The Persistance of Ethnocentric School History

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Introduction

The open and productive dialogue among scholars and educators from all the countries, involved in the Textbook Committee, was based on a common vision of a future, where the young generations will know how to live in a world of peace, and collaboration. In this committee, the educational system is considered the main vehicle for the accomplishment of harmonious coexistence and collaboration among the peoples of the respective countries, through respect and acceptance of the national differences in culture and language.

The interesting papers presented in the various meetings of the group of textbook analysis, contain the following very important information: despite the big differences between the countries and the educational systems, one may claim that, with no exception, all educational systems are ethnocentric.

In all countries involved in the study, the selection of knowledge transmitted by schools has a tendency to accord primary importance to the dominant national group, and to evaluate its real or alleged characteristics and practices as more worthy. All educational systems socialise children, by inducing a symbolic code of representing society, by describing this society as having a national culture evaluated directly as homogeneous and indirectly as pure, In all ed-
ucational systems history is mainly national history. In all history textbooks, the history of the other nations is limited to the narrative concerning the national self, and its past conflicts with the "others". Schools in all countries present history as a field characterised by unique narrations, taken as "the truth". A double standard of values is employed, qualifying the same "national" characteristics as positive or negative, depending on their reference to the national self or the "others". In all educational systems, each respective nation has a single definition. According to it, the nation is presented as an almost "natural" entity, related by bonds of blood, since it is described as having common origins and ancestors, besides a common culture, language, habits, and a particular idiosyncrasy.

The Greek case
In Greek society, there are spectacular changes the last 25 years, as far as education in general is concerned. An important landmark in the Greek political history since the civil war (which ended in 1949) is the dictatorship of 1967-74. During that period political authorities lacked consensus; democratic principles and freedom of the press were treated as dangerous for the social status quo; and open coercion was used. After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, a period of political stability was inaugurated and for the last twenty years, there is regular function of parliamentary rules, consensus based authorities, freedom of the press, and respect of human rights. Since 1974, one of the main concerns about education, has been the immediate change of school textbooks. School books, and especially the history ones, being used up to the fall of the dictatorship (1974) served the ideological triptych of nation-religion-family, contained falsifications, distortions, and blunt political propaganda.

In the current school textbooks, there is an expressed intention of objectivity and a modern historical approach*. History is no longer exclusively devoted to the narration of wars, treaties and actions of monarchs or state leaders. Textbooks contain now additional information on the economy and its development, on social groups, social life, and culture. There is also an equally expressed intention of transmitting democratic values, both directly, by presenting them as principles to be defended, as well as indirectly, by looking objectively at authoritarian governments or the use of coercion, and by underlying the importance of democratic values. A last change is the intention of presenting conflicts and wars not any more as "natural" incidents (as was the case in the books before 1974), but as a consequence of social and economic conditions, the result of inadequate social organisation and ineffective political regimes. There are references to the necessity and the value of peace, both directly, by underlying its importance, as well as indirectly, through descriptions of the magnitudes of destruction, pain and grief caused by wars. There are no more derogatory references to other nations, no negative evaluative attributions, no generally hostile statements. Despite the above important changes, Greek school textbooks are still very ethnocentric.

Although we do not any more find in the school books (as was the case in the ones before 1974) the use of the term "nation" for periods before the actual formation of nations, the national self is systematically defined by the term "Hellenic". This generic and anthropomorphic subject permits the description of the Greek history as a continuous and linear millenary course, without major falsifications of the

* The history textbook analysis presented at the Joint History Project meetings was performed by Triantafyllos Petridis and Maria Zogruttsik, secondary school teachers.
historical information provided. The term “Hellenism” allows the narrative so much to establish the image of an uninterrupted continuity, as to solve the problems that arise from a presentation of history as a course beyond time, evolution and change. The term “Hellenism” allows also the narrative to silence the process of formation of the nation and of Greek national ideology, as well as that of other nations in the Balkans and their respective national ideologies. Thus, the identification with the Greek national group and the adherence to the plan of an independent Greek state is not seen as a historical process. It is rather presented as a static and a priori aspiration of the Greeks for national self-determination, which are not the result of historical evolution, but a given characteristic of the Greek people.

