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PROF DR. MARIA GREVER

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Conversations about Contested Pasts
Historicizing Historical Consciousness in a Globalizing World

Maria Grever
Erasmus University Rotterdam (grever@eshcc.eur.nl)
NL-Lab KNAW Humanities Cluster Amsterdam

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HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS - HISTORICALTHINKING - HISTORICAL CULTURE

Abstract
In several post-colonial countries, the war on monuments and cultural traditions has been given impetus by the Black-Lives-Matter movement and is further fuelled by racist hate messages on social media. Teachers grapple with heated debates on these issues in their multicultural classes. They have a tremendously difficult task in dealing with students' emotions about contested pasts. Sometimes teachers are also confronted with violence outside the classroom. That happened to French history teacher Samuel Paty in 2020, when he was brutally beheaded in front of his school by a young extremist Muslim. In this polarized atmosphere, how can teachers organize a meaningful historical conversation that recognizes students' interpretative traditions without freezing these traditions? Several researchers have pointed to the need for more intercultural orientation in history education. In the context of current tensions, it is therefore invaluable to consider in depth the different interpretative frameworks of student responses.

My paper focuses on this problematic by using a holistic approach to historical culture that encompasses three interactive levels of analysis: historical narratives; mnemonic infrastructures; conceptions of history. The third level offers the opportunity to historicize the concept of historical consciousness and to deconstruct its possible, implicit Western assumptions. I then discuss some aspects of the hermeneutic process of meaning-making in relation to conducting a conversation. I will illustrate my argument with two sensitive topics from the Dutch practice of history education.

Keywords
Historical Culture; Historical Consciousness; Gadamer; Samuel Paty; History Education

Introduction

In several postcolonial countries all over the world, the war on monuments and cultural traditions has received a boost from the Black-Lives-Matter movement and is further fuelled by racist hate messages on social media (Atuire 2020; Çelik 2020; Kapp 2020). These controversies have also entered the classroom. Teachers grapple with heated debates on these issues in their multicultural classes (e.g. Pitts 2017). They have a tremendously challenging task in dealing with students' emotions about contested pasts, certainly if we consider the increasing politization of emotions in the public sphere (Frevert 2019). In addition, debates and protests are nowadays fuelled by social media. On X (twitter) people anonymously post hate messages and angry reactions. As a result, teachers are sometimes also confronted with violence outside the classroom. That happened to French history teacher Samuel Paty in 2020 when he was brutally beheaded in front of his school by a young extremist Muslim. Before the assassination a parent had orchestrated an online hate campaign against Paty. Two

students - not from the teacher's class - were paid to identify the teacher who had shown cartoons of the prophet Muhammad (Henley 2020). Much to the disgust of his murderer, Paty had encouraged critical historical thinking and free discussion, skills that are also important in history education. In this polarized atmosphere, how can history teachers organize a meaningful historical conversation that recognizes students' interpretative traditions without freezing these traditions? What can researchers do to support them? Several historians have pointed to the need for more intercultural orientation in history education (e.g. Rüsen 2002; Seixas 2012). In the context of current tensions, it is therefore invaluable to consider in depth the different historical and cultural interpretative frameworks of student responses.

In this paper, I will first reflect on this problematic by using a holistic approach to historical culture that can provide some starting points for a deeper understanding of current tensions in the public sphere, which also affect the classroom. To this end it is important to historicize the concept of historical consciousness by including it as part of historical culture. In this way the historicity of historical consciousness will be acknowledged, while its possible universal assumptions can be deconstructed as well. After clarifying the conceptualisations of historical culture and historical consciousness, I discuss some aspects of the hermeneutic process of meaning-making in relation to conducting a historical conversation. I will illustrate my argument with two sensitive topics from the Dutch practice of history education.

