the participating countries and regions an identical list of about fifty questions was given to a representative sample of the student population of 15/16-year old youngsters in a classroom environment. The questions were mainly opinion asking multiple choice questions with in most cases a continuum of 5 answering possibilities[2].

The questionnaire can be divided into a number of main groups : relevance of and motivation for history (signification of history and importance of past, present and future, trust in and fun with historical media, determinance of the past); interest in periods, topics and areas of history; historical socialization (what happens in history lessons); chronological knowledge; interpretations of the past; historical-political concepts (nation, Europe, democracy); political attitudes based on historical experiences (argumentation by history, empathy into history, understanding of change, perception of the present, political and individual preferences - e.g. attitudes toward immigrants and actual controversies); relations of past, present and future (determinants of changes in times and expectations of the future). The complete questionnaire can be found in the appendix of volume A.

It is not our purpose to review here all parts of the comparative analysis, nor all the national particularities and striking deviations from the international mean. In that case we should have to limit ourselves to a mere enumeration. We thought it more appropriated to focus on the didactical implications of the results. Against the international background positive and negative aspects of our history education are becoming visible. A lot of these aspects would never have become clear without this

comparison. It is to be hoped that the effort that has been delivered will bear fruit in the education programs of the participating countries.

One of the conclusions of the comparative analysis is that a regular geographical pattern can be distinguished in the answers. Some countries tend to answer in the same direction for most of the questions. So we see that for instance the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe frequently answer as one block. This is not so surprising, in view of their common history, culture and/of language.
However, on a cluster analysis base - and thus impartially - the participating countries can be classified in only three regional groups : nordic countries (Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland), Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, [3]Bulgaria) and Eastern Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia - but not Czechia !). A fourth group - "Western Central Europe" - is formed by Italy (with South Tyrol), Germany and Belgium. The authors see the "late and difficult nation-building" as one of the causes for their similarities. We find this explanation not very convincing as far as Belgium (= Flemish community) is concerned. In our opinion, this explanation may apply to Italy and Germany, but in a much lesser extend to Belgium. All Belgian regions had a common history and belonged together to the same administrative rule long before the independency (1830).
The rest of the countries couldn't be fit into a cluster, except for the Iberian pair Spain-Portugal.

Now, some didactical highlights of the comparative analysis

- Esteem for teachers and marks in history

"The students' merits in history are judged positively by teachers; and the teachers teaching history is seen even more positively by the students of Europe".

- Students, religious socialisation and political interest

The question about the importance of religion shows the largest and clearest difference in the whole questionnaire. According to the authors, "the mean value ($M_{Overall}$ = 3.25) shows a relatively low level of religious obligations or faith". For students from Palestine, Arab Israel, Turkey, Greece and Poland religion occupies a "high rank" (highest mean Turkey 4.57) in their life. Most countries from Scandinavia and Western Europe describe themselves as basically secularised (lowest mean Belgium 2.27).
The Y&H-results don't confirm the predicted regain of the strong influence of the orthodox faith in eastern Europe after the collapse of communism.
"The political interest ($M_{Overall}$ = 2.52) is much lower than the religious engagement" ($M_{Overall}$ = 3.25). Only two countries have a positive average value : Palestine and Arab Israel. There is no sure relation between war/conflict and political interest, neither is the level of interest explained by a democratic tradition.

- Relevance and aims of history

One of the main conclusions is that history is judged positively by the majority of the European students, but not very strongly.
The Nordic (except Iceland) and Western European countries show less rejection of the negatively formulated statements : "History is...something dead and gone..., a

school subject and no more, ...an accumulation of cruelties and disasters (in descending order from more to less rejection).
Nevertheless, some of the more positive statements are not matched by enthusiastic agreement either : "History means... a chance for myself to learn from failures and successes of others" and "... a number of instructive examples of what is right or wrong, good or bad" get just an equal average ($M_{Overall}$ = 3.37). This means only a moderate acceptance, except in Slovenia and Belgium where we have a moderate rejection for the first, and in Israel and Spain for the second item.
History as "the background and explanation of today's problems" is accepted with more enthusiasm, while history as "a means of mastering my life as part of historic changes" is given a neutral response.
The most favoured item of the itemblock "Aims of historical study" is "knowledge of the past", before "understanding the present", with a trend of general agreement. In nearly every country "the present is a bit more important than the future, only the mainly Muslim communities (Turkey, Palestine, Arabian Israel) and Poland are exceptions.
There is a cluster of more past-oriented countries and another of equally past- and present-oriented. Some cultures have a preference for the past, others for the future.
Factor analysis confirms the conclusion that on average there is only a weak rejection of "disgust at history as a useless and repugnant topic", together with a medium acceptance of "relevance of history as societal orientation" and a weak acceptance by the average student of "relevance of history as an individual guideline".

