



Antíteses

ISSN: 1984-3356

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Universidade Estadual de Londrina

Brasil

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Antíteses, vol. 5, núm. 10, julio-diciembre, 2012, pp. 537-553

Universidade Estadual de Londrina

Londrina, Brasil

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Historical Agency As A Problem For Researchers In History Education

Ação Histórica como um Problema para Pesquisadores em Educação em História

Peter Seixas^{1*}

ABSTRACT



In this paper, I am dealing with conceptual problems, turning attention to the second order concept of historical agency, which was identified early as important for historical understanding, but which has received little subsequent attention from history education researchers, despite its attention from philosophers, sociologists and historians. It is a fundamentally contested term, and the bulk of this paper consists of an exploration of a number of challenges raised by it. At the end, notwithstanding unresolved conceptual dilemmas, I will suggest avenues for empirical research on historical agency that might help inform history education, and contribute to more active, useful, and meaningful teaching and learning of history.

Keyword: Historical education. Historical agency. Historical learning. Second order concept.

RESUMO



Neste trabalho, estou lidando com problemas conceituais, dirigindo atenção para o conceito de segunda ordem “ação histórica”, o qual foi primeiro identificado como importante para compreensão histórica, mas recebeu pouca atenção subsequente de pesquisadores de educação em história, apesar da atenção dada por parte dos filósofos, sociólogos e historiadores. Este é um termo fundamentalmente contestado e o conteúdo deste trabalho consiste em uma exploração de inúmeros desafios lançados por eles. No final, apesar de dilemas conceituais não resolvidos, vou sugerir possibilidades para a pesquisa empírica sobre ação histórica que talvez possam ajudar a educação histórica e contribuir para um ensino e aprendizado de história mais ativo, útil e significativo.

Palavras-chave: Educação histórica. Ação histórica. Aprendizagem histórica. Conceitos de segunda ordem.

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* I would like to thank Kent den Heyer for research assistance and for ongoing discussions on the issues raised in this paper

More than a decade ago, two cartoons appeared in a single page spread in the *New Yorker*. One, drawn in stark, minimalist style, a man sits at one end of a couch speaking into a telephone with resignation: “Doing something never solves anything.” In the other, an executive is dwarfed by the huge desk between him and his guest, and by the panoramic views of the city visible through the windows of the corner office. He says to his visitor, “We must never take for granted the precious gift of hindsight.”

“Hindsight” is an excellent term because, unlike the term “history,” it constantly reminds us that our perspective is one of looking back at the past from the present. “Hindsight” links past to present, in a way that prepares one to confront the future. In this way, it serves as shorthand for “historical consciousness.” At the same time, its connection to agency is apparent, in that the view on the past from the present sets one up for action (whether or not action is going to “solve anything.”) These two cartoons, then, set the central themes for a discussion of agency which, as I will argue, is enmeshed with the notion of historical consciousness.

Much of the new history education research—to which this paper is meant to be a minor contribution—works from two ends. First, drawn from historiography and philosophy of history are conceptions of the cultural tools available for historical consciousness, including the second order historical concepts, like significance, causation and evidence, which structure historical thinking (LEE; ASHBY, 2000).² Second, those conceptions frame questions for empirical investigations of young people’s cognition and learning, teachers’ thinking, teachers’ practices, and textbooks’ (and other curriculum materials’) construction of the past. The work does not necessarily proceed from the first to the second, but rather, dialectically, with empirical investigations refining and enhancing notions of the definition, availability and use of cultural tools.

In this paper, however, I am dealing only with conceptual problems, turning attention to the second order concept of historical agency, which was identified early as important for historical understanding, but which has received little subsequent attention from history education researchers, despite its attention from philosophers, sociologists and historians.³ It is a fundamentally contested term, and the bulk of this paper consists of an exploration of a number of challenges raised by it. At the end, notwithstanding unresolved conceptual dilemmas, I will suggest avenues for empirical research on historical agency that might help inform history education, and contribute to more active, useful, and meaningful teaching and learning of history.

² See also, e.g., Levstik and Barton (2001); Lomas (1990); Seixas (1996); Voss and Carretero (1998); Wineburg (1996).

³ A theme issue of *History and Theory* on historical agency was the immediate stimulus for this paper.

