

History-education in a shadow of the canon?

It is of relevance to ask oneself what the purpose of history education in multicultural societies is, as well as to discuss what kinds of knowledge high school pupils as well as authors of the textbooks regard as relevant. In addition to this I will in this paper try to examine how teenagers interpret the content of history education and teaching strategies. Consequently the aim of this paper is to give the reader an overview of how nineteen high-school students as well as three authors of the textbooks¹ for high schools perceive history as a school subject. Parallel to this it should be emphasised that the results of the interviews with authors and pupils were compared and contrasted to the content of the textbooks as well as the content of the national curriculum. It is in my view important to discuss these questions from gender as well as ethnic perspective. The interviews with the pupils were made between 2004 and 2006 in Swedish city of Malmö, where over 40 percent of children between the ages six and fifteen have a foreign background.²

From my point of view this methodological standpoint gives the reader an opportunity to understand both individuals' views on history as well as the value of history as a school subject. Accordingly it is of significance to consider some perspectives on why one is supposed to read history in schools. Historian Beverley Southgate argues that there are at least six reasons that are correlated to historian's epistemological and ontological views on history.³

1. By way of introduction one can refer to the opinion that we should teach/read history "for its own sake".⁴ From this point of view history is taught in order to give pupils general education; that is to say: "history gives cultural orientation". This is the perspective that seems to be regarded as the most relevant perspective both by the pupils and the authors. According to Southgate there is something appealing in an educational system that has an inherent value, and does not necessarily have a practical value. But the question is whether this is enough to legitimize the existence of history as a school subject.

¹ The analyzed books are: *Perspektiv på historia A* and *Alla tiders historia A/Maxi*. It is the authors of these books that I have interviewed (interviews were made in February 2007)

² www.malmo.se/download/18.15092c0105cc1076c48000225/A+Kvalitetsredovisning+2004+Rapport.pdf#search=skola+etnicitet+statistik (25th of July, 2007); See even "Elever i huvudmannens skolor fördelat efter utländsk bakgrund och efter typ av utbildning samt antalet skolor och nationella program per huvudman läsåret 2006/07"; www.skolverket.se, (25th of July, 2007). A person with a "foreign background" is defined as a person whose at least one of the parents is born outside of Sweden.

³ for the discussion about the reasons see Beverley Southgate. *Why Bother with History— Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Motivations*. Lonman-Pearson Education Ltd. Harlow (UK) 2000

⁴ see Bernard Eric Jensen. *Historie – livsverden og fag*. Gyldendal. Denmark. 2006, p. 360f

2. In addition to this it can be added that history is perceived as “*Historia est Magistra Vitae*”.⁵ All students remark that The Holocaust and The World War Two are the questions of outmost importance because these questions can reduce the effect of nationalism, hostility towards foreigners as well as xenophobia. Unfortunately pupils do not see any other critical relevance concerning history as “life's teacher”.
3. History-education can even give a meaning on a personal level. According to some historians, schools can contribute to form young peoples' identities.⁶ As far as identities are concerned one can refer to Stuart Hall who states that identities should be seen as *many different ways* of positioning oneself or being positioned by others in narratives about the past. As far as the question of identities is concerned it is vital to point out that it is a *complex process and that it should not be perceived just as a question of ethnic identities*. Nevertheless I would like to quote one of the interviewed pupils in order to depict some of the problems that we might face in multiethnic schools. This is how Aida describes the construction of her identities and the importance of the historical conciseness for understanding of her identity constructions:⁷

Aida: I use Persian at home. Actually, I speak to my mother in Swedish and for some strange reason I speak with my father in Persian. I could write in Persian before, but later on I stopped participating in mother-tongue courses, so I lost my writing-skills. But I can still speak Persian and I am planning to teach my children. I want to pass it down on the upcoming generations. So I am planning to learn it all over again. /.../ One has an identity-crisis, you know. When I just started the intermediate level of the ground school I didn't want to study Persian anymore. I didn't know why I would need it. Why should I need to learn how to read and write in Persian? (Vanja: Why do you want to learn the language now?) It is probably because I am now more comfortable with the fact that my parents come from Iran. I have never been ashamed of it, ever, but I have probably thought that ... /---/ Aida: I realized few days ago, when I set and thought about the identity crises that was there before, that the identity-crisis is not as strong as it used to be. It's like, I don't think about the fact that I am two-pieced. For basically that is what one is and that is because I speak Persian at home, and don't look Swedish, and I have never lived in Iran. And if I were to go to Iran they would laugh at me because of my accent. I am neither part of this nor that. You never get accepted, neither as a proper Swede nor as an Iranian, ever! /---/ By the way, I just remembered one thing; this thing about double-identity. Just because I don't see myself as a native Swede, for the reason that other people don't see me as one, so I realize that if I talk to somebody else so... /---/ It's like when I travel through the immigrant ghetto of Rosengård, and if I were to talk to a guy who has lived entire his life in Rosengård and they have like parents from Iran or from Iraq or wherever and they have an

