THE DIDACTICS OF HISTORY IN WEST GERMANY: TOWARDS A NEW SELF-AWARENESS OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

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I

The standard opinion of what the didactics of history is, how it works, and where it is situated in the realm of the humanities goes as follows: historical didactics is a formalized approach to teaching history at primary and secondary schools, which plays an important part in transforming professional historians into teachers of history at these schools. It is a discipline that mediates between history as an academic discipline and historical learning and education at school. Thus, it essentially has nothing to do with the work of historians in their own discipline. It serves as a tool which transports historical knowledge from the full vessels of academic research to the empty heads of pupils.

This opinion is extremely misleading. It fails to confront the real problems concerning historical learning and education and concerning the relationship between historical didactics and historical research. Furthermore, it ideologically narrows the historians' perspective on their practice and on the principles of their discipline. Though I wish to concentrate on the didactics of history in West Germany, I shall not limit my observations to the development of a subdivision of history and pedagogics in a single West European country. Instead I would like to use West Germany to illustrate the broader issues of how one thinks about history, what are history's origins in human nature, and what are its uses for human life. These are the basic questions that a valid didactics of history should consider, which, when done, would make the didactics of history an integral and important part of historical studies.1

For those aware of the history of the discipline of history, especially of its transformation into a professionalized, academic activity, it should not be surprising

that didactics can play an eminent role in historical writing and understanding. Before historians came to look at their work as merely a matter of methodological research and before they conceived of themselves as "scientists," historians discussed the rules and principles of historical composition as problems of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning were conceived in the broadest sense, as being fundamental processes and phenomena in human culture, not restricted simply to the school. The well-known saying, "historia vitae magistra" (history is the teacher of life), which defined the task of Western historiography from antiquity to the last decades of the eighteenth century, indicates that the writing of history was directed by the moral and practical problems of life, not by the theoretical and empirical problems of methodological cognition. Even during the Enlightenment, when the modern forms of academic research and discourse were being forged, professional historians still discussed the didactic principles of historical writing as being fundamental to their work.

But due to increasing institutionalization and professionalization of history, the importance of historical didactics was either forgotten or minimized. During the nineteenth century, when historians defined their discipline they began to lose sight of one important principle, namely, that history is rooted in the social need to orient life within the framework of time. Historical understanding is guided fundamentally by basic human interests: as such, it is addressed to an audience and plays an important role in the political culture of the historian's society. As the nineteenth-century historians strove to make history a science, that audience was forgotten or redefined to include only a small group of trained, like-minded professionals. The didactics of history no longer was at the center of the historian's reflection about his own profession. It was replaced by the methodology of historical research. The "scientificization" of history entailed a conscious narrowing of perspective, a limiting of history's purpose and goal. 2 In this respect, the scientificity of history excluded from the purview of rational historical reflection those dimensions of historical thought inseparably combined with practical life. From this point of view, it can be said that scientific history, despite its rationalistic claims, has led to what I would like to call the "irrationalization" of history.

That this process can and should be reversed is my major thesis; and contemporary developments in the didactics of history in West Germany point in this direction. There, the recent development of the didactics of history can be described as a process of regaining the lost scope of historical self-awareness. The didactics of history, which had originally been interpreted as an external application of professional historical writing, has achieved a status within the academic discipline where it again can facilitate and enhance historical understanding, but now within its new, highly rationalized academic forms.

Originally, the didactics of history in Germany, as elsewhere, had been guided by the practical needs of training teachers of history. This training took place on two levels. One was purely pragmatic and dealt with the methods of teaching history in the classroom. The second was theoretical: it focused upon the condition and the basic purposes of teaching and learning history. On the first level, the didactics of history was and is related primarily to pedagogics: it is taught and learned by doing. We call it the methodology of instruction in history (Methodik des Geschichtsunterrichts). On the second level, the didactics of history is discussed in relation to those disciplines which deal with the phenomena of teaching and learning—for example with the social sciences, which investigate the social conditions of teaching and learning, with pedagogics, which investigates the aims, forms and processes of education, and, of course, with historical studies, which investigate history as subject matter to be taught. On this level we speak of the didactics of education in history (Didaktik des Geschichtsunterrichts).