All the other countries present in the books serve the ethnocentric conception of history. They are mentioned when they concern Greece or the Greeks, that is, in relation to events of the national history. Relevant, in this respect, is the absence of the history of all the other Balkan countries. Events concerning the history of Bulgaria, Serbia or Albania are included in the historical narrative, because they serve the description of respective territorial claims of the past, wars or treaties, conflicts or alliances, of those countries with Greece. All the other Balkan countries and their history are almost totally absent from the books. This applies also to the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. Although the Ottoman Empire is present in a large percentage of the books’ contents, this is due mainly to the importance accorded to the Greek revolution and the creation of the Greek State. Otherwise, there is no systematic information as to the history of the Ottoman Empire and its evolution, the Turkish nation state and its evolution.

This lack of information has an indirect negative effect.

The fact that Greek pupils do not learn from history books about the mere existence of Slovenia or Bosnia, have no information on Romania other than that of the historical existence of Greek communities there, do not meet in the books the term Hungarians (except in the mention of the “Austro-Hungarian Empire”, never clarifying what people the adjective “Hungarian” applies to), nor that of Czechs, implies that the history of these countries is not of equal importance or relevance.

Moreover, although there are no more derogatory qualifications for any nation, or hostile statements, information about all other peoples who are mentioned is limited to the events of the Greek national history. Thus the nations mentioned are those with whom Greeks have, in various historical periods, violent conflicts (the Ottomans and Turks, the Bulgarians, the Germans, and to a lesser extent the Italians), as well as those with whom the Greek state had in history differences on territorial disputes (the Turks, the Bulgarians, and the Albanians). Thus, although there is in the textbooks a deliberate intention not to cultivate negative or hostile feelings towards the other nations, a negative evaluation is produced, albeit in indirect ways and through latent messages, such as the descriptions of the suffering and misery those peoples have caused to the Greeks, by attacking, conquering and occupying territories belonging to the Greeks, or by claiming territories belonging to the Greeks, and fighting against the Greek people.

The most important of all, in respect to the indirect negative evaluations of national others, is the dualistic value system of positive and negative characteristics, indirectly attributed to various peoples as “national” characteristics. By this, we mean that the characteristics are not associated with specific historical periods neither with economic or political causes, but they are presented as traits that are al-
most "natural" of the national groups. This dualistic value system of positive and negative "national" characteristics is mainly due to the ethnocentric conception of history included in the textbooks. The implication of the historical narrative systematically attributing to the national self a set of characteristics which are presented as consistent with "Greekness", unchanged and undifferentiated since antiquity, is that these traits are considered almost as "natural" properties. If the Greek nation is seen as an almost natural entity with given characteristics, this inevitably applies to all other nations as well.

The deliberate effort (included in the books) to induce pupils with the will to defend peace and peaceful coexistence is undermined by the attribution of this kind of "national" characteristics both to Greece and to other nation states. The dualistic value system creates an indirect message of the existence of "good" and "bad" peoples. Moreover, since peoples are seen as "nationally", that is, "naturally" bad or good, this definitively impedes Greek pupils to differentiate between governments and peoples, as well as among various groups of the same people. Thus, contrary to the educational policy, the books preclude the pupils' possibility for striking eventual alliances with the "bad" peoples (for example, following the evaluation of the textbooks, pupils cannot envisage Bulgarians, Germans, Albanians, or Turks, fighting in their own countries against stereotypes of hatred and discrimination, opposing the eventual aggressive policy of their governments, defending democratic values, and being in favour of peace, coexistence and co-operation).

The Ottomans (more often named Turks in the books) are the most negatively evaluated national others, through the indirect association of information presented with information omitted. The absence of systematic and comprehensive information on the history of the Ottoman Empire and its evolution, and the accumulation of information about the empire related to the history of the Greeks, results in an indirect image of the Ottomans as powerful and fearful. Through selected information presented in the historical narrative, they are mainly seen as vast and strong armies marching in arms and banners, and as being above all hardy and mighty warriors. This image acquires a negative latent meaning, since it is complemented with relevant omissions. The books contain no information whatsoever on the education, literature, arts, or any cultural achievements of the Ottoman Empire. The information on the military strength and the supremacy of power, together with the complete absence of mention on culture, produce a latent but strong derogatory message, that the Ottomans were forceful and fearful warriors, but an uncivilised and crude people.