From individual to collective agency

The commonsense notion of agency begins with the individual. Philosophers have tended to examine agency as an individual problem (SEARLE 1983; TAYLOR, 1985). At the individual level, agency is a characteristic of those who do something, in the belief that doing something will solve some problem. Thus, agency involves action, but it also must involve intention. Furthermore, actions involve consequences. Actions may have no significant consequences; they may have consequences that align with the actor's intentions; or they may have unforeseen, counterproductive consequences. Thus, concern about the segregation of students with special needs might lead a school administrator to integrate regular classrooms, which has consequences, some anticipated, some not, for the teachers and the students involved. After the consequences are registered, people make judgments, and these all feed into the beliefs which shape the next round of intentions and actions.

It is immediately apparent that an idea of intentional action or agency necessitates a temporal dimension: memory or hindsight. Hindsight, again in commonsense terms, is the act of looking back on what has already happened from the standpoint of the present. Hindsight is my ability to look back to my decision a few days ago to eat some cheese with the overdue "best by..." date on it, and my memory that I felt sick some hours afterwards. Hindsight is of course different from the past. Hindsight is *more* than the past, because we know how things turned out: at the time of eating, I didn't know I was going to get sick, and *now*, looking back, I do. But hindsight is also less than the past, because it is selective.⁴ As I was thinking back, my having become sick (i.e., how it turned out) steered my awareness towards certain actions and not others: I focused on my eating the food, not my drive across the city, not the news report I heard on the radio, nor any of the other things I did in the hours prior to feeling sick. Nor did I, in this case, focus on any other of the innumerable background conditions that set the stage for my action: the fact that our family possesses a refrigerator, built with a certain technology, that we buy food from Safeway, that there is legislation requiring date stamps on perishable packaged food, and so on. So my thinking about the cheese was a simple version of the practice of hindsight. The next time around, I will exercise my individual agency by reading the date stamp before I eat the cheese.

The example leads to consideration the concept of agency as something that requires memory, or temporal consciousness. An agent takes actions, based on intentions, which are informed by memory of past experience, or hindsight. At the same time, hindsight is of little practical use in the present for someone who does not understand him or herself an active agent.

⁴ In discussing hindsight as both more and less than the past, I am paraphrasing Lowenthal (1986).

The central agency problem, as it appears to individuals, is the degree to which they are able to achieve what they intended. Social theorists have posed a dichotomy between agency and structure (SZTOMPKA, 1994). This is helpful as we enlarge the purview from individual decisions and actions yesterday or the day before, to large social formations in historical time. On the one hand are the actions that express human agency or autonomy; on the other hand are the social structures and social constraints within which these actions are played out. How much autonomy do we have? And how much of our lives are constrained by the conditions into which we were born? This is an important recasting of the central question concerning human agency. Yes, I did have a small decision to make about whether or not to eat the cheese, but all of the conditions around that decision—the refrigerator, Safeway, the legislation responsible for date-stamping, the patterns of land use that separate my living space from the sources of food—were structural conditions not of my own making. To what degree do these social, institutional and cultural structures constrain and put limits on the exercise of individual agency? Are we bound, ultimately by an “iron cage” of the conditions in which we find ourselves?

Anthony Giddens (1984) and other social theorists have dealt persuasively with this dichotomy, by emphasizing the fluid, permanently changeable, fully contingent (that is, the *historical*) nature of social reality.⁵ The analysis requires an important move from consideration of individual to collective agency. Collective human agency is, itself, what produces and reproduces social structures that then act as constraints to human agency in the future.

To return to the problem of the old cheese, rather than seeing my family, or Safeway, or urban geography or food product legislation as given structures outside of me, rather we understand them as institutions created and sustained collectively by the social practices of large groups of other human agents like me. And we start to understand that these institutions are historical, that they have changed, and will continue to change. We are active participants in the making and unmaking of the worlds in which we live, and this is a key component of our collective agency. Structure and agency are thus two sides of the same coin. The conscious exercise of this agency, however, depends on our hindsight not only as personal memory, but as history, in regards to the larger social structures whose genesis and changes lie beyond our lives as individuals.