In my opinion, the second level should precede the first. The didactics of education in history establishes the objectives and forms of historical education within a given political, social, cultural, and institutional context. The methodology of instruction in history establishes the practical means whereby these objectives are to be met.

Until the 1960s, the didactics of history in West Germany was treated as a geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik, a term which cannot easily be translated. I prefer the English version, pedagogical hermeneutics, or hermeneutical pedagogy, considered as a liberal art. The best known representative of this concept of didactics is Erich Weniger.3 According to this view, education in history can be defined as an historical process which can be analyzed with the theoretical and methodological tools of hermeneutic historicism. The teacher has to understand education as the historian has to understand history—that is, hermeneutically, as a kind of text constituted by intentional human forces and containing a meaning which can be deciphered to reveal the reader's own intentions and the possibilities of interaction between text and reader. The presupposition of this hermeneutical, historicist conception is that history is constituted by mental forces which the historian, being an active interpreter, can "reread" or appropriate, and which guide his historical questions and interpretations. Achieving empirical knowledge of the past would lead to an insight into the moving forces of the present. This insight would enable those who acquire historical knowledge to live within the mainstream of historical development and to accommodate their political life to it.

Both the didactics of history and historical science shared this historicist position. They both posited the same idea of the "educating forces" (Bildungskräfte)


of historical development. But the formal relationship between history and the didactics of history was characterized by a strict division of labor. Historical studies were still limited to a pure academic or "scientific" pattern of self-understanding. Questions concerning the interrelationship between historical research and the experiential world (Lebenswelt) of this investigator, as well as all questions concerning historical education, were relegated to a separate, extra-historical discipline: hence, formal history did not address the essence of historical scholarship directly. Historians considered their discipline to have been legitimated by its mere existence. Alfred Heuss made this clear in the 1950s when he claimed: "History as an academic discipline is a creature which legitimates itself by simply being there." He compared historical studies and its output of knowledge to a tree producing leaves. "The tree lives as long as it has leaves and it is its destiny to live and to have leaves." Heuss explicitly refused to accord history any practical use or real function in those cultural areas where history can serve as a medium for collective identity and for an orientation towards life. On the contrary, he thought that the methodology of historical research destroys the practical function of history.

The didactics of history during this period reinforced this narrow-mindedness. It viewed historical knowledge as being generated solely through the interpretive discourse of professional historians. The task of the didactics of history was to transmit this knowledge without partaking in the generation of this discourse. Historical didactics compensated for this modest refusal to engage in historical research by translating the results of this research into general philosophical presuppositions. It considered these philosophical categories as essential elements in shaping one's orientation towards life. Hence, these categories were thought to play a central role in the process of education. However, despite these abstract components, the primary and secondary history curriculum consisted of nothing more than a simplified abstract of standard historical studies. Thus, at its best, the didactics of history provided fundamental statements on the educational function of historical knowledge and on the corresponding objectives for teaching history in school. But it also included a hidden didactic, that of simply reproducing historical studies: in so doing, it lowered its level from the mountains of research into the valleys of classes (this is called copy or reproduction didactics).

In the 1960s and 1970s the whole scene changed. The scholarly arrogance that assumed historical studies to be legitimated by its mere existence lost its persuasive power. A new generation of scholars radically criticized the traditional concept of historical studies and propagated a new theoretical concept which they were able to put into practice. They conceived of history as a social science with close ties to the other social sciences. In so doing, they raised important questions concerning the basic task of historical cognition and of the political function of historical studies. This redefinition was only a part of a wholesale cultural reorientation that took place in Germany during that time. Hence, an equally important reorientation towards history was also felt at the schools, which resulted in a crisis of legitimacy for the teaching of history. The assumption that history played an integral role in primary and secondary education was increasingly questioned, especially as the attacks against historicism grew in degree and intensity. New forms of political education with corresponding new contents were introduced into the schools.

