TEACHING HISTORY BY THINKING ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF NATION

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ABSTRACT

In many debates about the way history is thought, two things are often set in opposition: on one hand, there is the way historical thinking and the processes involved in the creation of scholarly knowledge are being thought in school, which are often set against, on the other hand, their outcome, and especially, the narrative discourse about the nation. We need to accustom students to use social and comparative history tools in order for them to examine the narratives that are going around about a nation they are asked to identify with or against. In time, learning "the" method for studying history can lead students to research and process relevant information so they can take an informed stand the socioeconomic or sociopolitical debates (e.g. in relation to employment insurance, to the war) were only arguments that can be substantiated should matter.

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In order to help students make informed decisions about whether they want to take part in collectively changing the world, so as to make it more fair, history curriculums should, in our opinion, enable them to inquire about their origins, the causes and results of social, political and economic struggles and debates that have affected, are affecting and will continue affecting Quebec and the rest of the world. In order to do so, we believe these programs should put a greater emphasis on the study of the Canadian and the Québécois national discourse that has emerged throughout history.

Indeed, we believe that deconstructing narrative, informative and other types of discourses (whether it is a discourse held by its protagonists, its witnesses or its analysts, which should include, and perhaps give precedence even more so, to the discourses of contemporary politicians reported on internet platforms) that emerge around concepts like 'the nation' increases the educational value of such concepts since it allows students to conduct their own research while drawing on knowledge that is valid, consistent, enduring and related to attitudes, heuristics and abilities associated with history: being able to define problems, analyse, summarize, criticise and argue in an independent and disciplined manner.

With time, this approach in teaching history could enable students to learn to identify, analyse and explain the factors associated with the birth of a nation and its evolution, the different public discourses which it has generated, including the contemporary Québécois narratives of remembrance (e.g. the Québécois narrative of civic and territorial remembrance (Bouchard), the French-Canadian ethnic narrative of remembrance (Courtois) or the Canadian civic and territorial narrative of remembrance (Létourneau)) and the cultural, economic, social and political consequences of past discriminations on its victims and perpetrators. Many studies show that students, even very young ones, possess the intellectual skills necessary for such an exercise (see Demers and al, 2010).

Admittedly this is a bold strategy, one that would entail that teachers, who despite their inadequate work conditions, would find the means to expose their students to issues that concern them and that are real and significant, as well as to a wide variety of relevant documents from which teenagers could practice their hand at the intended techniques and could schematize valid concepts and generalisations.

Because, in order to help students reach this objective, they need to be faced with some obstacles and we need to provide them with the necessary materials to overcome these obstacles (explanations of content and methods, instructions, documents, work procedures, etc.), especially by creating models and by practicing problem-definition, investigation and conceptualisation.

In our opinion, we thus need to accustom students to use social and comparative history tools in order for them to examine the narratives that are going around about a nation they are asked to identify with or against. Here are some examples of the questions which students (interested in the history of Quebec, regardless of their ethnic origin or place of residency) should come to ask themselves by the end of their high school education; these questions compare the history of Quebec (or of Canada) to the history of other nations of the world:

- How to reconcile, for example, the role our nation has played in wars, in imperialism and in fascism as well as in national liberation movements that occurred in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean after 1945?
- How to interpret the contributions – which are disproportionately greater than their numbers – of black workers throughout their social and political struggles in the United States, from the civil war up to today? In what sense is this phenomenon similar to the experience of French-Canadian, and then to the experience of Quebecois citizens and workers during the 19th and 20th century?
- In what manner and to the advantage of whom did the power of the state and the international social and economic system perpetuate forms of oppression and exploitation inherited from production methods that prevailed previously in class society?
- Who pocketed the gains extorted by mining companies and by Canadian banks abroad or from the lands taken from Aboriginal people, who gained from the wage gaps between immigrant or francophone workers and other workers? Who extracted wage concessions by speaking of lower wages abroad? Who relied on identity-related prejudices (sexist or chauvinistic) in order to divide and conquer? Who had to fight against all forms of national oppression and for solidarity and human dignity?

Such a process would imply not giving in to hermeneutics or the intellectual biography of politicians, but to focus on the socioeconomic and sociopolitical analysis of all the details surrounding debates about the nation, on the differences in the discourses and actions of individual and collective stakeholders, witnesses, commentators, etc. There is no unique scientific approach that can be applied mechanically to every case in the same way as there is no unconditional moral truth, inherently good behavior, origin without a cause, or unique way to periodize history: the validity of each depends on its relevance and integrity in relation to the question being researched and the desired outcome. But first, students have to come to genuinely inquire about the world around them, a process which is neither automatic nor simple to attain…

In order to reach that goal, history classes require scientific rigor, which in turn requires that teachers avoid imposing on their students their sociopolitical views, but instead that they help them develop a more profound interest towards the world, so they can transform the common-knowledge representations they have (about the nation, for example) into concepts (e.g. nationalism) that are rational and can be validated within the discipline. In time, learning "the" method for studying history can lead students to research and process relevant information so they can take an informed stance on the socioeconomic or sociopolitical debates (e.g. in relation to employment insurance, to the war) where only arguments that can be substantiated should matter.

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