

## Cultural context and historical text

Prof. Pieter Kapp\*  
 Department of History  
 University of Stellenbosch

- *History is the form in which a culture gives an account of itself (Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga<sup>1</sup>).*
- *The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was (Czech writer, Milan Kundera<sup>2</sup>).*
- *For history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future . . . The invocation of history is indispensable to nations and groups in the process of making themselves. How else can a people establish the legitimacy of its personality, the continuity of its tradition, the correctness of its course? (American historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger<sup>3</sup>).*
- *He who fears facing his own past must necessarily fear what lies before him . . . Lying can never save us from the lie. Falsifiers of history do not safeguard freedom but imperil it . . . Truth liberates from fear (Czech President and playwright, Vaclav Havel).*

These four quotes from different genres, periods, countries and circumstances have two things in common. They all refer to the intimate link between those (usefully) vague concepts of culture and history and their equally vague but important functions and interrelatedness. For the purpose of this paper, and for that matter also in the study of history, the term culture is a usefully vague one precisely because it does not require agreement on a definitive and fixed definition. In the spirit of the above quotes the term culture is used to imply that which is not clearly and distinctly military, economic, political or social, but could encompass aspects of all these areas when it relates to forms of self-expression and identity. To avoid the traditional trappings of arguments about issues such as what or whose history, whether one should talk of history or histories, or even what someone called the carnivorous nature of the keen interest in the new cultural history (as opposed to the old *Kulturgeschichte*),<sup>4</sup> the term history is used to refer to change and continuity in human society over time. Historical consciousness refers to the way people interpret, understand, believe or accept a particular view of the significance and meaning of history for their particular situation or circumstances.

The term historical text is also intended to be a comprehensive one that includes a variety of forms of historical expression and not only scholarly and professional texts or even the texts of what is taught at school. Text refers to all expressions of a historical sense that implies a form of historical consciousness, be it a conscious or unconscious one. That would include professional history writing, popular writing, school syllabuses or text books, myths, oral representations, monuments and statues,

museums and manuscripts and various other forms of tradition and historical preservation.

Restrictions of time and space necessitate a presentation based on a number of brief statements rather than developed and elaborate arguments. The purpose of this paper is to deal with the South African situation against the background of comparable situations and developments elsewhere in the world, just to remind us that our situation is not as unique as we often think. A number of truisms about South Africa that are relevant to this discussion are:

- South Africa is a society of diverse cultures and histories which must find a way of establishing and developing forms of understanding, loyalty, acceptance and tolerance.
- Everything, including history and culture, in South Africa must be geared towards building a South African nation. For this purpose South Africa must develop a common culture and a shared view of its common history.
- The past must be “set behind us”, “forgotten”, “healed”, “buried”, “invoked to prevent us from repeating mistakes of the past”, etc.
- South Africa does not have a common historical heritage and its history of conflict and discrimination is one of the strongest divisive factors that is invoked to support directly opposing claims.

Against this background the role of history as a cultural expression must be considered. This paper would argue the following propositions:

- That history as a form of cultural expression must deal with the issue of identity, which is an important element of historical consciousness.
- That history cannot serve as a nation-building device but that it can play an important role in developing the climate or mentality which is a prerequisite for nation-building instruments to be accepted, be utilised and be productive.
- That in the dynamic process of the interaction of culture, communication and development, history is not “on the side of” anyone<sup>5</sup> but has functions in its own right and according to its own nature.
- That intellectual confrontation, dialogue, communication, mutual respect and understanding are the essentials for developing a mature historical consciousness that will not be confined to a few but will become part of people’s (unconscious) historical consciousness. For this purpose history should not be buried nor mobilised. History cannot heal but it can promote maturity. We do not need less but more history. We will not achieve this by de- or reconstruction but by positive engagement and accommodation.