The didactics of history also underwent a change that reflected this general cultural reorientation and the shift in the educational system. Its hermeneutical conception was radically altered and transformed into a new mode of argumentation. It experienced a so-called turn to curriculum theory. Now, historical education has no longer become the simple question of translating the forms and values of professional scholarship into the classroom. The basic question that is being posed is whether that knowledge and the form of thought it represents meets a pre-given and extradisciplinary set of educational criteria. Historians were confronted with the challenge of legitimating history's role in cultural life and in education. They responded to this challenge by broadening the scope of historical self-reflection and self-understanding. Historians began to respect those dimensions of historical studies where needs, interests, and functions appear as determining factors of historical thinking. In simple terms, the study of history in West Germany underwent what we might describe as a paradigm shift.

This shift coincided with the urgent need for self-presentation and legitimacy by historians concerned with the field of education. Together, both moments contributed to the formation of a new historical movement characterized by a commitment to a deeper and broader reflection on the fundamentals of historical

4. A. Heuss, Verlust der Geschichte (Göttingen, 1959), 44.
studies and on its interrelationships with practical life in general and with education in particular. This happened at a time when the university system underwent a great expansion, which created enough flexibility to encourage the formation of new concepts about education and to allow their implementation. Thus, positions were created for scholars and teachers who wished to follow this trend and to realize it by research, training, and teaching.

Symptomatic of this new movement in historical studies and historical didactics was the establishment of two journals, Geschichte und Gesellschaft and Geschichtsdidaktik. The first was founded in 1973 and embodied a new concept of historical studies. In the foreword which spelled out its goals, the editors envisioned a two-pronged approach. First, it would focus on new theoretical and methodological approaches and seek to establish close connections between history and the other social sciences. Second, it would emphasize the connections between the academic study of history and social practice. The editors thought this necessary because “historical studies are influenced essentially by contemporaneous interests as well as by the analysis of historical processes and decisions. Directly or indirectly, historical studies react to today’s social consciousness and practice.”

Geschichtsdidaktik, founded a year later, represents the new way of dealing with the role of history in education and in practical life. In a programmatic article, Klaus Bergmann, one of the editors, defined historical didactics as follows: it is “a discipline which examines the importance of history—all sorts of history and all of its constitutive elements—for the receptive and reflecting subject.” He considered emancipation and personal identity as the two leading ideas of this didactical reflection.

Within the framework of this new approach to the use of history in practical life, the didactics of history established itself as a special discipline with its own questions, theoretical conceptions, and methodological operations. During the 1970s, this movement was linked to the need for curricular change. Thus, it could be discussed without resolving the question whether the didactics of history should be attached to history or to pedagogics. As long as it seemed plausible that the leading objectives of historical education were defined and explicated outside of historical studies, the didactics of history still served as an auxiliary to general didactics: it was still seen as a pedagogic discipline. This was exacerbated by the traditional narrow-mindedness of many professional historians who excluded all questions of history’s practical function from serious historical self-reflection. The results of this attitude were to push historical didactics closer to pedagogics and to open up a gap between it and normal historical studies. This had problematic consequences. The fascination with curricular reforms tended to underestimate the peculiar character of history as a field of learning. History could be instrumentalized for the nonhistorical objectives of teaching and learning. The specific role of history in the whole area of the social sciences and in politi-


16. A systematic approach to these basic factors can be found in J. Rüsen, Historische Vernunft. Grundzüge einer Historik I: Die Grundlagen der Geschichtswissenschaft (Göttingen, 1983); J. Rüsen, Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit. Grundzüge einer Historik II: Die Prinzipien der historischen Forschung (Göttingen, 1986).
yet less clearly defined goal. It is still an open question whether the emphasis upon public life in the didactics of history will find a positive echo. But it should be clear that since the public cannot digest the output of the highly specialized discipline of professional history without mediation, there is a definite need for trained people able and willing to accomplish this mediation. What should be evident is that the normal skills acquired by a professional historian are not sufficient to effect this mediation.

II

In West Germany today, four main issues dominate the discussion about the didactics of history. They deal with the methodology of instruction, the function and use of history in public life, the establishment of the goals for historical education in the schools and verifying that these have been met, and the general analysis of the nature, function, and importance of historical consciousness. Let me deal briefly with each.

