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Psychological Presuppositions in the Teaching of History

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A psychological orientation precedes all methodology

UNTIL now not a great deal has been accomplished by practical investigation into the specialised field of the psychological foundation of the teaching of history. There are many questions which merit attention: How is the child's experience of time composed? How does his awareness of time develop? When and how does a child experience the historic for the first time? What excites the child's spontaneous interest? How does a child explain the origin of historical objects with which he comes into contact? How does he enter into the world of invisible intellectual facts, i.e. the relation between processes and things? When and how does the first clear demarcation arise between the world of fairy-tales and the reality of history? Is the child capable of reconstructing from the manifold data of history a total image in his perception? In each phase of his development the child reveals a specific attitude towards history, and if we do not wish to go right over his head, we must adapt historical teaching to his mental capacity.

A considerable amount of research has been done overseas, but not sufficient. In addition, the findings have been divergent. The most important work in this connection has been done by educationists such as Petzelt, Kroch, Piaget, Sonntag, Hansen, Stern, Spranger and Heinrich Roth, whose book, *Kind und Geschichte, Psychologische Voraussetzungen des Geschichtsunterricht*, is important.

This article, which briefly sketches the psychological problem is based on the findings of educationists whose works are mentioned in the bibliography. It should become the special task of history lecturers at normal colleges to investigate this matter scientifically. In this way they can help to provide a basis which can be used by students and history teachers in the execution of their task.

There are two important problems connected with the psychological aspect of the communication of historical knowledge: the first is the development of the child's experience of time and the second is the development of his ability to understand or grasp history. How does the child's experience of time develop, and how does he arrive at a knowledge of time? Since animals have no memory in the human sense, they have no experience of time. The human being is capable of recollecting something: memory, therefore, is a condition of his time-experience, which in turn is a condition of his experience of history.

History, according to Droysen, is the time-ordered memory of mankind. What has happened leaves a "mark" in the process of time. We only become aware of time through the succession of events. According to Roth, memory is the ability of the human being to elevate himself above the flux of time, i.e. he can restore to the present the things of the past. This takes place by means of a process which converts the things of the past into those of the present. Because man is able to think of the things of the future as if they belonged to the present, he reaches out into the future. The person who experiences and judges history rises above time because he combines the past, the present and the future into a unity in the *now* of his historical consciousness. Because man's memories are brought into a state of cohesion, he creates for himself a numerically ordered time-continuity, in which each event has its own place. Because time "flows" events can be represented in sequence.

There is a great difference between the time-experience of a child and that of an adult. A small child lives only in the present. Everything is "*now*", but he already has an expectation of things to come such as, for instance, his birthday or Christmas. As he becomes aware of this life, so he becomes aware of the fact that his life still lies

ahead of him ("when he is a grown-up one day"). The old person on the other hand, who has had a full life, looks back at the past of his life. Because the youth looks forward, time passes slowly for him. The opposite is true of the old person. The more time is filled with experience, the more quickly it goes by. The reason for this is that we do not remember time, but events. The youth and the adult each has a different attitude towards time, and consequently a different attitude to history. It is during puberty that the young first outgrow their naïve experience of time and become time-conscious. The question is how this naïve awareness of time develops into the complicated time-experience of the adult.

The second problem is the unfolding of the process of the understanding of history in the child. This is even more dependent on an encounter with the content of history than is the development of the child's consciousness of time. The awakening in the child of the understanding of history is commensurate with the measure in which he experiences the past, reacts to it and makes it part of his spiritual make-up. At about the age of nine the child begins to show signs of historical curiosity. This supplies starting points for the stimulation of an understanding of history. If he knows what attitude the child will adopt towards history and in which aspects of the past he is interested, the history teacher will be able to introduce the child into the world of history.

