MEMORY AND THE TEACHING OF THE HOLOCAUST: ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY AND FUTURE CHALLENGES[1]

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Although the Holocaust is covered in a distinct section in the History and Citizenship Education curriculum at the Quebec secondary school level (the "elsewhere" section of the 12th theme at the end of the second year of secondary school), it can also be presented in the fifth year of secondary school within the Contemporary World, 20th Century History, and Quebec Culture and Citizenship programs, which explore the concept of "genocide" and other themes related to racism. However, genocide – in this instance, the Holocaust – is a sensitive topic for teachers and students alike (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022) due to its nature and its complexity. It comprises ethical, social, political, and pedagogical dimensions.

In this text, we initially seek to understand why the Holocaust is a sensitive subject in the classroom and the pedagogical challenges that this poses. We then briefly present the approach proposed to meet

1 This text is inspired by the article: Moisan, S., & Hirsch, S. (2024). "*Étudier les génocides, un outil pour comprendre et prévenir.*" *Didactica Historica (10/2024)*, *Enfance menacée, enfance protégée*, 171–178.

these challenges in our pedagogical guide *Studying Genocides*.[2]

GENOCIDE AS A SENSITIVE TOPIC

The teaching of genocides in general, and the Holocaust in particular, are sensitive topics. Our research has identified these topics as "difficult objects of knowledge, mobilizing social values and representations that are complex and multifaceted, involving distinct ways of life in a plural school environment where reaching a consensus is not always possible. By entering the classroom, often unexpectedly, they can call the status quo into question by virtue of their strong subversive potential" (Hirsch & Moisan, 2022, p. 69). By analyzing genocides through the prism of this definition and the four dimensions it raises – ethical, political, social and pedagogical – we can better understand their sensitivity and thereby reveal the different challenges that these dimensions raise. We can then design instruction that makes room for complexity and discomfort, while enabling a sensitive understanding of the phenomena studied (Moisan & Hirsch, 2022).

- **The ethical dimension of teaching about genocide challenges social values and representations**

Studying genocides forces us to see that humans are capable of inhuman acts. By analyzing the racist ideologies behind genocides, students understand their impact on the ethics of societies, showing that good and evil can be interpreted differently. The conflict between Israel and Palestine makes the study of the Holocaust even more sensitive, as it often leads to ineffective comparisons and historical shortcuts, which do not allow for an in-depth study of the event itself.

Addressing different interpretations and Holocaust denial in the classroom can be just as perilous. All the aspects addressed – recognizing a genocide, understanding its consequences, reflecting on the ethical dilemmas of the actors involved, analyzing the underlying issues of justice – can become topics for debate in the classroom.

- **Through its political dimension, teaching about genocides reveals the power relationships at play in the past and present.**

Understanding how power relations are established and maintained – within and between societies – is a fundamental part of learning. As citizens of the world, students are invited to be attentive to what is happening around them, and to act for the common good of all. Unequal power relations between different social groups are an integral part of the study of genocide. Here too, the conflict between Israel and Palestine threatens to divert our attention from the context of the Holocaust and the power relations that governed it.

- **Through its social dimension, genocide education highlights diversity in all its forms**

Society is characterized by the diversity of the individuals and social groups that make it up. This diversity, whether real or perceived, sometimes

2 This guide is available at www.education-genocide.ca.

gives rise to divisions and categorizations that need to be reflected upon. The study of genocides forces us to take a stand against the use of dehumanizing (e.g. extermination, cancer, vermin), racializing and consistently subordinating vocabulary. Reflection on language and the choice of words is an indispensable step to be taken prior to teaching, as well as with pupils themselves. It helps us to understand how harmful otherness is constructed. The very presence of social diversity in the classroom can increase discomfort for both teachers and students in discussing these topics.