- Interest in history : periods, kinds and areas

In nearly all countries the fifteen - year - old students are most interested in the recent historical period (since 1945) and strongly interested in modern history (after 1800).
The authors pretend that factor analysis points at a clear regional pattern: "South and West prefer modern to ancient, East (and North) ancient to modern history." This statement seems a little too hasty. This is only a pattern with exceptions (e;g; Greece, Portugal) The least interest goes surprisingly to the period 1500-1800.
The most favoured items are: the story of the own family, adventures and great discoveries, and the effects of humans on their environment (European average in descending order).
There is no strong interest in the history of wars, kings and foreign cultures. On the other hand, the interest in every day life of ordinary people was met with a low - even slightly negative - general esteem too, especially in Southern Europe. Only in Belgium, Greece and Lithuania there is some low level of interest in the latter statement. This is like the author says, a disappointing result for those teachers who believe in a superior or fruitful use of interest in every day history or history from below. Items dealing with "historical structures" such as political and economic items get the lowest priority. This again will disillusion some reformers of historical instruction. Apparently, the influence of marxist history and the Annales-school hasn't affected the history teaching in the schools very much, or perhaps the students at this age find such matters simply to boring.

- Teachers' judgement on students' interest in history

"Generally, the anticipation of the students' interest in the teachers' minds is remarkably correct". There is only one exception: "teachers by far underestimate the students' interest in their own families' stories". This conclusion will give backing to

reformers of history teaching, who want more concentration on the students' lifeworld and involvement.

- Geographic areas of predilection

This question asked for the interest in different geographic levels : immediate locality, own region, country, Europe, outside Europe. There is no mistake possible : the nation state dominates the students' historical interest, even today. However, there are considerable regional differences in this general interest. The students of Lithuania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Arab Israel, Palestine and Portugal are really enthusiastic about their national history ($M_{Country} \geq 4.00$), while the country means in Nordic and Western Europe and in some Eastern countries (Slovenia, Estonia) lie far below the European average. Factor analysis confirms this.

Although there is a remarkable general preference for the own country, the interest in the history of Europe is everywhere slightly positive, except in Israel and Great Britain (which both can easily be explained). Perhaps not surprisingly the highest interest is seen in Eastern European countries, who dream of membership of the European Union, and in new member states as Greece and Portugal. The distance to European history of students in Western and Northern Europe may reflect the scepticism about the European Union in their societies.

- Fun with and trust in different presentations of history

Most enjoyed by students of all countries are fictional films but they trust them less than any other medium (except historical novels). Even so, there is no fundamental mistrust ($M_{Overall} = 2.81$, lowest trust $M_{France} = 1.92$). The most trustful media are : "museums and historical places" ($M_{Overall} = 4.15$) and "historical documents and sources" ($M_{Overall} = 3.93$), but students have much more fun with museums which they rank second among all, than with historical documents. Students in Denmark, Hungary and Belgium don't enjoy museums and historical places.

"Lack of fun with textbooks is apparently a common European structure". While apparently Southern Europe has a more friendly view toward schoolbooks, extreme disgust exists in different parts of Europe : Belgium, Czechia, Israel, Finland, Russia, Hungary, Slovenia.

The European average ($M_{Overall} = 3.18$) does not imply that students have strong confidence in textbooks. This and the lack of fun "should stir up ministers, publishers, authors, and teachers". The countries situated in the Northern, Western, and Southwestern parts of Europe articulate some (rather low) trust in textbooks.

In the authors' view, in some of the postsocialist countries this lack of trust "may be a consequence of long-term manipulation and instrumentalization of history by former governments. But then the exceptions (Poland, Lithuania, and Czechia) have to be explained". In the south a deep-rooted mistrust in authorities may be mentioned but again, what to do with two exceptions: Portugal and Spain?

Furthermore, the students have much fun with "other adults telling" as with "teachers telling", but the latter is a bit more trusted than the former. Only in Eastern Europe and in Muslim communities students like teachers telling. In Denmark, Finland and Hungary the students have "restricted confidence" but in Israel, the authors say, students "have some mistrust" of their teachers telling.

Regarding the students mistrust of textbooks in Eastern Europe, it seems indeed rather astonishing that the students have trust in their teachers telling. But on further

consideration, after a long period of (ab)use of history and without reliable textbooks, who can resolve the problem of reliability except the teacher?
Furthermore, students mostly enjoy and trust "other adults telling" (e.g. parents, grandparents). The students of Turkey, Germany, Czechia and Russia do not articulate much trust in these stories.
As a possible explanation the authors refer to the damaged communication between generations after a past full of dictatorship, aggression or civil war. It can indeed be a possible explanation for Germany but we have problems when the students of Israel express the third highest confidence. But let us not forget that a lot of parents and grandparents in Israel didn't experience the atrocities of the Second World War!
The fact that almost the last rank of fun in presentation is occupied by the item historical novels, doesn't surprise us at all, not only because of a crisis for books in a world of audio-visual communication like the authors say, but because this is not the most favoured genre in youth literature and after all, why should they have fun with fiction in history, why should they read such things when the real history in textbooks is that boring?
As said before, students do not fundamentally mistrust fictional presentations (films, novels) of history. In Russia and Ukraine, as in both Arab communities, students have more trust in fictional films and historical novels than in textbooks.
TV documentaries are more trusted than enjoyed and students of all countries have at least some trust in TV documentaries.
For us professionally interested in history didactics and for teachers and teachers trainers, the results of this research are very important. On the one hand students "tend to enjoy presentations which they don't trust and vice versa". On the other hand there is a high correlation between fun and trust for every item, also for "novels" and "textbooks".