“Cultural tools” is another double-edged concept that works in ways similar to Giddens’ structuration (WERTSCH, 1998). Cultural tools, like Giddens’ “structures,” are inherited from previous generations. They include language, technology, customs, laws, and, particularly pertinent for Wertsch’s studies as well as for our immediate concerns, narratives about the past. Cultural tools constrain and set limits, but they also provide the means by which to transcend themselves. Both the concept of structuration and that of cultural tools enable dialogical bridges

⁵ Giddens calls this process “structuration.” See also, Sztompka (1994, p. 38-39).

between individual activity and larger social, cultural and historical development. Individuals use cultural tools inherited from earlier generations. Their activity, collectively, then builds and transforms (incrementally or otherwise) the nature of the tools that will be used by the next generation for its activity. What is inherited is potentially both limiting and liberating.

Four orientations towards historical agency

The question of agency focuses us on the point between the domination of the legacies of the past and the creative resistances to those legacies in the present. Yet any creative resistances must be undertaken at least in part using the cultural tools which are also legacies of the past. Ideological positions must be acknowledged in any discussion of the issue. In this section, I survey a somewhat arbitrary range of stances, drawn from writing on agency in history, philosophy, and sociology. I examine not only how each makes sense of the interplay between agents and structures, but also its implications for a historical pedagogy that might contribute to increased agency among students.

a. Carlyle's "Great Men"

Thomas Carlyle's (1966) position on historical agency was reactionary, even when he gave the lectures which became *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, over 150 years ago. Working against Enlightenment historiographic trends that had been dominant at least since the French Revolution, Carlyle located historical agency not in any variant of "the people," but in "Great Men":

[...] as I take it, Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world [...] (CARLYLE, 1966, p. 1)

Carlyle's position is not reactionary by virtue of advocacy of the respect for tradition: here agency is tied to Progress, just as it is in liberal understandings of historical change. This is not Edmund Burke speaking. It is reactionary, rather, in its restriction of historical significance to those who hold power. And this restriction carries implications for a pedagogical practice for all those who are not among that small group:

"We all love great men; love, venerate and bow down submissive before great men... Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really

above him?” (CARLYLE, 1966, p. 15)

This conception of agency as removed from the people and invested in a few leaders is thus bound explicitly to a historical pedagogy of submission. And though it is associated with notions of nationhood and Progress, this pedagogy is profoundly anti-modern in its promotion of a natural hierarchy. While historical agency limited to Great Men is unthinkable in most contemporary cultures, Carlyle’s notion of the benefits of *teaching about* Great Men has not disappeared from pedagogical practice.⁶

b. Charles Taylor’s Malaise of Modernity: A philosopher historicizes agency

Exactly 150 years after the publication of Carlyle’s lectures, Charles Taylor delivered and published his own lecture series. Intended to address a broad public, on the topic of our deepest cultural problems, the 1991 Massey Lectures condensed a decade of the philosopher’s work. Leaping from Carlyle to Taylor, we move from “Great Men” as the locus of human meaning, to the modern search for meaning in what Taylor calls “ordinary life.” While it is a more democratic stance, Taylor sees it as fraught with problems. *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991) are efforts to show the contradictions that lie in the heart. What Christopher Lasch called “the culture of narcissism,” Taylor calls the “culture of authenticity.” But while Lasch and others emphasize rampant consumption as central to modernist malaise (FOX; LEARS, 1983), Taylor centers his analysis on production (work) and reproduction (family), which he calls “ordinary life”.

Taylor’s purpose in *Sources of the Self* is “to designate the ensemble of (largely unarticulated) understandings of what it is to be a human agent...this portrait of our identity is meant to serve as the starting point for a renewed understanding of modernity” (TAYLOR, 1989, p. ix). Taylor treats notions of individualism, the “inner self,” authenticity, autonomy as culturally and historically located in the modern era. While they draw on earlier currents, and develop through the 18th and 19th centuries, they take a particular form in the 20th and post-20th century West. These conceptions of self are central to how people enact human agency: Taylor’s analysis makes it impossible to see “agency,” as a transhistorical category, but rather a particular analytical lens for a particular time.

Agency is located in the tension between decisions and actions in the present, and the legacies, tools, and constraints inherited from the past. But among the tools we work with is a conception of identity in the present. He sees our cultural predicament as one of liberal individualism gone berserk, or at least under the influence of a fundamental contradiction.