Historicizing historical consciousness and intercultural orientation

In today's globalizing world, encounters with the past never take place in the separate worlds of academic history, school history, annual commemorations, historical films, games, and other popular expressions. All these genres and audiences generate specific, sometimes overlapping forms of historical knowledge, and there is usually a lot of interaction and mutual influence. The boundaries between genres are historical and dynamic. For example, the emergence of the historical discipline in the nineteenth century relied on the distinction between "scientific history" and "amateur history", which was later exposed as a gender-biased historiographic hierarchy (Grever 1996; Smith 1998). In the 1980s and 1990s, popular genres, such as historical tourism and re-enactments, were often condescendingly criticized by academic historians for their nostalgic and distorted views of the past that can lead to chauvinistic nationalism (Lowenthal 1998). While concerns about superficial interpretations of the past that can lead to its misuse are certainly justified, they ignore at the same time other, sometimes subverted, voices. This negative judgement has gradually changed and

converted into a broader view of how people encounter and perceive the past. According to De Groot (2009, p. 3), investigating how a society or community engages with its past can reveal the dynamics of that culture. In this way, we better understand how history operates in contemporary society and why some historical representations can suddenly evoke such strong emotions. Van den Heede (2021, p. 208) cautions for a binary opposition between popular culture and historical culture. Vast numbers of young people watch historical films on YouTube, play (video) games, post selfies in historical environments on Instagram, or participate in living history activities (Grever & Van Nieuwenhuyse 2020). They gather and process information about the past increasingly built on historical representations they encounter outside history classes (Haydn & Ribbens 2017). With the help of these genres, they give meaning to the past that teachers can discuss in their classes.

This process of meaning-making is based on transmitted traditions of interpretations, what Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006, p. 299) has called the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effect). Interpretation or *understanding* is, according to Gadamer, the basic activity of human existence. We understand the world based on familiar interpretive frameworks, the *pre-understanding*, which are linked to the culture in which we grow up (Grever & Adriaansen 2019). Over the course of their lives, people adjust their frames of interpretation, because every experience is a process of (often unconscious) mediation between old and new (Gadamer 1987). Sometimes new experiences can also clash with existing interpretive frameworks (Grever 2012).

Inspired by particularly German historians (e.g. Pandel 1987; Rüsen 1994, 1997; Schönemann 2000; Demantowsky 2005), at Erasmus University Rotterdam we study processes of giving meaning from a holistic approach to historical culture. This approach offers the possibility to investigate how people deal with the past, such as academic and popular expressions, material and immaterial culture, off-line and online representations (Grever & Adriaansen 2017). Whereas all communities have some understanding of past, present, and future, the meaning they attribute to these three temporal dimensions is historically and culturally variable. Our definition encompasses not only the contents of narratives and historical imagination, but also the ways in which relationships to the past are established or contested in a dynamic interaction between human agency, tradition, performance of memory, representations, and their dissemination, as well as the presumptions about what exactly constitutes history. We therefore distinguish three interactive levels of analysis in the study of historical culture:

1. historical narratives (e.g. about inventions, battles, victories, social movements);
2. mnemonic infrastructures (e.g. statues, archives, university chairs, commemorations);
3. conceptions of history (e.g. progress, decline, eschatology).

The first level refers to telling stories about the past or expressing historical experiences which is both describing and (re)creating what happened, it is both narrating and performing the past (Winter 2010, p. 11). The second level refers to the organisation of how people express their memories, experiences, views, and knowledge, such as annual commemorations, national calendars, mnemonic sites, museums, archives, schools, and other institutions (see also Zerubavel 2003). The third level concerns conceptions of history: interpretations of the relationship between past, present, and future that influence the degree of human agency and the epistemological possibilities to know the past, and vice versa (Grever & Adriaansen 2017, pp. 81-82). Conceptions of history implicate the historicity of human existence and can take many forms, varying in time and space. They overlap, entangle or conflict with other conceptions of history. Notions of human agency being the driving force of history may be at odds with, for example, the eschatologies of monotheistic religions, which conflict with the secular idea of time being infinite and the notion of an open, unknown future.

Particularly this third level of analysis, the conceptions of history, provides an opportunity to historicize the concept of historical consciousness and to deconstruct its possible, implicit Western assumptions (Grever & Adriaansen 2019; Seixas 2016, p. 429). German scholars have argued that historical consciousness and historical culture are intrinsically related. They conceptualise historical consciousness as an individual and mental process, which is expressed in the construction of a shared, collective historical culture. Historical culture and historical consciousness then appear as two sides of the same coin (Rüsen 1997, 2017, p. 168; Triepke 2011). However, seeing historical consciousness as the producer of historical culture would deny its historicity. Moreover, historical consciousness refers not only to an individual mental process but also to a mode of relating to the past that is characteristic for a particular historical culture (Clark & Grever 2018). As part of historical culture, historical consciousness cannot escape its own historicity.

