

THE TEACHING OF HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN ENGLISH EDUCATION
(lecture to conference of social science teachers at Debrecen, Hungary,
3 July 1985 by Martin Booth, University of Cambridge, Department of
Education)

I want this morning to focus my talk fairly tightly on history in English education rather than looking at the social sciences in general.

The reasons for this are twofold. In England in the majority of secondary schools, the subjects which are covered by the term social sciences are usually taught as separate disciplines in the majority of schools. In junior and middle schools, that is with the 7 to 13 age group, there may be some amalgamation of subjects: for example, they may run courses termed environmental studies or simply humanities in which a number of disciplines will contribute to the teaching of a particular topic; but for the majority of secondary schools, as a recent survey has shown, single discipline teaching still holds sway. There's no time to go into the reasons for this. It's partly an historical question. The separate disciplines established themselves firmly in the 19th century in the universities and this has a profound effect on the school curriculum. But it's partly also due to the fact that it's often been found that many of these combined, integrated courses have not been very successful. They've lacked focus and a clear rationale.

Secondly, history is now conceived in a very wide sense. Pupils do study social systems; they do look at political structures and examine political and economic processes; they are concerned with trying to understanding the motives of and interactions between groups and individuals. They make use of a wide range of sources, a wide range of techniques, including the use of statistics and computers to handle datas. As the British social historian G.M. Trevelyan said: 'History is a house where many subjects meet' and this is indeed how history is approached in most schools.

There is a third point that I want to make. You must remember that in England the education system is decentralized: the responsibility for the curriculum rests with each local authority, for the example the county councils. So we have no central, uniform curriculum and teachers have a good deal of autonomy to teach as they want in the classroom, though there will be an agreed school syllabus. There are moves to bring in greater uniformity - and I shall have more to say about that later in my talk; but at the moment it is difficult to generalize.

May I start in a direct and practical manner by describing to you a history lesson I was involved with last summer. It sums up much of what is going in history education in England.

The lesson took the form of an expedition to Burwell village some eight miles from the city of Cambridge. It lies on the edge of the Fens and its interest for us was in the deserted village which is to the west of the present buildings. In 1143, Geoffrey de Mandeville, one of the great lords of England, fell from power and rebelled against King Stephen. Establishing himself on the Isle of Ely, he attacked the surrounding country. In an attempt to contain him, Stephen ordered a chain of castles to be built along the edge of the Fens. The castle at Burwell, whose remains are clearly visible, was never completed. In the process of its construction, a number of the villagers' huts had to be pulled down and built over. Why was the castle sited in this position? What were the reactions of the villagers? And why was it that the building was so abruptly stopped?

We spent the morning closely examining the site. We traced the foundations of the huts that were spared, measuring the size of the rooms and the crofts. We walked along what was once the main street and inspected the fish ponds. Then with the help of an aerial photograph and a site plan we tried to identify various parts of the castle - the moat dug, the mound for the keep and ramparts raised

but little else done. In the afternoon we learned the truth: even while the castle was being built, Geoffrey de Mandeville had been killed in battle. The need for a castle at Burwell died with him. But what of the villagers? How had they reacted to the affair? Did their loyalties lie with Stephen or de Mandeville? And what of the building of the castle with the destruction of huts that it caused? Using the site we attempted to recreate some of the tensions and drama of the time. The pupils were divided into family groups with names and occupations. They established their identities and homes on the sites of the old village. The authority figures of reeve, priest and lord of the manor intervened with demands, not least that of building the castle for the king. Geoffrey de Mandevillé also appeared with attempts to curry support. The day ended with a fierce encounter between the king's and de Mandeville's troops on the ramparts of the half finished castle.