## 1. History, culture and identity

The contemporary reaction in historiography against “scientism” in history<sup>6</sup> and the revived interest in history as narrative<sup>7</sup> and in culture<sup>8</sup> and identity as issues of real concern for history (and other disciplines in the humanities<sup>9</sup>) has led to a new emphasis on and discussion of the role of identity and culture in history. Contradictory as it may sound, the buzz word of our time, “globalisation”, is accompanied by an exacerbation of civilizational, societal and ethnic self-consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Globalisation has covertly produced cultural differences rather than effacing them. Buell observes: “Tighter integration has thus paradoxically meant, and continues to mean,

proliferation of asserted differences. And a Janus-faced era has thereby been produced, one in which new nationalisms and ethnic fundamentalisms - ones that conceal their global sources - have sprung up side by side with a widespread movement dedicated to demystifying the ideology of national culture and foregrounding the international and intercultural relationships which it has in fact erected itself.<sup>11</sup> One of the recurring themes in Buell's book is the way in which old forms and codes have survived in cultural systems despite, among, and also in the newer systems.

The resurgent interest in identity - local, national and continental - is characteristic of the integration process in the European Union<sup>12</sup> and has stimulated great interest in e.g. the development of an equilibrium in the teaching of local, national and European history, the elimination of bias and intolerance in history teaching and text books and the promotion of mutual understanding, recognition and acceptance.<sup>13</sup> The American debate is almost the opposite of the European one. The insistence on multiculturalism in education has been labelled the "resegregation, and tribalization of American life" by opponents who view it as a "counterrevolution against the original theory of America as "one people', a common culture, a single nation."<sup>14</sup>

Questions of identity move to the front burner in times of social and political change, particularly so in a heterogenous society with deep cleavages such as South Africa. Identity and ethnicity are often regarded as interchangeable terms, which they are not. An ethnic group is any group of people who set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups with whom they interact or coexist in terms of some distinctive criterion or criteria which may be linguistic, racial or cultural.<sup>15</sup> Ethnicity is of special importance for an individual's sense of identity, and societies and people may suffer identity crises if they lose hold of their history or roots. But identity is a more complex phenomenon. People seldom have one identity. The more highly developed a society or country is, the more intricate the web of identities in which individuals can operate. These different forms or expressions of identity do not represent concentric circles as is sometimes suggested<sup>16</sup> or a simple hierarchical pattern, but a rather bewildering interlocking of loyalties and accommodation.

In this intricate process history in its variety of forms - be it as oral tradition, legends, myths, monuments and museums, school history teaching or professional histories - plays an important contributory role in shaping four basic elements of human society:

- Identity-formation in dealing with questions such as allegiance to people, group, place and social position. Identities do not exist outside of the conditions of their making. Rather, they are socially created in specific historical circumstances, though that may be reified and perpetuated through all kinds of mobilisation, organisation and stimulation. Identity is never final and fixed since it interacts with all other social, economic and political actors that can be present at any given time. Dominating majorities have their own identity but will most likely underplay it or express it in ways that are not immediately recognisable as identity manifestation.
- Legitimation of rights and interests on the grounds both of a claim to conserve what has been traditionally theirs or to demand what they have been excluded from. The use of history to mobilise people for a particular course is an integral part of all societies, civilizations, states and periods.

- State and political allegiances and education for citizenship are often regarded as natural co-travellers of history. Governments often demand the right to play a determining role in what history is taught at state schools and how history is presented in state-aided institutions. They regard it as an important task of history to create and develop a national identity which should be supportive of, or at least in harmony with, government aims and ideals. That is why the teaching of history is often a sensitive political issue. People with specific political affiliations also often base their criticism of a system or a government on a particular view of history.<sup>17</sup>

But there is also the important role of history outside the arena of political action. The significance of history for political education and for educated citizenship has always been strongly emphasised in democratic societies. It is also claimed as the most important reason why history should be included in the school curriculum. "Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been, what its core values are, or what decisions of the past account for present circumstances. Without history, we cannot undertake any sensible inquiry into the political, social, or moral issues in society. And without historical knowledge and inquiry, we cannot achieve the informed, discriminating citizenship essential to effective participation in the democratic processes of governance and the fulfilment for all our citizens of the nation's democratic ideals."<sup>18</sup>