The methodology of instruction in the classroom is still an important problem. Here the concentration upon curriculum has been predominant. Combined with the assumption that there exists a general theory of school instruction (Unterrichtstheorie), the teaching of history in the classroom has tended to become a mechanical affair. It still has not been resolved how the peculiarity of historical consciousness—those mental structures and processes which constitute a specific form of human cultural activity—can be integrated into this pattern of education. A gap still exists between the programmatic intuition of a good history teacher and the formal training he or she receives in the practice of teaching history. The reason for this gap is that the discussion concerning historical consciousness and the constituting factors of historical thought has not been integrated into the pragmatics of teaching and learning. The insights gained in the didactics of history about the processes, structures, contents, and functions of historical consciousness have not been translated into the analysis of teaching and learning in the classroom.

One example for this should suffice. On the abstract level of a general theory of historical consciousness, we know something about the patterns of significance which govern the experience of the human past and its interpretation as meaningful history. But we know very little about the way history is perceived and the effects of history instruction in the classroom. Some empirical research we have done at Bochum suggests that the pattern of exemplary education—history as a collection of examples leading to general rules of human behavior—is the way history is appropriated by pupils, without the teachers even being aware of this. The teachers were sure that they were implementing the patterns of modern historical studies. But the reality of the learning experience showed quite a different pattern. Thus the process of teaching and learning in the classroom is governed by a structure of historical consciousness not at all recognized by the participants themselves.

The second issue is the analysis of the function of historical knowledge and explanation in public life. This is a new field for history didactics. Since there are very few theoretical and methodological approaches to this problem, there are not very many empirical studies of it available. What we do have are the first steps in defining the discipline, discussions of what are the problems and what should and could be done. In order to establish an adequate research strategy in this area for the didactics of history, it is necessary to synthesize its perspectives, questions, and methods with those of the specialized disciplines that analyze public life. For example, if one applies the modern approach of the didactics of history to the use and function of history in the mass media, one is required to come to terms with journalism. This means that the specific insights of the didactics of history—its concepts of the specificity of historical understanding and its recognition of history's function in shaping social and individual identities—must be translated into the language of our understanding of mass communication. This is, for example, into the semantics of the cinema and into the poetics of visual communication.

The third issue—establishing the goals of historical education and discovering how these goals have been met—has been one of the most important issues in West Germany. For over a decade, the most desired and discussed objective of historical learning was defined as 'emanicipation.' It was hoped that through historical awareness, pupils would gain the ability of self-determination, that they would actively participate in the political decision-making which influenced their daily lives. This objective, however, was not simply an historical issue: it was closely connected to the other social sciences and to general political education. As such, the historical content of this program was difficult to define precisely. Though this issue has yet to be resolved, the desire to establish a curriculum with clearly defined objectives and the need to determine if the objectives have been met led to a critical investigation of the contents of historical education. History as a subject to be taught and learned has to pass a didactical examination concerning its applicability in orienting one to life.
The fourth problem—the analysis of the nature, function, and importance of historical consciousness—is, in my opinion, the most interesting issue for scholars of historical studies. Historical consciousness is the general category that deals not only with the learning and teaching of history, but covers every form of historical thinking: through it one experiences the past and interprets it as history. Its analysis thus covers historical studies as well as the use and function of history in private and public life. The German discussion of this subject has been rich and varied and it is impossible for me to sum it up here. Therefore, let me, therefore, mention what I consider three of the most important points.

First, historical consciousness cannot be merely equated with the simple knowledge of the past. Historical consciousness gives structure to historical knowledge as the medium for understanding present time and for anticipating the future. It is a complex combination that contains an apprehension of the past regulated by the need to understand the present and expect the future. If historians come to realize the essential connection of the three time dimensions in the structure of historical consciousness, they could avoid the widely accepted academic prejudice that assumes history deals only with the past: that it has nothing to do with the problems of the present and even less to do with the future.

