

Common Core History for Young Europeans

In 1981 the Society held a conference at Kerkrade to discuss the teaching of contemporary History. One of the first questions we were asked to consider and, if possible, to answer, was "When does contemporary History begin?" - what should be the starting date selected for a course in it? Several alternatives were suggested, all falling (if my memory serves me) within the last 100 years, and most of them well on into this century. 1917 was one particularly interesting suggestion as it marked both the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and America's involvement in the Great War - events which could plausibly be said to mark the entry of the two future "superpowers" upon the European scene, which they were later to dominate. I am sure that the matter is of great importance, but it seems to me that to make our starting point so late involves a very serious foreshortening of perspective which will limit the way in which History, adequately studied, can help us to understand our present times and to behave intelligently in them. If, for example, the present push for European unity is to be understood and evaluated (as opposed to just being accepted, uncritically, as "a jolly good idea") historical perspective is needed - only a very superficial understanding of the 'pros' and 'cons' would result from a study of events confined to post-1945, for example.

Such a constriction of view carries two related dangers. First the view might be formed (perhaps sub-consciously) that unity is a solution to a problem caused specifically by Germany - a mistake easy to make because of the recency of the German effort to dominate Europe and the peculiar hideousness of the regime which mounted the last attempt. This view must, of course, be categorically rejected and the necessary rejection needs historical knowledge and perspective. Germany's bid for mastery was merely the latest - one hopes, the last - instance of a process with roots going back three hundred years

during most of which Germany, so far from being the aggressor, was the battlefield on which and, largely, the prize for which, other States fought. The second danger of the "telescoped" view provided by a late starting point is that it blocks off the possibility of understanding in full measure the nature of the problem to which union is offered as a solution - in which case there can be no true grasp of what grounds there are for thinking it to be one. Understanding of those grounds can only be the fruit of historical knowledge.

It is important to realise why historical knowledge is essential. There are three reasons, two particular to Europe, and one general. The first reason why anyone wishing to assess the 'pros' and 'cons' of European unity by understanding the problem to which unity is suggested as a solution would need to be historically informed is that he would need to know the results - the "track record" - of disunity and the fears, rivalries and destruction of which that record so largely consists. Second, an enquirer would need to understand how and why changes have made European union what it never was in the past - attainable. Why is it only now attainable? Why, for instance, were Kant's proposals for Perpetual Peace quite unrealistic in his own time and for long after? Why are they (or something in their spirit) unattainable no longer? For both of these essential requirements - most obviously for the "track record" but also for the second, historical knowledge is not merely a pre-condition: it is the very substance of what has to be known.

Even more vital, if that is possible, is the third, general, reason for historical knowledge being essential. In large part, it underpins the two "particular" reasons by explaining them - it explains, for example, why national rivalry and war have been almost the rule in European history. I will try to explain what I mean.

No thinking at all is possible, of course, without some set of underpinning and barely conscious assumptions which shape our view of the world and determine how we interpret events within it. As regards how we view relations among States these assumptions might run something like this. It is of the nature of things, one might say, that lions do not lie down with lambs, nor with each other - that suspicion, competition and, perhaps, fear are normal, not exceptional, in relations among sovereign nation States, particularly when five or six big ones, commanding among them 90% of the world's military and economic power, are crammed into the world's smallest continent. Conflict is not the consequence of some peculiarly German (or British or French or) wickedness but the next-to-inevitable consequence of that concentration of power and its associated rivalries. It is of the nature of things (it may further be argued) that States have interests, political, economic, strategic and, perhaps, psychological, and virtually inevitable that these will clash. So - let us abolish such destructive rivalries by European union.

We may agree that the generalisations leading to the conclusion are true enough, in broad outline: but they are not true "in the nature of things" - that is, not true a priori, not analytical truths. How do we - how can we - know whether or not this picture of European relations is true, as opposed to just accepting that it is? This paper is not the place for a full philosophical treatment of the nature of knowledge, and of what may constitute adequate grounds for a valid claim to know something¹, but one point may be made which is sufficient for our purpose. If my claim to know anything is justifiable, I must have "the right to be sure that it is true". If, as in the present case, we are speaking of propositions which are

¹ Some consideration of the question, though by no means a full philosophical one, is given in Rogers (1979) Chapter 1.

not true a priori then only one thing can give such a "right to be sure" - an adequate weight of supporting evidence: and no weight of evidence could be adequate which did not include and embody the reasons why the propositions are true. In a word, the evidence must be explanatory. Only one thing could constitute explanatory evidence for propositions such as those given in the above example - an adequate historical record² - and it could not be adequate unless its generalised conclusions rested upon study of many instances of relations among European States - which clearly implies relations over a period of time, and in a variety of circumstances, much more extensive than the last fifty years, or even this century.

The full force of this point comes out when we remember that, as educators, we are concerned with teaching (or furthering the teaching of) the young and immature. Even if the answers of many empirical propositions about the world seem self-evident to us, they are not so to the young (particularly the idealistic young) - nor were they to us until appropriate study and adequate experience had made them so. Let us remind ourselves that we had (and have) - no right to claim to know them until and unless they were and are the fruit of such study and experience.