- Historical Instruction : perception of usual methods and of focused goals

The authors emphasise two very important results :
1) If the students observations are reliable, the use of textbooks/worksheets and listening to teachers telling are the most frequent methods. This, in combination with the conclusion that the most rare methods are audio-visual media while active and open methods (role plays, local projects, visiting museums/sites), indicates "a rather traditional, old-fashioned type of historical instruction in the European average."
2) The two most appreciated methods of instruction by the students are used least of all. But textbooks, which students really do not enjoy, teachers use very much. "Teachers undoubtedly do not pay any attention to students' wishes and preferences when they plan and decide on teaching methods and media in history lessons".
Indeed, "eager reformers will be disappointed"..."Theoretical controversies and convictions of didactians are not reality of everyday instruction".
It will be a sore disappointment "for those theorists and teachers who want to base historical learning mainly on personal examination of sources and imitation of research operations" to learn that the study of historical sources is not normally done intensively in Europe ($M_{Overall} = 2.69$), with the exception of Portugal, Spain, France and the United Kingdom. This is clearly a Western European pattern taken into account the more neutral answers of Belgium, Germany and Italy.

As the focus of their history lessons European students say first of all : "we seek knowledge about main facts in history", secondly the acknowledgement of "traditions,

characteristics, values and tasks of the own nation and society". But the students of Belgium and Sweden do not focus on - with the authors' words - learning traditions. Fascination and fun is the last perceived focus of instruction. But other items got low ranks and neutral values. Annoying is that students do not recognise a really intensive use of history lessons to "explain the situation in the world today" except in Palestine, Portugal, Spain, France, and Arab Israel. We are not astonished like the authors because the students accept "understanding of the present" as the second most important aim of historical studies. Indeed they do, but in the teaching practice of every day teachers do they actualise enough the distant past?

Given the importance of this study, the remaining part of the comparative analysis should be summarised briefly.

Andreas Körber discusses the results of questions aimed to measure the knowledge of general developments in time (economic organisation, twentieth century events, types of ships, fashion), associations with some central periods of European history (Middle Ages, colonisation period, Industrialisation, Adolf Hitler, Eastern Europe since 1985), and judgements to historical-political concepts (nation and national states, Europe and European integration, democracy). It is evident that the accuracy of the answers depends of the fact whether or not those items have already been covered in the classroom.

B. von Borries shows the political attitudes and decisions based on historical experiences and analyses. In this kind of questions Youth & History captures the actual performance of historical consciousness itself. Conflict between traffic and monuments, claims for a lost territory, obligations for colonial reparations, legitimation of economic wealth, immigrants rights and integration, and the commitment to political values and issues (e.g. voting about controversial topics) are well chosen subjects and a proof of the democratic commitment of Youth & History.

In "Linkages of three time levels..." (past, present and future) the authors investigate, with different strategies, the students' ideas about processes, changes, and developments. This chapter is required reading for every teacher who believes in the human possibility of change in time, the impact of humans and their responsibility for the change in time.

Finally, the authors try to explain some overall relations and common structures, and examine particularities of countries and regions. They are looking for a geographic pattern in the second level results and with a certain success. It is no use even to try to enumerate the second level results. Bereft from their origin, they can only lead to dangerous and unjustified conclusions.

The present article is only a faint echo of a book that both is incredibly rich in factual material and offers dazzling new insights into the historical consciousness of the European youth today. However, it should be read carefully before to jump into conclusions. We hope that our review of the didactical implications of this study may incite to do so.

ANGVIK, M & VON BORRIES, B. (1997). *Youth and History. A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents.* Hamburg: Körber – Stiftung.

Summary

The authors focus on the didactical implications of the results of the Youth and History-project in which the researchers attempted to make an intercultural comparison of the historical consciousness of youth in a quantitative, empirical description.
One of the conclusions is that a regular geographical pattern can be distinguished. The countries can be classified in four groups: Nordic countries, Eastern Europe, Eastern Central Europe and Western Central Europe.
Some didactical findings concern: political interest and religious engagement of pupils, the relevance and aims of history according to the students, their interest in different periods, items and areas, the teachers' judgement on students' interest in history, the geographic areas of predilection and fun and trust in different presentations of history.
A survey on methods and goals indicates a rather traditional type of historical instruction all over Europe.

[1] Most European countries participated, together with Turkey, Israel, Palestinians and Arab Israelis. Notable non participating countries were : Ireland, Switzerland, Rumania, Letland, Luxemburg. Belgium is represented by the Flemish community only, not by Wallonia. Special attention was given to some regional subsamples : South-Tyrol, Scotland. The Netherlands joined to late to be taken into account in the comparative analysis.

[2] Each of the answering possibilities of the continuum is given a value from 1 to 5 (Likert scale). As a consequence, all the calculated means are also between 1 and 5. Comparisons and analysis are thus based on the figures "behind the decimal point".