Second, historical consciousness can be analyzed as a coherent set of mental operations that define the peculiarity of historical thinking and the function it plays in human culture. Here the discussion about the narrative structure of historical explanation is extremely useful. Historical narration is more than a single specific form of historiography. Contemporary interpreters of this issue (for example, Hayden White and Paul Ricœur) present historical narration as a basic mental procedure that makes sense of the past in order to anticipate practical life within time. To understand this operation fully we must first identify the procedures of historical narration, define its manifold components, describe their coherence and interrelations, and construct a typology that includes their appearance under different circumstances and times. When this is done we can acquire an understanding of how the past acquires its specific historical design, and of how history is constituted by specific speech acts, forms of communication, and patterns of thought. All of this can give us insight into the cultural function of historical thought and argumentation in social life.


27. Cf. Rüsen, "Die vier Typen des historischen Erzählens."
and psychology. Given this imperative, the definition of the didactics of history as that discipline that investigates historical consciousness is too broad. I would like to propose a more modest definition of the didactics of history's object of inquiry. Its goal is to investigate historical learning. Historical learning is one of the dimensions and manifestations of historical consciousness. It is a fundamental process of human socialization and individualization and forms the core for all of these operations. The basic question asks how the past is experienced and interpreted in order to understand the present and anticipate the future. Learning is the framework in which the different fields of didactical interest are united into a coherent structure. It determines the subject matter of the history of didactics as well as the specific theoretical and methodological approaches to it. Theoretically, the didactics of history has to conceptualize historical consciousness as a structure and process of learning. Here it is necessary to reformulate ideas about historical consciousness as being a basic factor in the formation of human identity by relating these concepts to the educational process, which is also basic to human development. Methodologically, the didactics of history can use established methods of psychology and sociology and restructure them to accord to the peculiarity of the historical consciousness. With respect to the reflections upon the specific teaching and learning processes in the classroom, the didactics of history can choose the elements of pedagogics that pertain to the peculiarity of historical consciousness. What one must remember here is that teaching history affects learning history and the learning of history shapes the ability to orient oneself to life and to form a coherent and stable historical identity. So too, in the field of public life, the focus upon the learning experience should lead to a coherent program of research and explanation. Finally, with respect to the real process of history instruction in the school, the emphasis upon historical learning can reanimate the teaching and learning of history by emphasizing the fact that history is a matter of experience and interpretation. As so conceived, the didactics of history, or the science of historical learning, may demonstrate to the professional historian the internal connections among history and practical life and learning. This, more than anything else, can give new meaning to the phrase, *historia vitae magistra*.

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**HOW IMPORTANT FOR PHILOSOPHERS IS THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?**

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Two questions motivate this paper: what is the relation between philosophy and the history of philosophy? and: what is the value of studying the history of philosophy for those pursuing philosophy? Widely divergent answers are possible. Quine, for instance, writing about science but thinking of philosophy, says:

Science and the history of science appeal to very different temperaments. An advance in science resolves an obscurity, a tangle, a complexity, an inelegance, that the scientist then gratefully dismisses and forgets. The historian of science tries to recapture the very tangles, confusions, and obscurities from which the scientist is so eager to free himself.¹

If Quine is right, then to the extent that philosophy and science bear the same relation to their histories, the historian of philosophy must be an inadvertent obscurantist, reconfusing that which is now clear. Opposed to Quine is an outlook of a different sort, which we may in general associate with the doctrine of historicism, and which I shall refer to as "the historical point of view."² This position is expressed by the Spanish historian of philosophy, Julian Marías:

Philosophy's relationship to its history is unlike that of science, for example, to its own history. In the latter case, the two things are distinct; science, on the one hand, and on the other, what science was, that is, its history. The two are independent of one another, and science can exist and be understood and cultivated separate from the history of what it has been . . . In philosophy the problem is philosophy itself; . . . The entire past is included in every act of philosophizing. . . . [A]ll philosophy includes the entire history of philosophy; if it did not, it would not be intelligible, and, what is more, it could not exist. . . . There is, then, an inseparable connection between philosophy and the history of philosophy. Philosophy is historical, and its history is an essential part of it.³

I must say at the outset that my sympathies are with Quine. Though I grant the history of philosophy more relevance than he perhaps does, I believe that the importance of doing the history of philosophy for doing philosophy has been exaggerated. On my view the value of the history of philosophy for philosophy