The historian's act of "understanding" and the child's fantasy

Psychologically, the realisation of historical knowledge by the historian amounts to this: The past is a reality which no longer exists, except in our conception. To form an image of the past in his mind the historian must transcend himself, as it were, in order to enter the minds of strangers from other times. He becomes identified with the object of his contemplation, which becomes part of his spirit, and yet he must dissociate himself from it by means of his critical faculty and self-control; he must be able to link the unconnected facts and integrate them to form an image of the past; he must, in fact, bring the past back to the present and relive it; otherwise he will not be able to know, to judge and to determine the causal connections that existed in the past.

In the teaching of history, this process must run its course in the child. The question is how this can take place in a mind which still exists in the concrete and visible world and which is not mature enough to form abstract images and conception complexes. The teacher must adapt the psychological conditions which are present in the formation of the image by the historian to the child's stage of development. It affects the child's conception of time, the transformation of his fantasy into the historian's penetration or transference into the past, and also the child's ability to survey the isolated facts and mould them into a total image.

The teacher must broaden the still structureless time-conception of the child, to whom reality exists exclusively in the here and now, to include historical time which is based on a classification and fixation of events in a time-sequence. Without this no comprehension of the past is possible.

The moulding of the child's fantasy into the historian's act of transference must be effected by means of personal abstraction. It appears that the ease with which the child achieves identification and forms illusory images can easily lead to the psychological activity of the historian in "understanding" history. Here one should bear in mind that the child's fantasy has free play and is unfettered, whereas the historian's transference to and self-identification with the past is conditioned by material already formed, which sets bounds to the flights of his imagination.

The child loses himself in the images created by his imagination. The historian, on the other hand, always keeps at a distance, and regards the image from the outside, as it were. Although the child is able to create images or figures through illusions, he always remains in a world of his own. The historical image, on the other hand, is concerned with unique and individual things which force one to transfer oneself to the reality of a different, strange world. Whereas the child's world of fairy-tales is boundless and infinite, history is bound to a limited and circumscribed imagination, which always includes the element of criticism.

If the teacher wishes to remould the child's fantasy into the historian's identification with and understanding of the past, he must take the above-mentioned differences into consideration. The child's imagination must be riveted to a concrete historical object. The easiest way to do this is to make the past present again, and by analogy with our present experiences create an understanding of the past. It can be explained to the child that what is now the present, will be history in a hundred years' time. If the child projects his thoughts a hundred years hence and from that point of time looks back, "history" will become as much a reality to him as the present. The child will then realise that history is "life", and that it was once the "present". By the process of making the past the present once more the child will be given an opportunity to relive the past and in this way "understand" it. But it must not be left at

that. As will be indicated in the next chapter, the child's reflection must be connected with this so that the experience can be mentally digested.

When the pupil applies his mental faculties to the reliving of the past, he learns to survey the facts and data of the past and to integrate them into a cohesive entity. This is the *sine qua non* for the formation of the historical image. The simplification of intricate historical processes by means of vivid narratives is a great help in the achievement of this purpose. History must be reduced to the actions of concrete people. It must become alive and visible to the child. Through concrete, detailed picture-making the child is able to enter into the spirit of a foreign atmosphere.

In the following sections the findings of educationists and psychologists are briefly classified under four headings: (*a*) general characteristics of the child's stages of development, (*b*) the development of the corresponding time-conciousness, (*c*) the nature of historical interest and (*d*) the development of the child's understanding of history. Since the general characteristics of the phases through which the child passes are discussed in detail in child psychology, they are mentioned only briefly here.

The first four school-years (± 6–9 years)

(*a*) *General characteristics of this phase of development*

In the first two school-years the child's experiences as a whole have not yet assumed a definite structure and his existence is still confined to the "now". This is the "magical" phase. In his third and fourth school-years the child turns to reality and is filled with an urge to broaden his life.