⁵ For a critical discussion about the perspective see Reinhart Koselleck. *Erfarenhet, tid och historia – Om historiska tidens semantik*. Daidalos. Göteborg. 2004

⁶ See for example Bernard Eric Jessen (p. 74-75), Klas-Göran Karlsson (p. 7-11; p. 42-45) in *Historiedidaktik* 1997; David Lowenthal. *The past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge 1997 (1985) p. 41-46; Ulf Zander "Historia och identitetsbildning" in *Historiedidaktik* 1997; p. 98-99

⁷ For a discussion about the term historical consciousness see: Bernard Eric Jessen. *Historie – livsverden og fag*. Gyldendal. Denmark. 2006, p. 58

accent. So when I talk to them I feel very, very much as a Swede. And it feels strange, very different from a situation in which I meet other people. It feels strange in that sense that I am fully aware that I don't look Swedish but when I talk to them so I feel like I am very much like a native Swede. So it's like, it depends on a situation in which you are in, and whom you talk to.

From this quotation one can observe that ethno-cultural identities must be regarded as unstable and discursively constructed and this is something that we have to have in mind when we teach history in multiethnic societies. It is important to point out that we cannot take for granted pupils' identities (no matter if it is the question of gender, ethnicity, religion or class). For that reason it is relevant to discuss which kinds of identities we have in mind when we are constructing a historical narrative and which kinds of ethnic or other identities we are presenting in the text books as normative and therefore which stories are being marginalized. Consequently the content of "Swedish"/"national" culture and heritage should be deconstructed in order to show who is included and who is excluded from the narrative, and which gender relations are presented as a norm and which are regarded as an anomaly. It is imperative not to (re)produce subject "immigrant" in the classroom environments/textbooks. Instead we have to re-examine the content of the national meta-narrative(s) and adopt it (them) to multicultural environments and global changes. Therefore it is in my view vital to emphasize on the importance of the correlation between "the grand narratives" and "the life history" (i.e. history from below); especially because many (*sic. but not all*) interviewed pupils whose parents are born abroad declare that they "like when they read about 'their countries'" (that is to say their parents country of origin). With these words in mind it is reasonable to conclude that the content of teachers' and authors' historical narratives do make differences, especially in multicultural/multi-ethnic environments.

4. As the result of the above mentioned it is of significance to have in mind *how historical narratives are "produced" and by whom as well as for whom*. For that reason it is of great value that schools teach how the choices of historical narratives are connected to power-relations/structures. Unfortunately only few students remark in the interviews that the teachers and the textbooks give an attention to gender perspectives and ethnic diversity as well as questions of class and social status. In general it could be concluded that the interviews have shown that pupils think that there are too many kings and wars and that history

is all about “politics” and “great man”. I am of the belief that for example oral history can provide teachers with a tool that can give a voice to marginalized groups and consequently give an attention to class as well as ethnic and gender perspectives.⁸

5. Due to the above-discussed issues it is of value to focus on history’s role in challenging norms and values.⁹ From this point of view history is an important school-subject due to its relevance for shaping pupils’ norms, values as well as their ability to critically view society and political and economic structures. Pupils have emphasized that textbooks and teachers’ teaching strategies undermine a critical perspective and pluralistic perspectives on history. In stead it is a linear and teleological story that is presented.
6. On top of this one should finally add that few pupils think that the history-education does not relate history to the studies of religion and that the importance of religion is undermined in the discussions about historical and cultural changes. After these initial words I would like to concentrate on pupils critical insights concerning the content of historical narratives in their classroom environments.

“The book tries to be neutral, but it is a male perspective.”

Quite a few of the interviewed pupils have informed me that history in schools is perceived as neutral and objective but that the subject excludes women and gives a “male” perspective. This is how some of them perceive the situation in their schools.

- ☞ Karin: You know, *there is not much analysis, I mean the textbook doesn't analyse much*. The book tries to be neutral. But sometimes it is a male perspective. As far as female and male perspective is concerned, it is mainly male perspective.
- ☞ Anna: We have learned about it a little bit; I mean little bit about when women were at home and when they started to work but it was like one lecture, scrawl on blackboard. So it wasn't much. (Vanja: What do you think about that?) You know, in some way you can not miss that what you have never had.
- ☞ Mersad: It was “man that have had the leading position”.