- Developing life skills and orientation, or in the words of the famous Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, educating and equipping people for life, because history is occupied with life itself from its most minuscule individualist form to its most all-embracing holistic comprehension.<sup>19</sup> What is true for individuals in their encounter with history is true for the cultural, political or social grouping: the quality and scope of your historical knowledge and understanding is dependent on the state of your own level of development. Huizinga applies this more emphatically to the inherent qualities and dynamics of a culture: "Elke echte cultuur schrijft historie 'naar haar beste weten'. Is dat weten klein en onkritisch, dan zal ook de historie gebrekkig zijn. Maar toch zal die vage voorstelling van vroeger leven zulk een tijd dienen als historie, tot sterking van de cultuur zij zal een levens- en een waarheidsbehoefte bevredigen."<sup>20</sup> [Each genuine culture writes its history to the best of its ability. If that ability is limited and uncritical, then its history will be deficient. But even that vague presentation of its history will for some time serve as its history, influencing and strengthening its culture and fulfilling its need for a world and life view]. The relationship of the individual to his or her culture/society is a mutual one: the quality of the individual's historical understanding determines the richness and depth of the culture's/society's historical knowledge, insight and understanding. Vice versa, the richness and depth of scope of the culture advances the individual to higher levels of historical consciousness.

## 2. The role of historical consciousness

History is part and parcel of each and every culture and society whether they are aware of it or not, whether they accept or reject it, and whether they rebel against it or conform to it. As a collective memory history acts as a conscious or unconscious influence on the decisions of individuals as well as on the collective actions of the

great social forces that move in history - nations, states, cultures, classes, estates. Precisely how individual and social decision-making interact is a problem that is still being debated by historians and social scientists. But from what has been said in the previous section, historic experience has a formative influence on and clearly affects the mentality of groups. Such experiences can give rise to conflicting attitudes or lead to lasting antagonisms.

Historical scholarship in South Africa is strongly polarised along academic lines with strong ideological and political undertones. There is no definitive indication of a converging of views or a maturing of consciousness similar to that in Europe. It is perhaps even more likely that in the immediate future views and interpretations will diverge even more. The politicising of history in South Africa is likely to increase before real improvement sets in. A lot will depend on the working and outcome of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which could very well produce the opposite of what it is intended and expected to do. It could sharpen historical divisions, promote the political mobilisation of the past and retard the development of a mature and balanced historical consciousness.

Although there are important and meaningful differences between scholarly knowledge of the past and popular or even mythical beliefs and interpretations, there is very little difference in their social function.<sup>21</sup> This raises two important questions about the nature and role of historical consciousness: is historical knowledge nothing more than a mirroring of the ideas and beliefs of social groups, and does it have no other purpose than to help these groups establish their own social, cultural and political identity by providing them with their appropriate history? Or, conversely, is it the function of historical inquiry to call pre-rationally formed social and political identities into question and thus make changes in consciousness and institutions possible?

Before attempting to address these questions in the light of the South African cultural context and the different historical texts of the South African past, it is necessary to outline the basic constituents of a developed, refined, genuine and mature historical consciousness. For this purpose I utilise Arnold Gehlen's definition of historical consciousness of the ideal type: the ability to see events that are happening now with the eyes of future generations.<sup>22</sup> Historical consciousness is thus more than the professional historian's preoccupation with what happened in the past and has become history. It implies the wisdom and the ability to rise above people, events and circumstances to take a larger view of tendencies of long duration.

I would suggest the following as the most important constituent elements of historical consciousness:

- Unlocking the nature and meaning of identity in its complex and overlapping structure and ever-changing nature referred to above.<sup>23</sup>
- Utilising this established identity as an important element in providing orientation in the present and for the future.<sup>24</sup> As such it is a crucial element in the intellectual make-up of any advanced culture.<sup>25</sup>
- Creating conditions of communication to show opposing social and political groups the way toward pragmatic compromises and peaceful resolution of conflict.<sup>26</sup> This implies clarifying the self-understanding of social groups as active agents.