(*b*) *Development of his awareness of time*

During the first two school-years a naïve experience of time is evident in the child, but this is not yet an understanding of time. This phenomenon is commensurate with his ability to handle numbers correctly. The child lives in the present, but an expectation of future things, for example holidays, already exists. This appears to give a fixed rhythm to the child's first time-experience. He is still unaware of the past, and does not yet differentiate between space and time. In the third school-year we find the beginning of an awareness of time. The child has learnt how to add up figures and how to use a watch and a calendar. He also has a biological time-experience: the age of a tree is established by its size. In the fourth school-year we find a definite understanding of time in the pupil. He experiences, for example, a division of time in the form of cycles (spring, summer, autumn, winter). He is also capable of understanding the succession of generations, e.g. child–father–grandfather–great-grandfather. It is at this age that he discovers the year as a unit of time and begins to understand time connections in terms of numbers.

(*c*) *The nature of historical interest*

During the first two school-years the child still lives in a world of fairy-tales. It is the time of "there was once", the land of the mysterious, of the thousand secrets. In the third and fourth school-years the historical "primeval experience" still consists of fairy-tales and myths, but it constitutes the starting point for the first *historical* interest. In the nine-year-old a spontaneous awakening of the need for historical knowledge is apparent. This can be called a natural historical curiosity. We can call this a turning to reality which has its roots in an urge to broaden life. It is at this point that questions concerning the "truth" of fairy-tales arise. When a story is told the child wants to know: "But did it really happen?" Here lie the roots of inquiring into historical truth. This furnishes starting points for the teacher to really interest the child in history. But the historical must still be visible, concretely intelligible and comparable. The child also displays signs of interest in the age of things, such as buildings and old people.

(*d*) *The development of historical "understanding"*

In his third and fourth school-years the child discovers the human being as a link in the genealogical chain. He begins to ask about his own origin. He understands that things follow one another in time. He distinguishes between fairy-tales and history, but still clings to the mythical. He understands that the past, in the form of old ruins and monuments, can reach into the present and that he therefore encounters the past in the present in concrete form. The child learns that there is progress in an historical tale, that it has a beginning, a middle and an end. If a story ends on an unsatisfactory note, he wants to know "What happened then?" We also find that the nine-year-old child playfully and fancifully repeats things from earlier times. He transfers himself into the spirit and costume of earlier times and imitates them in his play. Examples of this are "cowboys and crooks" and the "I spy" game. This is an important element in the life of the group: think, for example, of the "Scouts" or "Voortrekkers". For instance, groups are given historical names. During this phase historical readers must be in narrative form, otherwise they remain unread.

The fifth and sixth school-years (± 10–11 years): the phase of the full childhood

(*a*) *General remarks*

This is characterised by the harmonious termination of the childhood phase. The child turns to the outside world. He is characterised by his energy and a tremendous activity.

(*b*) *Awareness of time*

There is an increasing time-experience and differentiation. The experience of time exists in numbers and the child becomes conscious of the time-sequence. He begins to acquire an understanding of precise historical dates. This, however, develops very slowly. One can only speak of a real conception of this aspect when the child does not only recite dates, but experiences them as points of time. It is spontaneously discovered, for instance, in old buildings or tomb-stones. A dimension of the depth of time now emerges in his historical experience. The year is established as the first point in the time-sequence. Between the year 1 and, say, 1960, the time-sequence is then filled in.

(*c*) *The nature of historical interest*

The fairy-tale stage is now past, but the fantasy of the child still remains active. Now, however, he is capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality. He is filled with a desire to examine and exploit the world of reality. We find in the child a greater craving for facts and particularly especially for realistic details of history. He is interested in great men, whom he glorifies as heroes. Furthermore, great events such as wars and revolutions appeal to boys. The idea of historical origin now dawns. The child likes great developments, e.g. in the technical field. We also find in him the urge to collect. Historical pictures, for example, are spontaneously collected and posted in albums. The child also evinces an interest in historical museums. He inquires about concrete historical objects, and begins to be interested in historical maps. He can become absorbed in the teacher's vivid narratives. The beginnings of an interest in contemporary historical processes is also apparent. The child begins to notice what is happening in the world around him and wants an explanation of it.