In those cases where women are depicted in the historical narrative it is usually being done as an addition to the “real history” and in general in small “boxes” that discuss “curiosities”. It

⁸ The oral History Reader (red.) Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson. Routledge. London/New York. 2002 (1998); p 183ff; Horrocks, Milnes, Roberts & Robinson i *Narrative, Memory & Life Transition*. (red.) Christine Horrocks, Kate Milnes, Brian Roberts, Dave Robinson. University of Huddersfield. Huddersfield. 2002; p. xviii-xix. Malin Thor. ”Oral History – mer än en metod” in *Historisk Tidskrift* 2001:03 (p. 345).

⁹ Adler Magnus Hermansson. *Historieundervisningens byggstenar – grundläggande pedagogik och ämnesdidaktik*. Liber. Stockholm 2004. p. 22-24

should be emphasized that the term “gender perspective(s)” is usually synonymous with “her-story”. From Joan W. Scott’s point of view women are “added” to the grand narrative. The consequence of this kind of historical representation is that the power relations are reproduced because men and women are seen as separate/different historical agents.¹⁰

Historians who are interested in the relations between knowledge and power proclaim that language that permeates the content of a historical narrative can never give a complete picture of the past because past and historical narratives differ. Instead it is possible to say that the language describes *some* components – the components that the narrator regards as the essence of the subject and “the historical truth”.¹¹ It is possible to conclude that the majority of the pupils that have been interviewed declare that only “men” are regarded as historical agents and that “women” and “their” social positions are seen as less relevant for the understanding of history. Hence the analyzed schools, textbooks as well as teachers’ narratives mediate views on history that reproduce the gender-power structures and gender-biased hierarchies. At the same time it should be added that many pupils think that the history as it is presented in the schools is *the* essential history. In many pupils’ views it is impossible to take anything out from the presented narrative. This, together with the fact that they indicate that the textbooks that they use and the teachers’ teaching strategies do not encourage a more critical view on history, has led me to a conclusion that history teaching lacks a more pluralistic and analytic perspective.

In conclusion it can be assumed that the produced historical knowledge (that is put forward in the analyzed school-environments) ignores women from the historical narrative, emphasizes importance of “the great men” as well as of “the important historical phenomena”, and thereby leads to the following consequences: women’s agency is ignored, men from lower social classes are marginalized and the prevailing power-structures are reproduced because the historical narratives do not relate to the “ordinary people”.¹²

¹⁰ Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. Columbia University Press. New York 1988, chapter 1

¹¹ Sara Edenheim. *Begärets lagar : moderna statliga utredningar och heteronormativitetens genealogi*. Symposium. Eslöv 2005; p. 61

¹² Compare Maria Sjöberg. ”Från kvinnohistoria till genushistoria” in *Genusperspektiv i historia – metodövningar*. (red.) Perlesta Magnus. Studentlitteratur. Lund 2001, p. 8-10; Yvonne Hirdman. ”Vad är kvinnohistoria?”. *Kvinnohistoria: om kvinnors villkor från antiken till våra dagar*. Utbildningsradio. Stockholm. 1992, p. 10-11; Mats Greiff ”Att synliggöra det som osynliggjorts” in *Rapport om utbildning 1/2001. Genusperspektiv på förskola, skola och utbildning – Några inlägg från en arbetsgrupp på lärarutbildningen*. Malmö högskola. Lärarutbildningen. Malmö 2001 (p. 97); Kenneth Nordgren. *Vems är historien? : historia som medvetande, kultur och handling i det mångkulturella*. Sverige Pedagogiskt arbete-Umeå Universitet. Umeå 2006 (p. 207-208). *I enlighet med skolans värdegrund? En granskning av hur etnisk tillhörighet, funktionshinder, kön, religion och sexuell läggning framställs i ett urval av läroböcker*. Rapport 285/2006. Skolverket 2006, p. 43

According to Joan Scott it is necessary to make fundamental changes in the historical perspective and thereby leave the “supplementary perspective” (i.e. addition of few “important women”).

Simply to assert, however, that gender is a political issue is not enough. The realization of a radical potential of women’s history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women’s experiences and analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies. With this approach women’s history critically confronts the politics of existing histories and inevitably begins the rewriting of history.¹³

With these conclusions in mind I would now like to continue the discussion by enthroneing the questions of migration because these questions are relevant for the understanding of human history; especially in so-called multiethnic societies.

