

W H Y T H E O R Y ?

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"Good sensible fellows who detest theory of any kind", that is how Samuel Butler would call my students and, I fear, nearly all history teachers too. Does this sentence, from his "The Way of all Flesh" (1903), apply to history didacticians too? For the moment I leave this burning question unanswered. But I am quite sure that in our midst history didactics is everywhere a very pragmatic business. Perhaps the answer depends a little on what we understand by 'theory'.

To return to my students, they are certainly not quite clear on what they mean by 'theory'. For them anyhow theory is every item they cannot use at once, that is to say in tomorrows lesson or perhaps next weeks lesson, within their teaching practice period therefore. The last week of my course is always a little bit difficult, because there is no longer a direct connection with school, all practice periods having ended by then. Although they are principally interested in practical subjects, in 'methods', they do not like practical methods or projects which require much bother or design. Practice must be simple or else it is theory. They do not like to become acquainted with the fundamental educational decisions which must govern important procedures in school, for instance keeping order or marking. Practice must be quick, intuitive and improvised; considerations are theory.

For them theory is also everything that is detailed and analytical or seems to be a purely conceptual argumentation. They do not proceed beyond a rough survey. Schoolbooks are good or bad, usable or unusable; they want to be explicitly told which textbooks are really good, but they do not take the trouble to analyse them carefully. 'Theory' includes also everything they cannot do themselves, as a didactic and practical exercise during the course. These items are extremely popular, one can hardly propose enough of them (in itself a good thing of course). But they are much less inclined to listen to a Lecture however short and interesting it may be. They tell you quite honestly that it was very clever and important, but that they would have preferred some more practice in the same time. I leave it to my readers to judge whether history teachers are so much different.

There are several deep lying reasons why history students and

teachers are not exactly mad about theory. We need not probe very deeply into them, but some of these reasons may be mentioned in passing. There is for instance our old historicist background that history (and history teaching) needs no justification, because our discipline is essentially human and cultural and possessed of intrinsic paedagogical and educational values, in one word, because it is selfevident. Then the hard dying superstition that good history teaching is the fruit of artistry and experience, not the product of teacher training and professional practice, and certainly not of any kind of theory. Perhaps one must also take into consideration that historians are more inclined to global than to analytical proceedings. Finally I present the argument that the subject matter of history is in itself eminently practical: it is about people doing things. The question is, do our much vaunted practice, our proved methods of history teaching, our solutions for the problems of the 'how' help us any further? Are our methodical efforts successful enough to keep history teaching going? Have they enough power to keep on a real development of historical education? Can they convince the authorities, the general public, the pupils, that history teaching is really necessary? If you see how history teaching is shrinking nearly everywhere the answer must be probably be in the negative. I risk the proposition that sticking to practice brings about just the reverse of what we all want.

A Dutch teacher, Cornelis Verhoeven, eminent essayist, winner of the most coveted Dutch literary price, the 'Prix P. C. Hooft', has used the term 'corruption by practice'. The only thing practical experience tells us is how things went and never how they ought to go. As long as things do not go wrong dramatically we may remain content with the rather dubious results which are the fruit of our educational methods and may never be altered again. I suppose that every practice which is not regularly checked on the base of general principles, is more or less 'corrupt'. This 'corruption' is one of the main explanations for the tedium which, after a number of years, say after a first teaching period of a year, creeps into teacher's lives very often. It is the feeling (which spoils the pleasure of teaching) that one does tolerably well, but not really very well; the teacher however does not know how to remodel his teaching.

Verhoeven in his treatise pleads for the necessity of 'philosophy', which in our context means the same as 'theory'. A 'philosopher' does not take the corruption by practice for granted and incurable. 'Philosophy' means "the last and most fundamental word, it is an

endeavour to keep the treatment of essential things free from corruption." In this way of thinking questions of practical use must be postponed; to let them in means to let corruption in. The 'philosopher' therefore is patient, he does not ask whether his ideas can be put into practice tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Now I do not want to blame hard working history teachers: it is very difficult to drive a car and to reconstruct it while driving. But didacticians are in a better position. They have to teach too, it is true, but what they have to teach are, at last partly (or only ideally?) ways of remodelling and reconstructing history teaching. Their work has or ought to have a 'philosophical' aspect. But looking about me, looking at the students too, a feeling steals upon me that this 'philosophy of history teaching' nowhere amounts to much, and that where it perhaps really is something the students do not see it as the foundation and the living source of their teaching practice.

In my 'International Workplan for History Teaching and History Teacher Training' (Mitteilungen/Communications, 1980, 1) I have enumerated a small number of theoretical points (par. 9): a. the problem of historical time; b. the problem of historical experience; c. the problem of historical relationships; d. the problem of historical objectives. - I added that all other questions depend on these four issues, e. g. the choice of subject matter, curriculum development, the relation with other disciplines, the relationship with society, the psychology of learning.

Perhaps there are one or two questions more which may be recapitulated under the heading 'why history?'. Of course I do not envisage the objectives of history teaching nor even the question why history must be taught in schools, but rather the more fundamental question why mankind has history at all, lives in a historical way. The solution of this question amounts to the creation of a historical anthropology in a paedagogic and didactical perspective. We need the answer for the solution of other questions, especially the choice of subject matter. We can approach the question of 'why history?' also from another angle, that is from the theory of science, in order to secure the position of history teaching. At this moment this position is not safe because history teaching is leaning heavily on traditional arguments which may be outlived or are dependent on political decisions which may be shortlived. What we need is a 'novus globus intellectualis' (like the one the Middle Ages had, with 'the trivium and the quadrivium') which creates a rational order among the many (ha-

phazard) disciplines in school (eliminating a few) and in which history has a firm and secure position.

The problem of historical relationship is about the question of subject matter. It is kind of historical chemistry. In chemics we ask what constitutes a certain stuff and we see that in water for instance a few atoms of hydrogen and oxygen cling together in a certain way. Now why is some person 'historical' and most others not, what elements constitute a historical 'event', what goes into a period to make it historical? Why, in school, present certain themes, units, projects? What makes it really a 'unit', that is to say subject matter with a certain consistency that marks it off from others? The answer to questions about the coherence of historical matter has something to do with the efficiency of history teaching, with objectives and evaluation, but still more with appropriate choices of subject matter, and last but not least, with the rationality of history teaching.

Profound study of historical time and historical experience is needed, because the presentation of history in and outside school goes more and more asunder. The film-goer (and t.v.-looker!) lives in a very different time perspective than the reader of a history textbook (but may actually be one and the same person).

My general conclusion is that we shall not be able to secure the position of history teaching without the elaboration of a didactical theory or even a didactical philosophy. Of practising history teachers we may not expect too much. The burden will fall on history didactics which will constitute itself as a science by answering the question of the why and the what. Of course we need not stop working on methods of history teaching, on the contrary, but we, or some of us, must turn firmly and decidedly to the more philosophical and theoretical side of our work. That means that they must spend the best of their time and exertions on it and that there must not be too few of them, not an isolated worker here or there, but rather an international group, an 'Arbeitskreis' in the framework of our Society perhaps. And may be, as we are growing into the habit of meeting regularly in congresses with special themes, an international conference on theoretical work would become quite feasible.