I daresay the balmy weather and the attractiveness of the site, poised as it is on the edge of the vast 'nothing' landscape with the stump of Ely's octogan tower in the distance, helped to make the day a success. But the combination of evidence - both pictorial, map and site - and active pupil participation through site work, analysis of documents and role play combined to produce some genuine, speculative historical thinking. These processes were not of a kind which could be classified in neat Piagetian terms. In a way, they were too chaotic and uneven - the sudden flash of understanding, the reversion to anachronism, the more carefully reasoned response. But the situation was open-ended enough for all of these: it helped to produce in the pupils both an understanding of the continuity of the past with the present and the common bond of humanity, as well as a realization of the fragmentary, uncertain nature of the evidence on which our understanding of the past is based.

I chose this example for a number of reasons. It shows first how broadly history is now being conceived - that the subject covers a whole range of disciplines. Our lesson at Burwell took in geography

(the site position); sociology (the social structure of medieval England); economic factors; political systems. We dealt too with a wide range of evidence - landscape, site, maps, photographs, descriptions: and the emphasis of the day was on active pupil enquiry and the processes of the historian rather than just his products - the knowledge he creates. The small group work also underlines the belief in the value of cooperative learning. Finally the Burwell lesson illustrates the widespread view of teachers of social science subjects that pupils understanding of difficult, abstract concepts can often best be achieved through the use of tangible and visible evidence and through role play - what Jerome Bruner would call the iconic and enactive modes of representation. I think it would be fair to say that these emphases, this theory of learning, is typical of the best of history and social science teaching in England today.

What a contrast with the position in England at the turn of the century! Then the emphasis was on the rote learning of a chronological survey of British history, concentrating on the activities of the top brass, the kings and queens, the prime ministers and ministers, the generals and admirals. The aim was quite clear: to inculcate pride and respects for British institutions and for the British empire in the hearts and minds of pupils. The information was to be learned, not questioned; few had any doubts about its value.

What factors then undermined these didactic, nationalist aims? First, simple patriotism and nationalism became increasingly suspect during the course of the century. As Edith Cavell, the famous British nurse who helped allied soldiers to escape from occupied Belgium during the First World War, said: Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred in my heart: and as the effects of blind nationalism have been experienced so the nationalist viewpoint has been questioned as the basis for the history syllabus. Besides, our empire today is all but gone and Britain has to take her place as one amongst many independent

nations. We can no longer afford to preach the glories of a past system.

Another factor which of course has affected our approach to the teaching of history has been the work of the psychologists and educationists. Throughout the century there has been increasing emphasis on the need for pupil activity if learning is to be effective and one sees this reflected in the writing on the teaching of history. Of key importance here has been the work of Jerome Bruner and Benjamin Bloom. The former, in his book The Process of Education (1960) stressed the need to make pupils aware of the peculiar structure of the subject they study; the latter in his two Taxonomies of Educational Objectives (1956, 1964) brought out the need to plan the subjects of the curriculum in terms of a hierarchy of thinking and feeling objectives and that we must not be obsessed with content and coverage alone.

The work of Bruner and Bloom led to the publication in 1971 of Coltham and Fines' Educational Objectives for the Study of History (London: Historical Association). This significant and influential pamphlet provides both a definition of the structure of history - that is, its unique features - and then lists the specific objectives which should underwrite the history syllabus if understanding of the structure is to be realized.

All this gave much a needed boost to the morale of history teachers: the initiatives of Bruner, Bloom, Coltham and Fines seemed to be ways of meeting the criticism that history was increasingly coming under in the 1950s and 60s. Remember that 1957 had seen the launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union: educationists reacted by emphasising the need for increased expenditure on science and technology education. Inevitably people were asking: what use is history? The old imperial and nationalist values are out: what rationale have history teachers got to replace the old aims? Well, it seemed as though Coltham and

Fines, following the lead of Bruner and Bloom, had provided the answer. All history teachers had to do was to define the structure of the subject and then translate this into specific classroom objectives and the subject would be reshaped in a way which would at once prove attractive to pupils and develop in them lively and enquiring minds of value to society.