It therefore follows that historical knowledge of a reasonably long period - how long is the next point to be considered - is imperative if our young adults are to understand their present and be equipped for making sensible decisions about it. This is not because we know and they don't. Certainly our object should not be that they always reach conclusions identical with our own - how could it be when we are by no means unanimous

² A historical narrative must be explanatory of the events it records. For supporting argument on this point see Rogers (1987a) pp.5-8 where History is contrasted with chronicle.

ourselves? - but that whatever conclusions they reach should be the fruit of adequate consideration of relevant knowledge. And the knowledge could not be adequate unless it included historical³ knowledge.

What is "contemporary History"?

The question of when a course in contemporary History should begin must now be faced directly. The need is for a criterion. Professor Barraclough has argued that contemporary History begins when the problems, possibilities or factors seen to be salient in our contemporary world first appeared and its study should consist of the study of their development. On this definition, with which I agree, the crucial point is not how much time has elapsed between a suggested starting point and now - it is quite irrelevant whether that be 200 years or 25 - but which aspects of the contemporary scene are salient and when they began. A course in contemporary Irish history, for example, could not, in my judgement, begin later than 1600 because without an understanding of the causes of, and motives underlying, the Nine Year's War and the Plantation of Ulster (to say nothing of the vehement and entrenched attitudes which have grown up since), the roots of our present troubles are not known, and appropriate responses to them cannot be made.

To this criterion I would add another. It is largely through its sense of a past which is to a significant degree shared and common that a society coheres. It is all the more important when that sense of identity has to be, in large part, forged among components which have not merely been separate for centuries, but often hostile and competing. My second criterion therefore is to choose the History which stresses the common elements among Europeans. We must ask "What has made us what we are?". To answer this question necessarily

³ N.B. "included". Of course I am not arguing that History is all that need be known - only that it is an essential and central component of the enabling knowledge.

carries heavy reference to past events and developments because the European predicament of today and tomorrow, did not arise yesterday but is the result of more or less protracted developments in the past in terms of which, alone, it may be understood. If our young Europeans are to become intelligent citizens they must have a view of the present which is informed not just by the events immediately antecedent to today, but by those aspects of the whole past which have been influential in shaping us. Now shared experience and the growth of a common identity do not necessarily imply friendliness or agreement. While I would not quite discount unifying forces - artistic, philosophical and intellectual, for example - which characterise the European past, it seems to me quite clear that, fundamentally, what we have shared and had in common, what has made us what we are, is at least three centuries of conflict, rivalry and division, which, by 1945 had left our continent in ruins, prostrate before, and divided between, the two outside "super powers". To understand this it is necessary to understand the causes of conflict.

It seems to me that modern Europe is, at bottom, the result of two related things - conflict and ideas - and the conflicts arose largely because of ideas and constituted their final working out. I believe that three really fundamental ideas and their related conflicts, have been decisive in shaping contemporary Europe and the European identity. Moreover, the three conflicts are related in that they constitute a common theme - three successive attempts by particular States to win the hegemony of Europe. The three pairings, I suggest, indicate the necessary time-span and appropriate content for a course in contemporary History for our senior pupils. The three ideas are the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Nationalism: the three related conflicts are the 30 Years' War, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the second world war.

The first pairing has already been worked out, albeit in sketched form, and interested colleagues are invited to write to me about it. Space prevents more being said here and I propose to add a few words about the omissions from my scheme. The first of these is the Renaissance and my reason for omitting it is that shortage of time makes it impossible to do both Renaissance and Reformation. Of the two, the latter seems the more crucial for our purpose, as it includes most of what would need to be said if the former were covered and, in addition, draws in the essential religious element.

The second rather obvious, and therefore perhaps puzzling, omission is Marxism. My reason for this omission is that I doubt that Marxism has had a really fundamental effect on the development and shaping of Europe. This may sound an extraordinary remark. I would defend it as follows. Marx's political programme, insofar as he developed one, has never been carried out, for two of its central tenets have been utterly flouted.

First, whatever Marx meant by the "dictatorship of the proletariat" he did not mean dictatorship over the proletariat by someone else - the Party, the caucus, the dictator.

Second, Marx argued for the impossibility of the proletarian revolution except in a State which was not merely capitalist, but where capitalism was over-ripe, and collapsing from its own internal contradictions: when those conditions existed, however, the revolution was said to be inevitable. In fact not a single developed capitalist State has undergone a proletarian revolution, whereas several backward agrarian States have seemingly done so.

Developments in Russia's external policy, at least since 1917, and in Eastern Europe since 1945, are far better understood without Marxism than with it. Indeed, I suspect that, had Marx been alive in Russia in the '30's, his head might well have rolled in the Terror! I conclude, therefore, that Marxism, not having been tried, has contributed little to the shaping and development of modern Europe, and I accordingly omit it from the recommended course. This omission, I am sure, will prove controversial.

My third possibly puzzling omission is Industrialisation. However this need not detain us, for it is not omitted. Economic development has been of such fundamental importance that it could not be, but as it has been so intimately involved in national rivalries, it is dealt with under Nationalism. The Second World War is to be prefaced by a summary treatment of those rivalries and followed by a brief account of the economic arguments for European unity - notably the advantages of economies of scale. Imperialism is dealt with in the same way - that is, only insofar as imperial rivalries contributed to international tension. It thus falls naturally under Nationalism.

Concluding Questions

1. What do colleagues think of the choice of the Reformation as a starting point for contemporary History?
2. Is conflict, intellectual and military, truly "what has made us what we are"?
3. If so, have I chosen the right conflicts?
4. What do colleagues think of my omissions, particularly of Marxism?
5. Finally, how far do colleagues agree with the argument used to justify a historical frame of reference for Europe's school leavers?

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