Let me summarize the three levels of analysis with an example: the fact that several European governments attach great significance to a narrative about the liberation of their country after the Second World War (1st level) and orchestrate annual commemorations (2nd level) based on the expectation of reconciliation and progress in history (3rd level) will

probably have a major impact on school curricula, popular genres and the agency of audiences, and vice versa.

Yet we must always be aware that historical culture is neither static nor homogeneous. To be able to understand people's different responses to representations in the public sphere it is also necessary to consider the possibility of different or even incompatible conceptions of history resulting in various forms of historical consciousness (Grever 2023). For example, historical consciousness has a specific meaning in the historical culture of the Maori in New Zealand. Maori's historical consciousness rests on the idea that the history of people and of nature are interconnected. Recently, the government of New Zealand has recognized the old wish of the Maori community to recognize the Whanganui River as “a singular entity that is ‘indivisible’ from its people” (Argyrou & Hummels, 2019, p. 752; Grever 2021). In the Netherlands, historical consciousness is traditionally based on the notion of progress and a malleable future with rational humans as active agents versus a manageable nature. Since the 1970s, Dutch historical culture has changed significantly. The characteristic infrastructure of religious and ideological pillars with separate schools and specific national narratives has virtually disappeared. Due to the arrival of post-colonial newcomers and migrants from Turkey and Morocco there is now a different kind of diversity (Lucassen 2019). In the context of history education, this implies that students are increasingly also bringing non-Western conceptions of history to the classroom with a mode of relating to the past (historical consciousness) that deviates from the culturally hegemonic mode (Grever, Pelzer & Haydn 2011). This situation affects the daily practice of teachers, especially when trying to have a conversation about a publicly sensitive topic.

Conducting a historical conversation

According to hermeneutic philosophy, people generally can learn from each other and their environment in a dialogue or conversation. A *historical* conversation then roughly consists of two steps: on the one hand questioning the sources from the past and on the other reflecting on one's own contemporary position and possible emotions (Paul 2014, pp. 170-176; Grever 2021, p. 23). The conversation with the source to be interpreted (e.g. the story of a veteran, a charter, statue, photograph or landscape) can make us aware of our preconceptions and encourage us to critically question our own frames of interpretation, what Gadamer has called "self-understanding" (Gadamer 2006, p. 83). Self-understanding presupposes a certain distance from the personal past, so that an open attitude can arise towards existing traditions

in which one's own functioning is embedded becomes possible (Gadamer 2066, pp. 291-299; Oudemans 1988, p. 58; De Mul 2009). Perhaps this model of historical conversation is too ambitious for high school students, perhaps not. In this paper it mainly serves as an ideal type to clarify the circumstances of two subsequent classroom situations in which teachers tried to organise a conversation.

In an interview a few years ago in a national newspaper, a history teacher noticed that his lessons about Jan Pietersz. Coen, the director-general of the seventeenth century Dutch East India Company who ordered the killing of 14.000 Bandanese people, did not evoke much interest (Van Walsum 2018). But as soon as he mentioned the historical context of the Black Pete tradition, students' engagement increased by leaps and bounds with opponents and proponents. This Dutch tradition relates to the arrival of Sinterklaas every December who is helped by a group of so-called "Black Petes": white men with black painted faces and black curly wigs handing out presents to children. However, with the arrival of migrants from the Dutch former colonies Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, members of the Afro-Caribbean community began to turn against these performances because of its resemblance of the racist blackface minstrel shows in the US, which creates feelings of fear and insecurity (Grever & Legêne 2023). Due to the heavy and sometimes violent clashes between "defenders of the tradition" and "Kickout Zwarte Piet" activists, and because the appearance of Black Pete evokes associations with enslaved people, many institutions and schools have moved away from this tradition or include in the parade "chimney Petes", "soot Petes" and "rainbow Petes". Recently, the tide seems to be turning in the wake of the Black-Lives-Matter movement. Even Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who initially supported the Black Pete tradition, told journalists during one of his weekly press conferences that he has become aware of the pain these performances might cause (Thompson & Heijes 2020).

