TRANSGRATIONAL HISTORY IN
TEACHER EDUCATION

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This article presents an argument from a German background and point of view in a current American debate about new challenges in teacher education. Experience and theory both show how necessary Transnational History is as a foundation for contemporary teacher training. Three ways to proceed in Germany are presented here, with suggestions for other countries, too.¹

1. Current Debate

This study originated in an ongoing debate entitled ‘Training Teachers of World History’ that has appeared in ‘Perspectives on History’ (the magazine of the American Historical Association) since October 2009.² Robert Mc Bahrain and Lauren McArthur Harris of the University of Wisconsin initiated the debate, being intellectually alert to serious deficiencies in the education of American teachers of world history.

Bain and Harris see two major problems. The first concerns supply and demand.³ Serious political developments in the United States and beyond stimulated a new interest and demand for World History courses in schools. According to a current survey 75% of all American high school graduates have attended such a course, an increase of 100% over 1982. Correspondingly all schools are eager to include such courses in the curriculum. There was, however, not enough teacher training to meet the demand. Teacher education at universities was still dominated by courses dealing with national history as promoted by Senator Robert Byrd’s Teaching American History Institute.⁴ So World History courses are still taught in an inappropriate way or even by teachers without any formal world historical training.

In the German Länder there are no World History courses competing with standard history courses, so one cannot make a claim for more teacher training based upon the number of students enrolled in World History courses. But the political and cultural changes due to globalization which Bain and Harris use as an explanation for the US trend are of relevance in Germany as well.
This is why one may talk of a similar new need for historical orientation in the USA and Germany. So the reflections of Bain and Harris are interesting for the German discourse as well.

Bain and Harris call their second concern the Problem of Coherence. Teachers notice that World History does not provide a convincing narrative framework when compared with national history courses that often provide a flat success story. It is all too easy to end up in the trap of the old or traditional narrative of World History (rise of the west) with its more or less hidden background philosophy if one tries to narrate or teach the one history of the whole world. Even the glorified National Standards for World History (1996) cannot in the end escape that trap of hemispheric blurring.

The so-called Problem of Coherence is not so much a problem as a paradoxical risk and a special chance for history classes to question our common nostrocentric boundaries instead of accepting them as an initial condition that is taken for granted. Moreover one can probably more seriously investigate such a Transnational History if it is not, as in the USA, taught separately from the common history course at, as we can hope for in Germany, forced to integrate repeatedly within the latter. This is similar to what Denis Sheerl once called 'polythetic narrative framework'. However, he used the term in the context of another derivation and with regard to a British history course.

2. Why Do We Need Transnational History in Teacher Training? Examples.

Anyone discussing teacher education has to bear on his field of reference: lessons in school. Here are three examples: German history textbooks and lessons dealing with the end of the Seven Years War, the First World War, or the revolutionary changes of 1989, usually treat these subjects just as they had done forty years ago.

German pupils learn specifically more about the Treaty of Hubertusburg than about the Treaty of Paris. The conclusion of the Seven Years War appears first and foremost as ‘the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg’ and not as the first effective global balancing of interests (which it probably was), which brought about cultural relations and coinage important to the present day.

The same holds true of the end of the First World War. German students may learn a lot about the Treaty of Versailles and its severe results for the German Empire but they usually learn nothing about the other peace treaties of Saint-Germain, Neuilly, Trianon, Sèvres or Lausanne and their worldwide rearrangement of boundaries and state loyalties that have brought about persistent conflict right up to the present day.

Finally, 1989: teachers and students often consider themselves fortunate if their history class reaches this very contemporary era at all. If ‘1989’ is treated at all then it is probably in accordance with the leading medium of the history class – the textbook. Following the common depictions German pupils can learn a lot about governmental actions from Moscow, Berlin, Bonn, Paris and London to Washington, but they mainly learn about German reunification. They can also learn something about the East German civic movement, and the struggle for freedom of travel, speech or political participation. German narratives also normal do not forget to refer to the Polish Solidarność or to the first Hungarian reformers. However, dozens of African, Latin-American and Asian upheavals, revolutions and reform movements between 1988 and 1991 from Beijing to Rangoon, Addis Ababa, Pretoria, Assuncion and Santiago de Chile – just to name a few – remain blinded out completely.