- **Through its pedagogical dimension, the teaching of genocides invites us to consider complexity in an interdisciplinary way**

Genocides are complex phenomena involving a wide range of geopolitical, historical, identity-related, ethical and cultural issues. Consequently, their study may require an interdisciplinary approach in the classroom. The abundance of information and resources available makes teaching this subject simultaneously simple and difficult. How can it be taught to foster students' democratic education? Where to start? How do we go about it?

This is also a complex subject, because the questions raised cannot be answered in a single, simple way. We need to take the time to develop an answer that examines all the aspects involved. In this respect, the abundance of more or less reliable online documentation, offering more or less acceptable answers, can also present a challenge.

Finally, the complexity is also of a pedagogic nature. Teachers are faced with the need to master a great many things, both theoretically and pedagogically, and the questions raised are numerous: at what age should we start talking about it with pupils at school? How should the issue be approached? Is it possible to compare genocides? Is it legitimate to do so? Answering these questions requires a certain amount of expertise on the part of those who plan to teach the subject. It requires taking risks and deciding which knowledge and tools are relevant.

- ***Studying Genocides:* A Tool for a Comparative Approach to the Holocaust**

It is with these challenges in mind that we developed the Studying Genocides guide. The guide consists of three complementary sections. In the theoretical section, three tools offer a better understanding of what genocide is. The UN definition of genocide serves as a starting point for understanding the concept as it is used in international criminal law. To this definition of the concept, which serves primarily to determine whether or not the phenomenon under study can be considered genocide, we add a tool for thinking about the process. Our six-stage genocidal process grid enables us to understand genocide in a systematic and analytical way, so that we can compare different forms of genocide and identify ways of resisting and preventing this crime. This grid, inspired by that proposed by Gregory Stanton,[3] includes the following stages: categorization, dehumanization, polarization, organization, persecution, extermination, and denial.

3 www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages

Since genocides are marked by the presence of a racist ideology, a third analytical tool on racism is proposed. Racism is understood as a social construct that can take different ideological forms (Wieviorka, 1993). This schematization (and its accompanying explanatory supplements) helps to understand this concept and its manifestations.

The second section presents the study of nine cases of genocide, including the Holocaust, by summarizing the facts and providing a problematization and contextualization of each, followed by an analysis of the genocide through the six stages of the genocide process. These texts are accompanied by testimonies, historical documents, etc.

Finally, the third part focuses on pedagogical goals and suggests teaching approaches based on didactic foundations (problematization, contextualization, agency, multiperspectivity), analytical tools (UN definition, genocide process, racism definition), and a small guide to teaching practices that support teachers in their choices of content, materials, and resources, including images available to students.

Under these conditions, teaching about the Holocaust can be based on a comparative approach with other cases of genocide. By enabling an analysis of racist ideologies, the genocidal process and issues of justice, this comparative approach has the advantage of highlighting the similarities and distinctions between these cases of genocide, without falling into a clumsy comparison of suffering or genocidal mechanisms. The tool also allows for a study focused on the Holocaust, where historical, legal and ethical analysis is privileged.

CONCLUSION

Although the political debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accentuates the pedagogical challenges identified here, leading many to hesitate about the relevance of talking about it in class, the Holocaust remains a historical event that can be described as fundamental to understanding contemporary society.

> **“Racism is also present in democratic societies, and the approach of this guide allows us to tackle the issue without falling into the trap of catastrophism [...]”**

While for students living in a pluralist democratic society and a state governed by the rule of law, such as Canada, the world in which genocides occur may seem remote, many of the stages of genocide are observable in these societies (such as categorization, dehumanization and polarization). This observation helps us to understand the crucial role played by the ramparts of democracy, however imperfect they may be. Racism is also present in democratic societies, and the approach of this guide allows us to tackle the issue without falling into the trap of catastrophism or other sophisms, by giving students the tools to understand and act against these manifestations.

Understanding the sensitivity of this teaching and the complexity of the event can enable both teachers and students to meet these challenges.

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