History teachers have often used the phenomenon of Black Pete to reflect with their students on its historical backgrounds and the changing significance of the past for different groups of people in current society (Van Boxtel, Grever & Klein 2015). But since the clashes between supporters and opponents hardened, it has become difficult to organise a meaningful discussion about Black Pete with students (De Bruin 2017; Vader 2020). The interviewed history teacher explained to the journalist that students in his classes often respond indignantly about anti-Pete protests: 'I can be angry can't I?' Or: 'I can say what I think or feel, can't I?' When the teacher pointed to the facts about the association of enslaved people, he was immediately part of the "Kickout Zwarte Piet" camp (Van Walsum 2018).

The teacher's solution was to explain how discussions on this kind of themes arise, and what the difference is between opinions and facts. By applying historical thinking (e.g. opinions versus facts) and taking a meta-perspective the teacher stimulated reflection on the relationship between past, present, and future, including how, when, and why traditions such as this one have developed. If teachers can bring students to this point, a dialogue becomes possible: a conversation in which partners display a fundamental openness to each other's truth claims. They share the subject matter, which they approach from different perspectives and experiences; they even can agree to disagree. This means that the conversation partners acknowledge the interpretive traditions in which they all find themselves without utilizing these as *fixed frames* of interpretation. In this way, unexpected voices can be revealed that may stir up their horizons, enriching students' historical consciousness (Grever 2012).

Most important, by making his students aware of the historicity of the figure of Black Pete and of their own interpretative framework, the history teacher also revealed the permanent history of new interpretations. The true conversation, Gadamer states, corresponds with what he calls *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* – translated as "historically effected consciousness" (Gadamer 2006, p. 301 and 336) – a consciousness that is both aware of the historicity of the past, and of the historicity of the interpretive framework of the subject. While we can never fully grasp the Wirkungsgeschichte of the past and of the interpretative frameworks that are used - just as it is impossible to be completely free from it - especially the awareness of changing interpretative frameworks undermines the very idea of fixed interpretations. Precisely this subversion poses the greatest threat to authoritarian and radical ideologies. It is deeply sad that Samuel Paty fell victim to this.

Social markers and intra-group dynamics

Just like in other countries, many Dutch teachers were shocked about the murder. The Association of History Teachers in the Netherlands (VGN) immediately posted a statement on their website: "The VGN offers their condolences to the relatives of our French colleague #SamuelPaty. We will continue to stand up for our fundamental rights" (Van der Schans 2020). Historians published a lesson guide on how to conduct a conversation with students about the murder (De Graaf et al. 2020). The government called on schools to commemorate Samuel Paty (Bouma 2020; Obdeijn 2020). So did the Catholic Emmaus College in Rotterdam. There was a minute of silence and the rector gave a short speech. Some teachers talked with their students about the cartoon issue, which sometimes already created tension.

Then, at the end of the day, things went completely wrong (Kouwenhoven 2020). Five Muslim girls entered a classroom because they had heard that a cartoon of the prophet would be hanging there. It is the classroom of a teacher known for his philosophical approach. The notice board in his classroom was always full of statements and images which the teacher sometimes used for a discussion in his class. The collection also included a cartoon about the attack on the editors of satire magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 (Van der Gaag 2020).

The girls demanded the teacher to remove the cartoon from the board, because they said it is "blasphemy". The teacher explained that the cartoon imagined a jihadist (terrorist) not the prophet Muhammad. The cartoon was a satirical comment on the attacks of Charlie Hebdo five years ago. But it was impossible to get through to the girls. Other teachers were brought to the classroom. The dispute became heated and the girls left; in the meantime the cartoon had been removed. Then the riot continued on Instagram and Facebook. It was said that the cartoon was "of our prophet" and that the teacher would have used it as a deliberate provocation. The photo was widely shared on Instagram. Anonymous threats soon followed. The teacher went into hiding and several other teachers at Emmaus College no longer felt safe (Kouwenhoven 2020; Van der Gaag 2020).