Under such treatment 1989 does not stand out as the long year of real global interrelation, which appears strange from the perspective of today. It ought to be considered as a year of a worldwide breakdown of usurped state power regardless of each country’s political agenda. From a transnational perspective ‘1989’ can be regarded as a pandemic of the democratic desire for freedom.

These three examples were chosen to make clear and concrete why we need schools and teachers to think in terms of Transnational History. They ought to show by examples what potential for learning exists in the manner of historical thought.

In my opinion it is also possible to deal with this argument on a more abstract level.
3. Why Do We Need Transnational History in Teacher Education? Theory

Here I follow two aspects. First, the perspective and approach of Transnational History is a question of hermeneutical completion. Many historical interpretations of past phenomena simply remain insufficient if one forces them onto the narrow framework of national narratives. It is, admittedly, a familiar objection to this argument that every didactical decision on certain subject arrangements, whether at schools or colleges, is necessarily determining and excluding. We simply have to choose, according to this argument, between alternatives, and that is why hermeneutical completion is not more than an empty phrase. One might notice an underlying assumption: if a decision is basically and inherently arbitrary, then I can practice those subject patterns that my students and I are accustomed to. Nothing is more comfortable than this didactical habit.

However, it is at the same time, unfortunately, logically not convincing. If we think of Transnational History, the term 'hermeneutical completion' refers not to any subject arrangement but to special ones. The special nature of these cases consists of their cross-border, cross-culture, cross-era or cross-domain structure. There are plenty of historical phenomena that can be explained sufficiently in a national narrative ('Basisnarrativ').\(^8\) There are, however, also some historical phenomena needing strict transnational explanation, as measured by the general methodological principles of historical research. 'Historians no longer have to invent the world in order to study world history.'\(^9\)

Secondly, in the other aspect of the subject, the argument of hermeneutical completion is not only a methodological one. Beyond that and perhaps not less important is the fact that requirements of our educational target groups — or, to use Bain’s and Harris’s words, the history referring demands of students in times of cross-cultural mass migration with its continuous repercussions and the much-emphasized economic, environmental and cultural globalization — have changed considerably. In short, it is not a matter of course that our apparently comfortable nostocentric narrative framework is indeed truly plausible for our current learning groups at school and at college, being often composed of students from totally different Web-2.0Lifeworlds which demand completely different identi-

fications than those we are used to. The situation is regionally different but structurally the same.

One may observe a common situation, ‘non-contemporaneousness of the concurrent’ or in German an ‘Ungleichzeitigkeits der Gleichzeitigen.’ Many teachers and teacher educators are educated and prepared for life in times and situations characterized by a scarcely developed cultural and ethnical diversity. Nonetheless they are confronted by rising diverse cultural requirements in their learning groups today. This mental and social gap has to be bridged if history education at schools and colleges is to fulfill its responsibility to encourage and support a balanced historical interest and identity. Education needs mutual comprehension.

4. Framework Conditions for Transnationally Oriented History Education

The call for Transnational History at German general-education schools requires that the deficiencies of current practice be described. When I consider all the scientifically generated empirical data about German history education, when I consider common knowledge, and finally when I consider my own experience as a former teacher or my current experience as a teacher-trainer, I have to assert that Transnational History or a global perspective on history is in effect irrelevant in German history education. The traditional master narrative in its national or Western variation, depending on the era being studied, governs the German pupil’s access to history.

Much has changed positively since the 1970’s, due to the awakening of History Didactics in Germany. We can look with pride at vigorous and up-to-date teaching principles like source-orientation, method-orientation and project-orientation among others. However, regarding the basic patterns of different variations of the creation of historical significance and identity, we are confronted by very traditional one-dimensional historicism. In textbooks and in their plans for lessons and panel discussions there is cultivated a nostocentric one-dimensional outlook which can only be marveled at.