(*d*) *Historical understanding*

The child shows an increasing understanding of important aspects of historical events. He is eager to understand exactly how things happened. His admiration for heroes, however, dominates his interest in intellectual cohesion and when events are judged, it is done superficially. He seldom expresses judgment on historical values. The pupil readily accepts the opinions of others without criticism. He is particularly susceptible to influences at this stage. The teacher can exercise a great deal of influence over the child, but he must also exercise great care. During this phase a feeling of historical responsibility awakens in the child. He also shows the first signs of seeing historical things in broader relation and in connection with the present.

From the seventh to the tenth school-years (age ± 12–16): The pre-puberty and puberty phases

(*a*) *Characteristics of this phase of development*

The period of full childhood is followed by the pre-pubertal period. It is the period of transition to puberty. The two periods cannot, however, be clearly demarcated. Both periods are characterised by the ego-experience of the young person. As a child he was able to lose himself in play. The boy lacked a strong subjective consciousness and could completely surrender himself to the objects of the outside world: he felt his way rather than knew it. With the intensified awareness of his ego there comes in pre-puberty a separation from the outside world; and his inner subjective and objective existences begin to separate.

An urge to act awakens, and hesitantly the youth emerges from himself and enters the outside world. But everything is still indistinct; nothing is mature and complete. He is awkward, clumsy, unsure of himself, as his words, gestures, attitude, dress and action testify. Because he is unsure of himself he soon feels rejected, and thrown back on his own resources. He is super-sensitive and can isolate himself. He is no longer a child, but neither is he an adult. He wants to do a great deal, but finds himself powerless to achieve anything. He is continuously beset by contradictions and discrepancies.

From the pre-pubertal period, however, a hunger for experience of life, for knowledge of the world and its people, remains. He wants to broaden his own subjective life. He is not satisfied with life, and wants to change it to what he would like it to be. Hence his criticism of everything and everybody. He rejects the guidance of his teacher and of adults. His behaviour is characterised by distrust and a sort of nihilism. Puberty is, indeed, a crisis-filled revolution in the life of the young person. He experiences a period of fret and fury, and does not really know what he wants. Nevertheless, there is an increasing differentiation between the various aspects of the world and life. He searches for a life-plan of his own and for

examples to guide him. The question of evaluation now becomes decisive. However, the young person reaches a vagueness of judgment.

(*b*) *Awareness of time*

Whereas up to the phase of full childhood the child lives with a view to the future, the increase in experience causes his recollection to increase more and more in importance. In puberty he becomes aware for the first time of his own life-history, i.e. the historical value of his own existence. His own present is extended backwards and illuminated by his reflections. To this is joined a grasp of the idea of history in general. The awakening of the realisation of the time-factor does not happen suddenly, but develops gradually. He now sees his own life as a phase in the sequence of the space of time. We can call the discovery of the temporary nature of his life psychological time. His discovery of the temporary nature of all life and all things we can call philosophical time. His reflection on time relates to its beginning and end, its meaning and purpose. He develops a sense of periods of time: the characteristics, style and atmosphere of time begin to receive his attention.

(*c*) *The nature of historical interest*

In the puberty phase the child begins to show signs of a striving to obtain a general view of history, though initially he is not capable of achieving this. There is an interest in causal connections and in the motives that cause people to perform certain actions. An interest in socio-historical relations is also apparent. The lives of great historical personalities receive attention: their deeds investigated, praised or condemned. The great concepts of history, such as "father-land", "state" and "nation" are of great significance to the child, because he is seeking examples on which to base his own life. This is accompanied by an interest in political problems of the day. The youngster begins to see them in relation to history. The approach is, however, more emotional than rational. The child can be guided by the teacher into thinking about history.

(*d*) *The development of historical understanding*

In the puberty phase the child's attitude towards history undergoes a fundamental change. He begins to be interested in the psychic aspect of history, i.e. in the motives that inspired the people of the past. He begins to ask questions about the meaning of history and reflects on his own share in it. In this way history becomes a part of life. This is the phase in which the national consciousness of the child begins to awaken.