⁶ See Rüsen, 1989, on the “exemplary” in history didactics. Also see Phillips, 2000, on British historiography prior to Carlyle, and Niethammer, 1992, on German historiography.

Decisions and actions of the individual agent in the present can only be understood in relation to communities and histories. The quest for “authenticity” of the true self, to be achieved by shedding one’s community and one’s history, is pure illusion. “We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages [in the broadest sense] of expression,” (TAYLOR, 1991, p. 33). Thus, becoming an agent is a dialogical process, achieved in interaction with the legacies from the past and others in the present. Taylor thus criticizes the contemporary culture of inward-looking “authenticity” which sees the highest end of life in realizing one’s own authentic self, subordinating obligations to other human beings or to other broader principles. He argues that the choices involved in self-definition and the quest for the authentic self only make sense, only have significance, against a background (or “horizon”) of things that matter *beyond* the self, i.e., history, demands of nature, duties of citizenship and the like (TAYLOR, 1991, p. 31-41). Otherwise, the quest is reduced to triviality; it self-destructs. The personal understanding of authenticity reduces all associations with others to the realm of instrumentality and subverts any deeper commitment to community.

Taylor underscores the distance between his own stance and the blanket condemnations of Lasch (1979) and Bloom (1987). He recognizes something of value in the ideal of authenticity, but only in relation to the “horizons” of meaning, which is elided by “authenticity’s” extreme enthusiasts. Self-fulfillment *requires* unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self. This, according to Taylor, is reason for hope. He wants to “enter sympathetically into its [i.e., the culture of authenticity’s] animating ideal and try to show what it really requires” (TAYLOR, 1991, p. 79). The error of contemporary culture is thus the lack of commitment *beyond* the self, but this lack of commitment rests on misunderstanding. Taylor hopes to uncover this misunderstanding through his work as a philosopher and teacher: he does not envision other pedagogical strategies for cultural improvement.

c. The “new history” and the democratization of historical agency: Davis and Green

A revolution in the treatment of the notion of agency has been central to the historiographic revolution of the past 40 years. Historical writing has been transformed by the project of bringing historically marginalized peoples into the purview of the discipline, not simply as those acted upon, but as active participants. Historians have sought a way to understand the historical agency of relatively powerless groups, even as they operated within the constraints of their social and historical positions. In path-breaking works such as E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* (1966), Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) and Joan Scott’s *The Glassmakers of Carmaux* (1974), those who had previously been thought of as *acted upon*, by virtue of class, race or gender, became historical *actors* in the new narratives.

Not coincidentally, given the political orientations of the new historians, this approach to history has important implications for the uses of history in the present. If ordinary people participated actively in making the world in the past, then ordinary people in the present have an important relationship to historical change. Here, the links between the narratives of a broadly based, collective historical agency of people in the past becomes relevant to political action—the envisioning of futures—in the present.

Among many historians who have embraced the new understanding of historical agency, Natalie Zemon Davis is one of the most interesting for our purposes. Like Carlyle and Taylor, she addressed a wide audience through a series of public lectures related to the topic. But she also extended her public reach through involvement with what is arguably the most broadly influential vehicle for historical narratives in our time, the history film. After her collaboration on, “The Return of Martin Guerre,” she reflected on the problems of historical agency:

I have seen the people not as personifications of heroism or passive victimhood. Rather, they are flesh-and-blood human beings with some agency, shaped by the distinctive circumstances and values of their times, sometimes accommodating, sometimes resisting, sometimes suffering, sometimes escaping, sometimes changing things and trying something new. (DAVIS, 2000, p. ix-x)

Davis’ used this lens for her Frum Lectures, subsequently published as *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*. Enslaved people—by definition—are way down at the disadvantaged end of the continuum of historical agency. Moreover, popular film, as a powerfully evocative medium which draws huge audiences, is as important a location for teaching about historical agency as any. Davis’ awareness of these two points lies behind her analysis of the films—which range from “Spartacus” to “Beloved.” She recounts sympathetically, for example, Black actor Debbie Allen’s approaching Steven Spielberg, wanting to make the story of the Amistad known to “millions of viewers” because it was “‘a true story’ of African people acting to change their fate.” (DAVIS, 2000, p. 72)

What constitutes a “true story” in the context of historical film becomes a central concern. Davis is less interested in small details, minor fictionalizations and undocumented filling in of the historical record, than in the larger lessons that the films are trying to teach. Her standards of historically valid representations thus diverge explicitly from those applied to the academic monograph. In her review of “Amistad,” she accepts some examples of fictionalizing which “add depth to the film” while criticizing other instances as being “arbitrary and unnecessary” (DAVIS, 2000, p. 79).