- Increasing rationality in the critical functions of history to check on the creation of historical meaning.<sup>27</sup>
- Developing perspectives that will enable one to rise above naïve empiricism or total relativism or scepticism.<sup>28</sup> Despite the efforts of futurologists we have only a vague knowledge of what the future holds. Only history - the past revealed to us via the meaningful perspectives the historian has applied to it - can offer us a foothold for intellectually stepping outside the present and for freeing ourselves from the tendencies immediately at work in the socio-economic systems of our present-day world. Deprived of historical reflection “open societies” run the danger of surrendering to supposedly objective and apparently inevitable developments that would ultimately lead to control of everyone’s daily life.<sup>29</sup> They then become increasingly unable to conceive the manifold human possibilities that are still open to them.<sup>30</sup> If open societies will continue to draw on historical thought, it can help them, in the light of their own historical heritage and identity, to remain conscious of their human potential.
- A refined historical consciousness also means that we are able to see our past the way it is, neither idealizing it nor condemning it, but accepting it in all its glory and misery as part and parcel of our existence.
- It is also important to mention the possible negative consequences of a neglected or an absent historical consciousness. If historical consciousness is shoved aside or neglected in educational planning, it will not simply die out. It will flourish in an unhealthy way and create its own special world in which legends will thrive and historical truth will be distorted by false pictures of the past.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. The South African past

South Africans have a shared past but not a common history. Nor do they have a common culture. Or perhaps one should apply Diane Ravitch’s description of the American situation to South Africa: South Africa’s common culture is multiculturalism. It is unnecessary to repeat the number of references and commitments to the cultural, linguistic, religious and group diversity of the “rainbow nation” by the present government. It is a commitment that still hovers between promise and peril. There are a number of encouraging developments but also a number of warning lights flashing. It is not the purpose of this paper to deal with these wider cultural issues.

I will restrict myself to history’s role.

- The most encouraging sign is the acceptance of the need to fill in the details of South Africa’s past and to ensure that the picture of the past is as complete and representative of genuine historical developments as is possible. This will need time, resources and sustainable research. It is a worrying fact that research in the human sciences seems to be geared overwhelmingly to applied social sciences and very little to the cultural and historical disciplines.
- The strong disagreements on the nature, meaning and content of what constitutes South African history will not be softened through political or bureaucratic decisions and actions. What is needed is communication, understanding and dialogue. This needs to be conducted in a more planned and systematic way, involving all meaningful role-players.

- This dialogue can only be fruitful if it is conducted in a non-political environment as an ongoing process recognising the legitimacy of each and every group's right to its particular history. Trust and understanding must be the key words in setting this process in motion.
- Too high expectations in the short term will be a recipe for failure. Finding the right strategy and rhythm will be of critical importance. Identifying the "team" to develop this process is of the utmost importance.
- This process could be overburdened if it is assigned tasks that are beyond the scope and responsibilities of history. It is not the task of history to heal wounds, to build a nation or to promote peace. These things are political issues to be solved by political processes. But history can make a much more basic contribution to the fundamentals that must be in place before there can even be a thought of achieving these high-sounding ideals: history must assist in and be assisted to develop a refined, mature and enduring historical consciousness. This is not the work of a public relations campaign, or a conference, or a programme. It is a process that must be set in motion and the stakeholders in the process must accept that it will be a long and energy-consuming one.

## Summary

What is the importance of history for different people? As it is the case with most explanations in the historical discipline, the answer is not simple. Despite the difficulties, the author gives a global explanation of the idea of historical consciousness and its meaning in the South African situation in comparison with developments elsewhere in the world.

He reflects on the role of identity and culture in history and their impact on human society. Two basic questions about the nature and role of historical consciousness are put: is historical knowledge a mirroring of the ideas of social groups to help them establish their own identity or does it instead call into question pre-rationally formed identities? In his broader definition the author suggests to take a view of tendencies of long duration instead of concentrating exclusively on people and events.

South Africans lack a common history and a common culture, although they have a shared past. This creates specific challenges for the role of history in society.

## References

\* First published in "Yesterday and today. Journal for history teaching" nr. 34 (oct. 1997) 4-9. With thanks to the author and editor.