The hallmark therefore of History teaching in the 1970s was its emphasis on four things. First, it was concerned with inducting pupils into the nature or structure of historical knowledge, to confront pupils with the question 'What is History?' Secondly, pupils were being introduced to a wide range of source materials ranging from written documents of all kinds to pictures, artefacts, landscape, buildings, oral evidence and so on. Thirdly, pupils were being given the opportunity to get to grips with the key historical concepts of change and continuity, cause and consequence, similarity and difference. Fourthly, the emphasis of the teaching was on pupil centred activity.

These emphases were summed up in two national curriculum projects of the early 1970s. The first is based on the integration of History, Geography and Sociology and is entitled Time, Place and Society. It is designed for pupils aged from 8 to 13. The project is concerned in the first instance with process rather than product. It provides a framework of objectives both general to the three subjects and particular to each and a list of seven key concepts (for example, cause and consequence) which will help the teacher both to select content and to organize its teaching. There are some support materials which the project team has published but basically the philosophy is that schools must develop their own syllabuses within the framework provided.

The other project focusses on History alone and is designed for the 13 to 16 age range. It is also closely linked to the national system

of examining at sixteen plus. Its approach is firmly based on the notion of teaching the structure of history rather than simply its content and a belief that the adolescent has certain needs which history can fulfil - for example, the need to understand something about the locality in which he lives. But the project spells out in detail the syllabus content. Pupils will study a long period of History - medicine from the earliest times to the present - in order to gain some understanding of the concept of change and continuity; they will investigate a short period of time in depth - for example, Elizabethan England - so as to appreciate the motives and viewpoints of people on the past; they must look at a modern world topic - for example, the Middle East in the 20th century; and they must engage in fieldwork on an aspect of the history of their locality.

Anmerkung des Herausgebers: Die hier wiedergegebenen Ausführungen von Herrn Kollegen Booth, Cambridge, stehen in einem inhaltlichen Zusammenhang mit den Mitteilungen und Literaturangaben von Herrn Kollegen Hannam, Bristol, über die Geschichtsdidaktik in Großbritannien. Nachdem es entgegen den Planungen nicht gelungen war, Großbritannien in der Internationalen Bibliographie mit einem eigenen Länderartikel zu berücksichtigen, leisten beide Autoren einen Beitrag zur Schließung dieser Lücke.

Der Vortrag von Herrn Booth wurde während einer internationalen Konferenz in Debrecen, Ungarn, gehalten. Er sollte zusammen mit anderen Beiträgen von dieser Konferenz veröffentlicht werden, was aber den Umfang dieses Heftes gesprengt hätte, da mehrere aktuelle Anliegen zu berücksichtigen waren. In Heft 2'86 dieser "Mitteilungen" folgt von dieser Konferenz in Ungarn ein Vortrag von Herrn Kollegen Szabolcs, Budapest, über "Die Fragen unserer Zeit im heutigen Geschichtsunterricht". - Der Herausgeber hat während dieser Konferenz gesprochen über "Historisch-politische Bildung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland". Dieser Vortrag wird auf Ungarisch erscheinen.

Note a number of points about both these projects. First, they are clearly both based on the notion of identifying the structure of subjects and stating specific objectives if effective teaching is to take place. Content is something which follows. Secondly, both curriculum projects demand high levels of thinking and understanding; but the assumption is that pupils of a wide range of ability and age can engage in such activity provided that the right approach is used. Thirdly, though I have referred to these as national projects they are not in fact mandatory. It's hard to say how many schools have taken up the Time, Place and Society curriculum; undoubtedly a good many middle schools have been influenced by its approach. With the 13 - 16 History Project currently something over 20 per cent of schools in England are following the full project.

We are however moving into a situation of greater central control of the curriculum by the government. Since 1976 when the socialist Prime minister Mr. Callaghan in a much publicised speech raised the whole issue of standards in schools we have been inundated with a documents coming from the centre urging us to reconsider the school curriculum in the light of certain principles. What skills, concepts and attitudes does it foster? What 'areas of experience' does it cover? But what we are finding is that exhortation is increasingly changing to command. For example, for History the government published this year a set of National Criteria which attempt to sum up the current thinking about History by stressing the need to get pupils to examine the nature of historical knowledge, to use source materials of all kinds and to develop an understanding of key concepts such as change and continuity. The national criteria also indicate the kinds of assessment techniques most appropriate for measuring the assessment objectives and stipulate that at least 20 per cent of such assessment must be based on some form of course work. From now on all History courses for 14- to 16- yearolds which are to be publicly examined will have to conform to these criteria.