Questions of migration in the shadow of emigration to the USA

As far as the representation of migration in the textbooks is concerned it should be highlighted that these questions are dominated by the following representation of migration: “The invasion of Roman Empire”; “The invasion of Europe”; “The Arab expansion” and the Swedish emigration to the US during the second part of the 19th century (when one quarter of the Swedish population emigrated). In general it has been observed that the questions of migration in the examined school environments as well as the textbooks are usually represented as something negative, destructive and something that is not a part of everyday lives. So the questions of migrations are treated as historical anomalies and as a threat to the “culture heritage”, and the state’s own “sovereignty”.¹⁴ It should be added that the question of immigration to Sweden after the World War Two has according to several rapport been marginalizes even though more then 20 percent of the population of Sweden has a foreign background.¹⁵ In The Swedish National Agency for Education’s rapport that analyzes textbooks it has been identified that in spite of the fact that “the past is full of cultural encounters there are no lines of arguments concerning the effect of conquest, colonization nor

¹³ Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History*. Columbia University Press. New York 1988, p. 27

¹⁴For discussion about migrations questions se: *I enlighet med skolans värdegrund? En granskning av hur etnisk tillhörighet, funktionshinder, kön, religion och sexuell läggning framställs i ett urval av läroböcker*. Rapport 285/2006. Skolverket 2006, p. 19; Nordgren Kenneth 2006. p. 195ff

¹⁵ Definition of ”foreign background”: Either they were born outside of Sweden or one/both of their parents were borne abroad. For statistics se *Demografiska Rapporter 2004:5*

migration; that is to say different forms of encounters.”¹⁶ A pupil that I call Dejan remarks that it is rather strange that the questions of migration are not regarded as more significant.

☞ Dejan: [The question of migration] concerns large parts of history. It is quite strange that we don't talk about it. It is sort of a repetitive history and people emigrate and immigrate constantly. So it is very strange that we don't talk about it; and we should talk about it.”

The fact that some teachers and the authors of the textbooks emphasize the importance of the emigration to the USA, during the second part of the 19th century, and marginalize the post World War Two immigration could hypothetically lead us to a conclusion that some pupils (especially those whose parent have immigrated after the World War Two) could perceive that schools on one hand regard emigration to the USA as something which is relevant for the understanding of that what National Agency for Education calls “cultural heritage” and on the other hand present modern immigration as a relatively irrelevant historical event.

The linear history of Europe - the structure of the historical canon?

Further more it should be remarked that the overviews of the textbooks¹⁷ and the interviews have shown that the focal point of the dominant narrative is the view that Europe has had a linear development (progression) since the Ancient Greece (i.e. “the cradle of European Culture”) and Ancient Rome. This is something that was pointed out even by the pupils. Sociologist Masoud Kamali reveals that the textbooks are written for a so-called “typical Swede” who is supposed to represent/construct the We-group, that is to say Christian Westerners who have since time immemorial lived in a geographically and socio-historically “clearly defined” area called “the West”.¹⁸ Historian Kenneth Nordgren points out that the curriculum takes for granted children’s cultural heritage due to its focus on that which is regarded as “uniquely” national as well as European.¹⁹ The “historical meta-narrative” can according to the majority of the pupils as well as Nordgren’s findings be summarized in the following way: absolute chronology (in history we move from one epoch to the next and so on),²⁰ homogenous view on “the European culture”, linear development with a focus on Ancient Greece and Rome, Christianity, The European Middle Ages, “The Age of Discoveries”, “The Age of Enlightenment”, “The Age of Revolutions and Imperialism”,

¹⁶ *I enlighet med skolans värdegrund? En granskning av hur etnisk tillhörighet, funktionshinder, kön, religion och sexuell läggning framställs i ett urval av läroböcker. Rapport 285/2006.* Skolverket 2006, p. 19

¹⁷ See Kamali 2006, Runblom 2006

¹⁸ Masoud Kamali ”Skolböcker och kollektiv andrafiering” i *SOU:2006:40*, p. 85

¹⁹ Nordgren Kenneth 2006, p. 204-205, 207, 174, 177

²⁰ Compare to B-E Jensen ”Historiemedvetande – begreppsanalys, samhällsteori, didaktik in *Historiedidaktik*. (red.) Christer Karlegård, Klas-Göran Karlsson, Studentlitteratur. 1997; p. 71; for diskussion on the content of textbooks se chapter 4 in Nordgren Kenneth 2006

World Wars and finally The Cold War, and “The Period thereafter”. The post-colonial theorist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty states that historical narratives often portray a simplified and (Euro) West-centric view of history and reproduce dichotomy between “us” and “them”.²¹ It seems that the only time when history talks about “them” is when “we” visit “them”. It is in the light of these supposed constrictions of the “uniqueness” of Europe and the uniqueness of the European identity that we should interpret chapters that are in the textbooks called “Europe discovers the World”.²² In the interview with a pupil whom I call Aida, she concludes that “just because Europe is in the centre of the map of the World it doesn't mean that it should be in the centre of the interpretation of history”.