The reason for that peculiar inadequacy of methodological innovation and for the unchanging content cannot be found in the social circumstances of history education. Rather, the broad diversity
of today’s pupils should lead teachers to reflect earnestly upon the
traditional patterns of history narration. The reason for that
inadequacy is to be found, in my opinion, mainly in the individual
teacher and the different phases of teacher education. Above all, this
inadequacy is not based on a lack of emphasis on textbooks or
curricula. Criticism of official curricula is always possible and
desirable, but it should not become a cheap excuse which
simultaneously claims a didactical authority of instruction for itself.
Curricula and textbooks are one thing, concrete lesson plans are
another.

And indeed, looking analytically at contemporary German history
school standards and curricula one can find many fashionable phrases
in the political and educational prefaces and many fashionable trends
concerning historical content. But one can find absolutely nothing
leading to a systematic and reasonable answer to the social, economic
and environmental diversity challenges of the present time and our
probable future.

Current curricular prefaces deliver plenty of concepts like
‘competence expectations,’ ‘global knowledge,’ ‘guiding knowledge’
and ‘performance standards.’ Any explanation of the standards and
content of curricula requires an understanding of the modern world,
of transnational contacts and of how people across the world
understand or misunderstand one another. However, if one looks just
a little further, leaving through the fanciful language of educational
policy, one discovers those features of the curricula that have the
most significance for history teachers in their daily professional lives:
the content charts.

Admittedly, beside the well-known canon of Western knowledge
some non-European and normally non-German topics are stipulated
too – but just concerning the three ‘classical,’ nortocentric historical
fields of world history: the era of ‘Discoveries’ beginning with
Columbus, the era of ‘Imperialism’ of major European powers, and
finally the confrontation of the Cold War and its by now predictable
successful outcome.

Briefly speaking, the seemingly super-modern curriculum follows
the old-fashioned dichotomizing mantra of ‘The West and the Rest,’
if ‘the Rest’ gets on the horizon at all. To complete the picture, I
would like to mention the most modern among the approximately
one hundred history curricula in federal Germany, the curriculum of
North Rhine Westphalia for the Sekundarstufe I (secondary school)
from 2007. A glance at the current curriculum from the Land Berlin
for 2006 leads to no other result. The conclusion that Bain and
Harris came to with similar results for the United States in 2009 is
indeed worth considering. The basic narrative patterns of historical
teaching are obviously strongly resistant to change.

5. Conclusions: What Does Teacher Education Need in Order
to Enable Teachers to Teach Transnational History?

Three points stand out:
- The substantial change and improvement of official guidelines and
the corresponding textbooks is a long-term business and it is in
addition a political business. Insofar as it is political it is incalculable
and contingent upon outside circumstances. Frequent attempts to
exert influence on education policy and textbook production certainly
make sense, but they do not refer directly to our professional
responsibility; nor do they exhaust it.
- In order to promote the desired change we must look at the
everyday professional practice of history teachers at university. Bain
and Harris claim correctly ‘However, a crucial question remains:
What knowledge of world history is most valuable for teachers of
world history?’ From what I have observed, the Science of History
in Germany has expanded extensively over the last twenty-five years
to include suggestions and criticisms from representatives of the
schools of Historical Comparison, the History of International
Relations, Postcolonial Studies, Global History and Transcultural
History, just to name a few. One result among others was a kind of a
‘New National History.’ Therefore the problems which might be
charged to history education at German schools certainly are of less
concern to history courses taught at university. Nevertheless in
courses of, for example, Medieval History, students should not only
be taught the theoretical and conceptual questions of Transnational
History. It is from my point of view much more important to
challenge every subject systematically according to the problem of
hermeneutical completion. Whatever the political and cultural
borders might be at the time under study, whatever traditional limits of
explanation might exist in our time, the educational question is: what
are the real sufficient historical explanations and interpretations?
Concerning university courses in History Didactics it seems to be important to make intellectual autonomy sustainably possible in dealing with historic-political demands, curricula and textbooks, all this with regard to the circumstances and the normative setting of the prospective occupational field, which can be quite divergent as far as the new approach of Transnational History is concerned. Teachers must be able to understand and to explain the principles of narrative construction as oriented toward certain target groups. They must also be able to recognize and judge the conditions and factors of the process in which master narratives are generated, how they keep their validity and how they manifest themselves concretely. Thus they do not only need a knowledge of historical fact in order to plan lessons but also the competence of deconstruction in order to become able to make their pupils do their part in constructing a corpus of history which is reasonable, communicable and which can also be criticized — in short, a somewhat sophisticated historical identity.