In the conclusion of the volume, Davis defines her criteria:

Are the fictional elements [...] used to fill in the inevitable gaps in the historical record? Are they historically plausible, so they can effectively serve as “approximate truths” and “thought experiments”? Or do they override perfectly good historical evidence in a way that risks misleading? (DAVIS, 2000, p. 126-127)

Filmmakers are led astray, she suggests, both by too cavalier an attitude towards the evidence, and by a desire to smooth out the strangeness of the past to make it palatable to contemporary audiences. She concludes that both tendencies are unnecessary, and underestimate the abilities of the viewers. She calls for more cinematic inclusion of the signs of tentativeness and uncertainty where the evidence is unclear; and more pointers to the sources from which the narratives were constructed. “History is not a closed venture, fixed and still,” she states, “but open to new discovery” (DAVIS, 2000, p. 133).

This broadly construed and liberal approach to cinematic truth is directly connected to the uses of historical film in the cultivation of historical agency in the present. If historical consciousness involves the use of the past in the present to frame the future, historical accounts lose their power if they cannot be believed as true, at least by the standards that Davis suggests. Her suggestions for the cinematic presentation of epistemological warrant and doubt, furthermore, would help to move viewers towards more sophisticated handling of historical accounts.

More than a decade ago, Peter Novick (1988) explored the epistemological implications of the “new” historians’ willingness to bring their disciplinary expertise to the public realm of contemporary social and political problems (FRISCH, 1990; LINENTHAL, 1996). Perhaps the contemporary historian who has gone furthest in engaging the public presentation of history as an exercise in stimulating historical agency (and writing about it) is James Green (2000). His *Taking History to Heart: the Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* explores doing what he calls “movement history” as a means of supporting contemporary collective action of workers, African Americans and others. Movement history is “that body of work produced by scholars and activists passionately engaged in the study of social protest for moral and political reasons as well as intellectual ones” (GREEN, 2000, p. 2). That engagement has led Green into a variety of projects where the ties between historical agency and action in the present are explicit. The book is an account of his exploration of multiple avenues available to the engaged public historian for promoting historical consciousness. He tells of organizing commemorations in the 1980s, interwoven with the historical events they referenced. He recounts one hundred years of remembering Haymarket. He calls for more commemoration of interracial solidarity in the South: “Those few who dared to create free spaces for democratic experiments in the South deserve their places of memory, if not for what they accomplished in the past, then for what their efforts mean for the future” (GREEN, 2000, p. 165). He has made documentary film, campaigned for monuments, joined workers on strike, and goaded unions towards a more democratic vision of workers’ movements, all from his vantage point as an activist historian:

In their telling, these stories can become part of popular effort to shape a different future from the one global capital has in store for us, a future in which new crusades for equality, democracy, and social justice appear as extensions of nearly forgotten stories kept alive within movement culture by activists and historians working together. (GREEN, 2000, p. 21)

It is worth noting both the continuity and discontinuity between Green and the Enlightenment project. By mid-18th century, French thinkers--Turgot, Voltaire, Condorcet, Diderot--had begun to connect the idea of scientific progress--human control over nature--to the amelioration of the human condition through human control of history. In the eyes of J. B. Bury (1932), writing on “the idea of progress” in 1920, the prospect of potentially unending growth of scientific knowledge and unlimited movement towards the perfection of social and political arrangements, were dynamic ideas: human agency was enhanced by the belief, itself, in the possibility of action for human betterment. In this way, Green is the bearer of Enlightenment thinking. If, however, agency consists of the ability to “dominate the things that dominate us” (TAYLOR, 1991, p. 101), then Green arrays the force of historical agency not against the domination of “nature,” which Enlightenment science confronted, but against the technological/bureaucratic/capitalist society, which poses the greatest challenges to human freedom in the 21st century.

d. Poststructuralism, subaltern studies and agency

It is the links between the Enlightenment, and liberals like Taylor, reformers like Davis, and activists like Green that poststructuralist and subaltern theorists have sought to disrupt. Agency demands agents, and the poststructuralist “fracturing of the subject” poses a fundamental challenge to the notion of agents and intentions. Can there be agency without a subject?