The reference to the Bulgarians is another example of an indirect negative evaluation, because these people happen to have to some extent a very similar history to the Greek one, up to the beginning of the 20th century. A double standard of values is employed, qualifying the same "national" characteristics as positive or negative, depending on their reference to the self or the other. Expansive national policy, called in both countries in the 19th century "the great idea", is described as a national dream of the self, but as aggressive expansionism of the other, the claim of territories is presented as a right for the self, and an assertion for the other, victory in the battle field is said to be the hard consequence of lofty heroism for the self, and the result of massacre by the other.

The peaceful future is contradictory to the traditional nationalist ideology, included in the textbooks and presenting the Greek nation state without differing internal in-
terests. According to this ideology, all members of the national entity appear to have perfectly common interests, which only contrast with interests of other nation states. In order this statement to be founded, the school textbooks present all historical social conflicts in morally reproachable fights among brother-Greeks. This ideology is impeding pupils to recognise the internal national group differentiations, divisions, and discriminations. It stops them from seeing the social reasons of political differentiations and conflicts, and thus undermines any prospects for a critical use of historical knowledge, necessary in planning the future, through the understanding of the past and the recognition of the present.

Conclusion

The understanding of the past and the recognition of the present are a great necessity for all countries involved in the History Education Committee. The peaceful and cooperative Balkan future is a very important goal and a great challenge for all respective peoples. It helps in each country those forces that desire a more pluralistic perspective, a democratic society, open frontiers, and economic as well as cultural collaboration. Yet, it still has to fight against the traditional nationalist ideology, prevalent in all countries, presenting each nation state as a natural entity, without differing internal interests, and culturally or/and ethnically homogeneous.

The notion of homogeneity is not only fictitious, but it excludes important parts of the population in each country. Moreover, it implies a conception that in its extreme logic hides the idea of cultural purity. It also implies the taxonomic idea of national “authenticity”. The claim of authenticity is even less fit than homogeneity to represent national realities. It is an old taxonomic myth, which has
been invented in the past for the exact same reasons it survives today. It helps justify social division of economic privileges and social power, both between nation states, as well as between social groups inside every nation state.

As analysis of the history taught in almost every country shows, there is not yet a breakthrough toward comprehensive alternative narrations of the national past. Schools present history as a field characterised by unique narrations, taken as “the truth”. Thus, the most elementary principles of scholarly historical inquiry are ignored and transgressed. This leads to history textbooks, which are characterised by a total lack of means, which could cultivate a sense of critical analysis of the past as well as the present.

As a result of all the above, new knowledge is needed in schools of all respective countries, which will be a breakthrough toward comprehensive alternative narrations of the national past. The principles of scholarly historical inquiry are to be included in school history. History textbooks will then become a means, which could cultivate a sense of critical assessment of historical discourse. Thus, history will be providing pupils with conceptual tools, they would permit them to understand the conflictual historical process, and use these tools in order to better understand current social reality.

The history of all other countries should be included in the school textbooks. It is necessary to understand the conflicts of the past in order not to reproduce them, and understanding necessarily means to see them from a distance through a historical perspective, and include in this image the view of the “other”. It is also necessary to learn about the “others” in order to acknowledge similarities and understand differences, and finally appreciate the wealth resulting from culture contact and mutual influences, peaceful coexistence and collaboration.

New knowledge is needed in the schools which will be transmitting values and assumptions, through which:
(a) the past will be historically distanced and rationally treated;
(b) past differences will be explained and historisized as part of the past when different values were dominant, different needs existed, and different ideas were functional;
(c) cultural history will be included, where a lot of similarities and inter-influences will appear;
(d) present differences will be recognised and respected and rights will be acknowledged;
(e) peace is valued, collaboration is learned, and new perspectives are taught.