He becomes conscious of his ties with his own country and people. He lives increasingly on the heights and in the depths of his nation's past; is ashamed of its misdeeds and rejoices over its achievements. History is applied as a solace to the modern generations. He becomes identified with the fate of the group to which he belongs. This disposition affords the historian an opportunity to influence the character of the child and to guide him to objectivity and tolerance.

The eleventh and twelfth school-years: Transition to adolescence (age ± 16–18)

(*a*) *Characteristics*

In this phase the child settles down; the fret and fury of puberty abates increasingly.

(*b*) *Time-consciousness*

The young person is capable of surveying and classifying the sequence of time and space of time.

(*c*) *and* (*d*) *The nature of historical interest and the development of historical understanding*

The ability of the young person to meditate on history and even on the teaching of history has now awakened fully. He is capable of forming historical concepts and abstractions. He can integrate the particulars into a total image. This is based on his ability to observe events in their historical cohesion. In addition, he develops a feeling for the various ways of viewing history. He starts thinking about the content of history. Questions crop up about the progress or changes or changes in culture. He reflects on the path and the goal of his own nation: whence did it come and whither is it going? What applies to his own nation applies to humanity as a whole.

The young person also reveals a grasp of the reality of the struggle between nations. He understands the meaning of friendly and hostile relations. His national consciousness has awakened. He also grapples with the question of values. He is eager to sit in judgment on history. He chooses sides and pronounces judgments as to values. There is the danger that the teacher may convert the lesson into an hour of reckoning. He now has the opportunity to develop a feeling of personal responsibility in the pupil. He can now reveal to him the eternal value of norms. History can be represented to the child as an everlasting struggle between the ideal and reality, and the difference between these two concepts can be explained. The best results are obtained by starting discussions on the subject in class, the teacher providing the necessary guidance. From this comes historical reflection. The scholar is not only interested in political questions but also in religious and

economic history. The scholar is ready for an understanding of the ideas or tendencies of an age or epoch. The operation of ideas must be explained to him. The young person is also interested in the question whether history is subject to laws. Are events predetermined or does humanity have freedom of action? He is capable of grasping super-personal powers and of understanding how history is determined by causal connections which are independent of the human will. Sometimes, therefore, the teacher should take him into the historical opponent's camp and in this way show him the other side of the question. Here lie many startling points for educational and formative work. Only during adolescence does the young person become politically of age.

Teaching history to girls

History is usually of less interest to girls than it is to boys. In the modern state, in which the female also has the vote, civic moulding is just as important for the girl as it is for the boy. Therefore the teaching of history to girls is also essential. Spranger has shown that girls pass more quickly through the phases of life than boys; their pre-puberty years, for example, start as early as the age of eleven and puberty at the age of thirteen. Where girls and boys are taught in a mixed class, they will not necessarily be interested in the same things and troublesome problems will arise.

Girls are interested at an earlier age than boys in the motives behind the actions of historical personalities. Their powers of thought develop later and more slowly than those of boys and they find it more difficult to grasp relationships. They display very little interest in power-alliances and in the game of diplomacy. Since they are more interested in the human aspects of history and endeavour to find psychic explanations for human behaviour one can concentrate in their case on biographies. In biographies conditions, costumes, fashions, etc. are also depicted as part of the picture of the times, and these are of interest to girls. Where possible, one should also concentrate on the heroines of history.

Girls also ask questions earlier than boys do as to the value of history. They want to know what history has to do with our times and whether it is worth while to study it. When girls can be made to realise that history actually deals with the present, a great deal will have been gained. History must not, however, be presented to them in an abstract form. The personal element must not be neglected either. Girls are only capable of abstract thought round about their sixteenth year.

The danger that girls will do the work for the teacher's sake and not to learn the content of history is always present. In that case the teaching of history misses its target. If the teacher can teach the girls to be interested in history for its own sake, the battle is won. History teaching has a practical application. It will assist the situation to rear girls with a sense of responsibility so that they, as the future housewives and mothers, will also be enlightened citizens. In this way a contribution is made to the development of the life of a nation.

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