Suggestions for the Teaching of a Non-Conflicntual History

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Asking a group of students - in the near future primary school teachers - about the necessity of studying history in schools, most of them have raised the question of historical knowledge as a basis for identity. Following a long intellectual tradition they consider history as a major tool for understanding the present, but they also complete this statement in an amazing way: "knowing the past, we can more easily accept the present". Surprising assertion, because one can ask what kind of history should be taught to put the people in such an ideal state of mind to accept the reality only by studying history? And we can continue by asking if all realities must be always accepted? But analysing the answers of my students, I had at the beginning the impression of reading again and again the conventional foreword of a textbook, explaining in predictable words the importance of studying history: for fostering an identity, for making the present understandable. Yet, suddenly, at the question regarding what fields of history should be better represented in the teaching of history, almost the whole group mentioned cultural history, mentalities, everyday life, criticizing the way most of them had learned an event- and fact-focused political history. Thus they reminded me of all the discussions held in the workshops of the Joint History Project about teacher training and about how im-
important it is to work first of all with the teachers’ conceptions about the role of the teaching of history.

Working in and for the workshops of the Joint History Project was a way not only of knowing the so close, but meanwhile the so distant - in a way of speaking - Southeast European reality, but also a possibility to face the own situation and to compare it not as usual with the West, but with the neighbouring world. I remember that during the first workshop held in Budapest there was raised the question of what really means "common heritage" in Southeastern Europe and how can we put this in textbooks? The concrete discussions on the schoolbooks revealed that in almost all the Balkan countries world history is heavily Western-centred, the history of the West being considered the normal path of evolution, the standard to which are compared all other particular states or parts of the world. When referring to Southeastern Europe, most of the interest is devoted to the bilateral relations of the various states and/or peoples with the author’s own state (people). Thus, the place assigned to the history of the neighbours depends on the intensity of bilateral relations during different periods. The political aspects prevail. In this respect, I have tried to find out what history of Southeastern Europe is presented in a recent history textbook for high-school, dealing with the 19th and 20th centuries, written by two university teachers from Bucharest. Disappointment. Following the curricula, the authors discuss the conflicts in the Middle East, but there are just few lines about the situation of the Southeastern Europe in the 19th century, an aseptic description of the Balkan Wars and then practically nothing about the contemporary situation in the Balkans. I must confess that I wasn’t surprised. But it is amazing that the author dealing with the 20th century doesn’t realize the importance of explaining to the children the nearby - in space and time - reality. In these conditions, for most of the children, the teachers of Balkan contemporary history remain only the media and the old stereotypes and clichés learned at home or in primary school.

Therefore, during the workshops there was raised often the problem of increasing the share of Southeastern Europe in the economy of history curricula and schoolbooks. But that does not mean just to add some battles and conflicts to the already existing ones. This risk is especially great because conflicts are more present in the collective memory of the peoples in the region, and because a dichotomic presentation of a heroic past is easier to be taught in school. The important step is to find the proper manner to acquaint with the delicate common aspects of the past in a balanced approach. It is well known that each national history supplies its own vision upon an event or another. The "memory conflicts" are frequent in Southeastern European history. An event can be perceived as providential/favorable by a national community and harsh/negative by another. Can we introduce in the textbooks both approaches in order to develop analysis abilities of the children? The most expressive example is that of the Balkan Wars. In this respect we have to cope also with the problem of the historical characters and names of places claimed by various nations at the same time. For example, Iancu de Hunedoara ( Hunyady Janos) was the son of a Romanian nobleman, but acted like a magnate of the Hungarian Kingdom, and is claimed by both the Romanians and the Hungarians. Similar is the case of the Zrinis, nobles of Croatian descent but of Hungarian political affiliation. And there are even more impressive disputes, as for example the figure of Alexander the Great, who is claimed by both Greece and FYROM. I remember, the participants at the discussions around this topic suggested that in such cases the complex
identity of the historical characters should be presented in a balanced way, avoiding any competition in appropriating them and insisting that they are part of a truly common heritage. With respect to the names of the various places, it was recommended that the schoolbooks should indicate and/or explain in brackets or in footnotes the alternative names. Such a method might generate public reactions accusing the excessive "concessions", but it would also signal the need of taking also into account the perspective of the other. About another common topics, for example, why don't to put in the textbooks the common gastronomy? In fact, most of us eat tomatos rolls in vine leaves or "ciorba" or "baklava".

Meanwhile, not only the common aspects should be a major point in teaching history in Southeastern Europe, but also the diversity of the region. The problem is how to teach this without stressing on a self-centred image of the past and without developing conflictual comparisons between "us" and "them". In this respect, the example of mixed local communities could be a practical tool in teaching the multicultural aspects.

All the discussions revealed a lot of common problems we have to deal with. Besides the question of rewriting the textbooks in a more balanced way, cleaning them xenophobic, hostile messages and stereotypes is in fact also a question of deconstruction and replacement at the academic level of historical knowledge. It seems to be important that in each country there should be chosen the main historical themes that need to be changed. In the meantime we must decide what should be put instead. This implies the political, cultural and scientific will to clarify a lot of delicate problems first at an academic level. The next step should be going in public with controversial issues of the past in order to prepare the public opinion to accept at least a discussion about some topics considered "sacred". It is obvious that it will be also necessary to provoke at national level debates about the aims of history teaching, involving academics, teachers, pedagogues, textbooks authors. These debates must be doubled by discussions around the delicate themes of the national/world history and the way of dealing with during the classes, organized by the academics for the history teachers. Then we come to the problems of the curricula, the writing and the approval of the textbooks.

Yet, essential to the whole process remains the way the history teachers really teach the pupils in their classes. If the teachers are not prepared and willing to change their teaching, then the best schoolbook will prove useless. Taking into account the fact that in all countries there is a significant resistance to the change of the traditional nationalist way of conceiving history, often the discussions emphasized that the professional historians must take publicly position with respect to the most controversial issues and help thus the public opinion and the history teachers to accept the change of the historical discourse. The question remains how to find the proper words to explain to the teachers that the changes - some times uncomfortable and difficult - they are asked to operate in the historical topics, information and didactical methods are beneficial for the society in a long term.

And now, a few words about teachers' training. Here, we have to be aware of the economic and social status of the teachers compared with other social groups inside society. If the teachers feel themselves economically frustrated, it is more than possible that they will resist to any changes. This is an aspect we have to keep in mind. About teacher training, one of the solutions mentioned during the workshops were the networks for in-service teacher training. Such
networks might work both at national and at regional levels, allowing to history teachers to update their concrete historical knowledge, to learn new teaching methods and to discuss the practical problems raised by their teaching. The use of the existing history teachers associations as basis for such schemes is desirable, provided that they will be willing to cooperate to the renewal of the history teaching and that such a cooperation will enhance the effectiveness of teacher training. But the problem seems to be that these networks will include only a small number of teachers. How can we manage to involve in the networks teachers able and willing to disseminate the information and to create an intellectual emulation around the changes in the teaching of history?

Another aspect we have to be aware of is not to reduce our analysis to the history lessons and history textbooks. We have to complete this step with the historical universe supplied by literature, civics, religion and music lessons.

It is obvious that between identifying the problems and solving them there is a considerable span. Such workshops are just a first step in a long way, and active resistances as well as social inertia are to be taken into account. Therefore, we must prepare for a long-run process.