<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga: *Over een definitie van het begrip Geschiedenis; De Wetenschap der Geschiedenis*. Both essays in *Verzamelde Werken* vol VII, pp. 102 and 165. (H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, Haarlem, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger: *The Disuniting of America*, p. 48. (W.W. Norton, New York, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Remark by Laurie Nussdorfer of Wesleyan University in *History and Theory* vol 32/1, 1993, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> André Odendaal: "History is on our side". Paper 46, *Social and Economic Studies*, University of the Western Cape, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> G.R. Elton: *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study*. (Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1991).

- <sup>7</sup> F. R. Ankersmit : *De Navel van de Geschiedenis*, pp. 23-30 and 47-77. (Historische Uitgeverij, Groningen, 1990); Jorn Rüsen: *Lebendige Geschichte. Grundzüge einer Historik III: Formen und Funktionen des historischen Wissens*. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht , Göttingen, 1989).
- <sup>8</sup> Lynn Hunt (ed.): *The New Cultural History*. (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989); Joan H. Pittock and Andrew Wear (eds): *Interpretation and Cultural History*. (St Martin's Press, New York, 1991).
- <sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Krejci and Vitezlav Velimsky: *Ethnic and Political Nations in Europe* (Croom Helm, New York, 1989); M. Chapman, N. McDonald, E. Tonkin: *History and Ethnicity* (Routledge, London, 1989); A.P. Cohen: *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (Manchester UP, Manchester, 1986).
- <sup>10</sup> Roland Robertson: Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the problem of Globality, in Anthony D. King (ed): *Culture Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Department of Art and Art History, State University of New York, Binghamton, 1991).
- <sup>11</sup> Frederick Buell: *National Culture and the New Global System*, p. 9 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> The Council of Europe initiated a project in History Teaching in the New Europe in 1991. A number of conferences and symposia have since been held all over Europe. *The Vienna Declaration* of the 32 heads of government that participated in the Vienna Summit of October 9, 1993 *on their commitment to promoting tolerance and understanding in Europe* called on history teaching in particular to make a major contribution in this regard. As part of this process a European Charter for History Teaching will be submitted and discussed in 1997.
- <sup>13</sup> See in this regard the project "Europe and the Text Book" started in 1989 by Dr Göran Behre and Dr Ola Lindqvist of the University of Göteborg Sweden and the work done by the Georg-Eckert-Institut für Internationale Schulbuchforschung in Braunschweig.
- <sup>14</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger: Op.cit., pp. 18 and 43.
- <sup>15</sup> C. Seymour Smith: *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*. (Macmillan, London, 1986).
- <sup>16</sup> Sharon Macdonald: *Inside European Identities*, p. 9. (Berg Publishers, Oxford, 1993).
- <sup>17</sup> See in this regard the special editions of *History and Theory*, Beiheft 17, 1978 on Historical Consciousness and Political Action for examples from European history.
- <sup>18</sup> *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience*. (National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1995).
- <sup>19</sup> J. Huizinga: *De Wetenschap der Geschiedenis*, p. 104. (Verzamelde Werken, vol VII).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 162.
- <sup>21</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen: Social Conditioning and Social Relevance of Historical Judgements. (*History and Theory*, Beiheft 17/1978, p. 32).
- <sup>22</sup> Arnold Gehlen: *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, p.258. (Bonn, 1956).
- <sup>23</sup> Jörn Rüsen: *Studies in Metahistory* , p. 75. (HSRC, Pretoria, 1993).
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 164.
- <sup>25</sup> R. Elze and K. Repgen (eds): *Studienbuch Geschichte*, p. 4. (Stuttgart, 1976).
- <sup>26</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen: Op.cit., p. 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Jörn Rüsen: Op.cit., p. 236.
- <sup>28</sup> Andrew Beard: Reversing Historical Skepticism: Bernard Lonergan on the writing of history. *History and Theory* 33/2/1994, pp. 198-219.
- <sup>29</sup> Wolfgang J. Mommsen: Op.cit., p. 35.
- <sup>30</sup> Thomas Nipperdey as quoted by Mommsen: Op.cit., p. 35.
- <sup>31</sup> Theodor Schieder: The Role of Historical Consciousness in Political Action. *History and Theory*, Beiheft 17/1978, p. 18.