

Teaching on the USA

Report of a European Teachers' Seminar in Donaueschingen (October 1982)

Since 1981 the Council of Europe has organized a series of teachers' seminars on the links between Europe and other regions and cultures of the world. The first seminar in May 1981 dealt with teaching on Japan in Western European schools. A year later another was held on 'Europe and Asia'. There are plans for new seminars which are to deal with the teaching on China, Africa and Latin America. The third in this series, which I attended, was held in Donaueschingen (Federal Republic of Germany) from the 25th till the 30th of October 1982. It was a seminar on 'Teaching about the USA in secondary schools in Western Europe'. The Council of Europe organized this seminar in co-operation with the Atlantic Council of the U.S. and the U.S. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). About sixty participants attended this teachers' seminar, which made it the most voluminous the Council of Europe ever organized. Not considering the delegation from the United States (thirteen participants), the delegation from the Federal Republic of Germany was comparatively large (some sixteen members). Other Western European countries were surprisingly not represented at all, such as France, the Netherlands (I only happened to be there as an observer for our International Society for History Didactics and not as a representative of my country) and Switzerland. The large majority of the participants was formed by teachers of English, geography, history and Social Studies. The working language was English.

The seminar had three aims:

- to identify what is taught about the USA in secondary schools in a representative cross-section of countries in Western Europe;
- to indicate teaching approaches, which would take account of the diversity of educational systems in Western Europe;
- to make proposals for the contents of a foundation course on the USA for use in secondary schools in Western Europe.

During the week most of the time was spent on the second and third aim.

The programme of the seminar consisted of lectures and discussions in plenary session and - mostly - of discussion in working groups. As a starting point the lecture by Mr. Michael Kammen, professor of the US history and culture at the Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, was interesting and stimulating. Mr. Kammen not only dealt with 'the US scene and mood today' (e.g. pluralism, ethnic diversity, social change, problems of value), he also tackled 'the problem of integration of knowledge'. The mass of knowledge, acquired during the last fifteen years by many sciences, confronts teachers with problems. As an example Mr. Kammen pointed at the results of what he called 'the new social history'. Apart from the so-called 'manifest events'

(wars, elections, events contemporaries know of) this science 'produces' so-called 'latent events' (e.g. changes in sexuality, history of birthcontrol). The problem for the teacher is: how to integrate these events in education? Mr. Kammen also pointed at 'new directions of the social sciences in the USA'. In this context it is worth while for historians as well as didacticians to mention a book Michael Kammen edited for the American Historical Association in 1980: 'The past before us. Contemporary historical writing in the United States' (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London). This work also beholds a contribution by Hazel Whitman Hertzberg on 'The teaching of history'.

Another lecture was held by Mr. Leonard Marks, secretary-treasurer of the World Press Freedom Committee and former member of the Federal Communications Commission in the USA. Mr. Marks spoke about the abundance of information from the mass-media in the USA. He also pointed at abusing of the media such as by politicians and protest-movements: 'events are staged for television', he warned. One of his conclusions was, that teachers are confronted with the challenge to handle the technology of and the information from the mass-media in education.

In other plenary sessions, for example, two panel-discussions were held: one on approaches to teaching about the USA in secondary schools in Western Europe, and another on 'perspectives on the USA'. The first was led by three European teachers who told about their experiences with the subject in the classroom. The latter was led by four American representatives.

Most of the time of the seminar was spent on discussions in the working groups. Four groups were formed. They were asked to:

- share their experience in teaching about the USA;
- suggest, based on this experience, strategies (single-subject or interdisciplinary) for teaching about the USA;
- make proposals for the contents of a foundation course on teaching about the USA.

First of all each of the working groups produced a 'catalogue' of themes/topics (e.g. 'the American Dream', 'ethnic diversity' or 'cultural pluralism', 'foreign policy' or 'position in the world'), which could be suitable contents for an foundation course consisting of subjects such as English, geography, history and Social Studies. In this sense the seminar was 'more productive than others', as Mr. Maitland Stobart, head of the School Education Division of the Council of Europe, put it in his conclusions at the end of the week. Any member of our International Society for History Didactics who is interested in more detailed results of the working groups (there are some 26 pages with reports), can write to me, so I can send a copy of the reports.

Besides an amount of themes, each group pointed out several problems in

relation with the foundation course one was planning. Two problems, which were felt as important, were:

- any foundation course would have to be flexible, allowing for restrictions such as different school-systems in the different countries, not much time in the time-table, the problem of the resources, the age of the students etc. The programme-proposals had therefore an open-end and lacked a precise structure.
- it was felt highly desirable to have a large variety of appropriate material available for the teacher. The organizing institutions were asked to look for possibilities to make materials available, e.g. by ways of U.S. Embassies or the forming of information/documentation centres in Western Europe.

The organizing institutions of the seminar have plans for a follow-up seminar in the USA in 1984, where the contents of the foundation course will be defined in detail. After this the outcome will be tested at teachers' courses and sent to educational authorities in Western Europe. I'm looking forward to the results of this follow-up.

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Lesefrucht:

„Es gibt kaum etwas Verhängnisvolleres für die Geschichtsschreibung als nationale Abschließung, die fast notwendig zum Provinzialismus der Fragestellungen, Methoden und zur engen Begrenzung der behandelten Gegenstände führt.“

Gerhard A. Ritter am 7. November 1981 in Münster anlässlich der Preisverleihung an Gordon A. Craig

Statt "Geschichtsschreibung" kann man hier auch "Geschichtsdidaktik" sagen.