It could be assumed that the previous research results and my findings have shown that some school environments are being overshadowed by a tacit, but certainly existing canon of cultural history. Harold Blooms defines a “canon” as a desirable field of study that has an authoritative position and is regarded as eternal knowledge.²³ Frank Kermode points out that a canon abolishes difference between knowledge and opinion and often contributes to the situation where something continues to linger. Thereby a canon should resist “erosion”.²⁴ The question is whether teaching of history is organized in this way. In my opinion that is the case. The interviewed authors of the two of the commonly used textbooks (*Perspektiv på historia A* and *Alla tiders historia A/Maxi*) have implied that that it would be hard to take out anything more from the textbooks. This entails that the content of the textbooks contains the “essence” of History. Perhaps they are willing to open the historical narrative to new horizons but according to them these new approaches should not affect the “core” (canon) of History. In the following I will try to discuss some of the possible solutions to the presented problems of Euro-centricity that some of the youngsters have presented in the interviews.

Shift in perspectives – World history

In order to get to the bottom with the above mention problems regarding the “historical canon” the majority of the interviewed pupils have suggested that there should be a shift in a historical perspective, namely through widening of the historical horizon. This is how two of the interviewed pupils summarize the problem.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe – Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press. New Jersey. 2000, p. 7

²² Seen for example the textbook called: *Perspektiv på historia A*

²³ Harold Bloom. Den västerländska kanon - böcker och skola för eviga tider. Symposium. Eslöv 2000, p 11

²⁴ Frank Kermode in Bloom, Harold 2000, p. 14

Emir: I mean it was quite good, but it was just Europe. That was *primary concern*. You know, it is *Europe and World War one and two*. /.../ It's just that history should be little bit more than about Sweden and like, little bit more general. *I mean, for me this perspective that had dominated in the school led to the situation where I got less interested. If we were to spread it out a little bit more, I would have become more interested.* Yow know, studying about religion is more interesting. The fact is that all religions have same God. They have lots in common so they can teach more like ... It should be like that in history. They should spread it out little bit more.

Ali: There are many interpretations of truth and many people see truth in different ways. Textbooks in history have not been the most useful because they are very egocentric, here in Sweden. They, I mean, Europeans, want to show that the civilization originates from Greece. They want to show that the civilization comes from us /Europe/. The most important point in history was Greece. [---] But there is something that we forget. Why is it so that we never discuss Indian culture? Mayas' and Aztecs' culture. We never talk about them. [---] I mean Catholicism destroyed these cultures. So the textbooks are, they are... There are hundreds of ways to describe the World. I would really like to learn more about Chinese culture and south-east Asia because they have managed to solve conflicts much better than we have. They have managed to live much better at each others sides. /---/ Ali: I think that one has to try to get an all-embracing picture of history, I am mean in the textbooks. But now it is 80 % Europe. Of course that European history has been interesting. But it is important to have in mind that people are like small chains that are connected. And Europe is a part of the world. *People think that Europeans were born in Europe, that they are all blue-eyed and blond and totally disconnected from the rest of the world. And they think that it is just because of them that people in India can get food. But you know, language used here is founded on Sanskrit, meaning from India. But if you were to ask people here nobody would know that. You know, they don't discuss the origins of the language. They discuss religion more. But the language is the most important thing the humanity has developed. So one wonders why in a hell does English originate from Sanskrit, which is in India. Why isn't the basis of Sanskrit in English?*

With these words in mind it can be alleged that majority of teenagers that I have interviewed strive for a more pluralistic geographical and cultural perspective. Historian Patrick Manning underlines that world history puts forward the importance of “‘the interaction of the pieces (by community, social, or continental) in human history’ and assesses ‘the experience of the whole of humanity through study of interaction’”.²⁵ According to Chakrabarty Dipesh”it is only in this way that we can create plural normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities.”²⁶

²⁵ P. Maning in Ross E. Dunn's text in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and international perspective*. (edt.) Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg. New York University Press. New York & London 2000, (p. 128)

²⁶ Chakrabarty Dipesh. 2000 p. 20

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