- In conclusion, still more important than straightforward teacher training seems to be advanced teacher training. From research we know that young teachers, confronting the mighty and innumerable demands of school reality and school supervision, tend to distance themselves quickly from what they learned at college. This is especially valid at a point where established certainties are brought into question. Thus young teachers need support, and that is why a continuous and persistent follow-up in Transnational History teaching is necessary to hold firmly in place those historical skills, habits and competencies that hopefully we instilled in teachers at college. This presumes a better organizational frame of German advanced teacher training. And it naturally presumes the willingness of university lecturers to commit to teacher training. Often good intentions fail in practice because there are no handouts of specific historical content for teachers with which one could compensate for deficiencies in the fields of Transnational History. These deficiencies are conditioned by the different ages and experiences of teachers, but they could be rectified by specific directives from the university for use in history classes in schools. This appears to me as a prospective field for commitment.

Coming to the End

Bain and Harris have not only triggered an important debate in the United States. The above mentioned problem of supply and demand is relevant for Germany as well, but in a different way. I have tried to demonstrate how one might work on this problem. The Problem of Coherence which is stressed by Bain and Harris can however not be regarded as such: paradoxically, the attempt to solve it leads behind current standards of scientific knowledge in the discipline. Those standards should maintain their power of veto in the field of World History education.

Notes

1 With many thanks to Mr. George Wrangham for his linguistic corrections, all remaining inaccuracies are mine.
  (http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2009/0910/0910teac2.fcm, last opened at 2010-05-15);
  Perspectives online 2009 (http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2009/0910/0910teac4.fcm, last opened at 2010-05-15);
5 Bain, R. & McArthur Harris, L. (2009), paragraphs 5-11.
7 This empirical based supposition gets currently even more evidence by the results of a Bochum master thesis project, vide van Laack, Christina (2010), 
HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND THE ACOUSTIC DIMENSION. 
A NEW FIELD FOR TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS?

Robert Maier

Mentions of acoustic phenomena (noises, sounds, melodies etc.) in history textbooks, though themselves 'dumb', enable pupils to imagine the 'sound' of history. This study explores how intensive this phenomenon is, its causes and the ways in which it is presented. By taking a look at textbooks from earlier periods, one may realize that the widespread advancement of images has led to the neglect of the acoustic dimension of history in textbooks. Cultural influences also have to be brought to account. The study of a Brazilian textbook shows that, in cultures which rely only minimally on written tradition, the reconstruction of historical sonorities acquires greater importance. New media make it possible to place greater emphasis on the acoustic dimension of history in classrooms. If textbooks are commensurate with the medial pilot function ascribed to them and recognize the critical treatment of 'sounds' as a pedagogical exercise, the challenge they face is considerable indeed.

Hardly anyone would deny that there is an acoustic side to history. On an individual level, voices, sounds, screams and melodies are often the most lasting memories as they possess a particular emotional value. Sound sequences constitute historical rituals such as drum rolls and fanfares. Tonal icons are key expressions of identity within communities, such as hymns or the chimes of Big Ben, and, like Joseph Goebbels' cry, 'Do you want total war?', they take on symbolic character for a particular epoch.

For a long time, the history conveyed by textbooks was reduced to texts. This only changed during the course of the last few decades as a result of new printing technologies. Now it is hardly possible to imagine textbooks without images that are discussed and evaluated. With the acoustic dimension of history, however, it is quite a different story. Now, as ever, textbooks are a silent medium, and consequently textbook analysis has never truly concerned itself with 'tonal history'.

At first sight this appears to be entirely logical and understandable, though it is only partly correct. Just as purely textual schoolbooks have fostered, inspired and specifically created visual conceptions of