But what of content? The national criteria make it quite clear, that it will not prescribe this. Provided the aims and objectives of the syllabus conform to the criteria and that the content is of sufficient depth, width and coherence and deals with key issues, then that syllabus will be acceptable.

The other thing that is currently happening is that assessment is moving over to criterion referencing. That is, we are trying to establish the essential or key elements which go to make up the learning of history and then to determine the levels of mastery which sixteen-year-olds can be expected to show in each of these elements. What the government would eventually like to see is this exercise extended to cover the period of compulsory schooling for 5 to 16. We would then have a series of bench marks, or levels of competency, against which we could compare the performance of any child at any age.

So we are moving towards national consensus on the skills and concepts we should be teaching and the levels of attainment we should be aiming for. Is there then no agreement on content? Increasingly, the answer must be yes. There is now broad agreement that all syllabuses should have a world dimension to reflect the globally interdependent position of Britain today; and following from this our history syllabuses must take account of the fact that Britain is a multicultural society. Syllabuses must help pupils to appreciate and understand the cultures of other societies and the contributions that ethnic minorities have made and still make to our society. Syllabuses too should deal with the development of the technological world and the social and moral effects of such developments. They must also consider the place and part of women in society both in the past and today. Equality between the sexes is now enshrined in legislation and yet many of our text books give the impression that it is only men who have played any part in History. Above all, our History teaching must be committed to the notion of an open society where the possibility of choice

whether in politics or in society in general has always existed and has always been strenuously defended.

Now these issues, this content, takes us quite clearly beyond the realm of history as traditionally defined. To deal adequately with them, our teaching will have to take in a whole range of subjects which together might more realistically be termed the social sciences. This implies a move towards greater integration in schools, something I would not be adverse to provided the rationale for such a scheme is properly thought through and the particular contribution of history maintained.

Many of us feel that broad consensus on these issues and adherence to the frameworks of criteria that have been established could strengthen the position of history in the curriculum and yet still give the classroom teacher the latitude to develop his or her own particular interests and strengths within the context of this overall scheme. Three things however are making the position of History - and indeed the social sciences in general - very difficult in England. First, we are suffering from falling roles in secondary schools, which in its turn is leading to a cut back in teacher training. We have therefore less young people going into teaching bringing with them new enthusiasms and ideas, and fewer training institutions offering much needed inservice training. Secondly, the economic crisis has led to less resources being made available for the materials and fieldwork which the new approaches demand. Finally, and perhaps most seriously, there is an increasing emphasis in schools on courses of vocational training and the need to prepare pupils for the economic needs of Britain. In such a climate it is hard to persuade parents, employers and pupils of the value of History. What we are doing is to assert the value of the particular skills that History and the social sciences can impart - skills, for example of comprehension, interpretation, detection of bias, ability to synthesise - which are of immediate use to society. But perhaps more importantly we are stressing the unique

insights and understandings that History and the social sciences - and only these disciplines - can provide.

Perhaps I can leave the last word to that great Christian visionary, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose book The Phenomenon of Man is a passionate plea for the central position of history and the social sciences in our understanding, if man is to become truly man.

'For man to discover man and take his measure, a whole series of 'senses' are necessary, whose gradual acquisition . . . covers and punctuates the whole history of the struggle of the mind:

A sense of spatial immensity...

A sense of depth...

A sense of number...

A sense of proportion...

A sense of quality or of novelty...

A sense of movement...

A sense of the organic...

Without these qualities to illuminate our vision, man will remain indefinitely for us... an erratic object in a disjointed world'.