What struck me in the reports about this incident was the fact that the Muslim girls did not want to listen, they seemed immune for the facts the teacher told them. A conversation, let alone the application of critical thinking, such as evidence and sound argumentation, was just impossible. Apparently other, psychological factors were involved here. Let me explain this briefly, because much more research needs to be done.

When teachers are confronted with strong reactions from their students on a publicly controversial topic, such as tearing down statues, the anti-Black Pete protests or the assassination of teacher Paty, they have to face at least two socio-psychological phenomena. First, emotional responses in a group often function as *social markers* and sustain intra-group dynamics, which tends to establish a distinct group identity with outsiders and insiders. This helps groups to create a distinct social identity, but it can also generate social tensions and inter-group conflict (Ellemers 2017, 2018). Second, students bring to the school their pre-existing frames of interpretation - based on specific conceptions of history - pertaining to the community with which they identify, including its moral values. Students (sometimes also their parents) tend to freeze these frames and frequently assess whether or not other individuals subscribe to these values.

Moral guidelines and moral judgments are required through education and socialization by, for instance, families, school and religious communities. Socio-psychologist

Naomi Ellemers points to the process that these social norms can develop into specific moral guidelines "that are internalized by individuals as part of their 'moral compass'" (Ellemers 2018, p. 9). It seems that the priority of the girls was to demonstrate their attachment to the moral values of their religious community. In that case, an open discussion about views from other interpretative frameworks is hardly possible, if at all, probably because entering into a conversation would betray their own moral principles and identity construction.

What does this mean for teachers when they start a conversation with their students about a controversial historical topic? Is there a sort of pattern in students' responses that they can anticipate? First, let us not underestimate the impact of social media. X (twitter) or Instagram facilitate and exacerbate threats. You can easily threaten someone because on social media you can remain anonymous. Consequently, people can also ignore moral norms and values that are universally endorsed, like "do not harm" others (Ellemers 2018). When people physically meet and speak, it becomes more difficult to insult and to make threats. Then they are also forced to relate morally to each other. Second, parents and members of the students' community are often involved in the polarization of the debates in school. In the case of Paty, a father of a student had initiated the hate campaign together with a notorious radical Islam preacher. Yet the French Muslim community, including many parents, immediately condemned the murder and supported the relatives of Paty. The Council of Muslims in France described the murder as an insult to the memory of the Prophet Mohammed.

Concluding remarks

The tensions about Black Pete in the Dutch classroom of the interviewed history teacher were strong, but in the end a conversation was possible. The students accepted the meta-perspective used by the history teacher: the distinction between facts and opinion, the contextual explanation about the Black Pete tradition, and the association with black slavery. In the case of the Muslim girls at the Rotterdam school who demanded that the cartoon should be removed from the notice board, the conversation failed. No matter how clear or valid the facts and the arguments were, it did not work. They were unable or unwilling to distance themselves from the interpretative frameworks and norms of their own community. Perhaps the girls felt their identities were at stake if they were to listen to the arguments and join the discussion. In that case it seems more sensible for teachers to tap into a different repertoire, for instance by showing a historical film about the consequences of (self-)censorship or by organizing a meeting with the girls and their parents. But the trouble was that the anonymous

lies and threats already appeared on social media before anything of that kind could have taken place. It prevented to organise any open discussion or meeting.

This last example also points to a clash between two human rights - the right to exercise a faith and the right to freedom of expression - that may have been based on different and even incompatible conceptions of history. What on earth should teachers do with students and their parents who oppose the curriculum - be it history, biology, citizenship studies, or literature - because of their faith? Some groups of Orthodox Muslims, as well as Orthodox Christians and Jews, adhere strictly to the literal texts of the holy books. In that case, their responses are based on frozen interpretative frameworks. Then conversations about a contested past - possibly even agreeing to disagree - become impossible. It is therefore of the utmost importance that educational researchers and historians in collaboration with socio-psychologists examine how conceptions of history are related to specific moral values and norms, to what extent there is a growing gap between conceptions of history with specific moral values at home and at school, and how that gap can be bridged.

But whatever the outcome of this research, for now our main concern is to ensure that the class can remain a haven for free discussion and safe exchange of ideas (Scheffer 2020). In this way, students can continue to gain a lot of knowledge, insights and skills that they desperately need in this rapidly changing and globalizing world.

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