Linda Alcoff (1994) offers a critical summary of a common theme among Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault:

[...] the self-contained, authentic subject conceived by humanism to be discoverable below a veneer of cultural and ideological overlay is in reality a construct of that very humanist discourse individual motivations and intentions count for nil or almost nil in the scheme of social reality. We are constructs mediated by and/or grounded on a social discourse beyond (way beyond) individual control (ALCOFF, 1994, p. 103).

Agency, the possibility of intentional action, knowledge, and thus education, appear, in this line of thinking, to be mistakes.

Judith Butler (1995) offers a more hopeful reading of Foucault: “What he meant, I think, is that the subjects who institute actions are themselves instituted effects of prior actions and that the actions instituted via that subject are part of a chain of actions that can no longer be understood as unilinear in direction or predictable in their outcomes” (BUTLER, 1995, p. 220).

Before we ask, “so what else is new?” we should consider seriously the way in which Butler separates the “subject” from “agency”:

[...] to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked, resisted? (BUTLER, 1995, p. 223).

As she develops the argument, examination of the constitution (or construction) of the subject opens the possibility of the exercise of agency in deeper and more profound ways: “once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations, it becomes politically necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure” (BUTLER, 1995, p. 224). Butler’s comments are part of her discussion of the constitution of “woman”, but subaltern studies scholars have explored similar territory with respect to the colonial and postcolonial subject (PRAKASH, 1994).

The pedagogical project for these scholars is, then, an archeology of the subject: helping people to understand the constitution of their subject positions in a way that they can move beyond them. In an important way, then, this is an extension, and not a reversal, of the new history, in that it involves bringing more cultural categories out of the realm of the given, and onto the agenda of those “to be analyzed historically.” Making these insights accessible and credible to a broad public represents a major challenge, and one which, to my knowledge, few theorists have taken seriously.

Historical agency, historical consciousness, and history teaching

Across the late 20th century positions just reviewed, the common denominator is the rejection of the kind of “you can make a difference” individualism of commonsense thinking about the pedagogical task. In this, at least, Taylor’s critique of the culture of the authentic self bears something in common with the poststructuralist deconstruction of the subject. On the other hand, none of them rejects the possibility of action; none of them confines us to the iron cage of determinism. The necessity to understand the possibility and limits of action is what brings historical agency into the province of historical consciousness. Historical consciousness might even be redefined as the understanding that things change over time in very fundamental ways—that worlds are made and unmade—, that ordinary people play a role in historical change, and that orienting oneself in relation to historical change is a central task for all people.

What contribution does this preliminary investigation of the concept of historical agency suggest for educational researchers? It offers the beginnings of a rubric, and perhaps even a hierarchy of questions, to help researchers investigate young people's cognition with respect to agency. At the most basic level, we might look for students' abilities to make distinctions between what British researchers have already identified as "reasons" and "causes" in history (the former being what was intended by historical actors, the second being necessary or sufficient conditions, whether intended by anyone or not). A second level involves investigation of the notion of individual vs. collective agency. So much of our everyday activity is framed in terms of individual agency and responsibility (and nowhere more so than in school), that this appears to be the common sense, default position. As students try to extrapolate from individual, daily experience to history, a relatively easy route is the one suggested by Carlyle, which never transcends individual agency as the motor of history. Further, it leaves students alienated—except as worshipers of Great Men—from the processes of history. The concept of collective agency thus represents a major—but probably very difficult step forward for students' historical understanding. As Ola Hallden (1994) has shown, even where students start to work with notions of collective agency, they may "personalize" the collective, and thus think about it as if it were acting like a larger version of an individual. Complicating matters, it may be that such a move is necessary, in some form, in the construction of any narrative (CRONON, 1992). At a still more challenging level, investigations might undertake to see how students understand—with or without instruction—the historical construction of subject positions suggested by the literary theorists. Is it possible—and under what conditions might it be productive—to teach students to examine the historical construction of the identity categories that they take for granted in everyday life? And are student teachers in the humanities arriving in teacher education programs sufficiently steeped in poststructuralist theory from their undergraduate programs, that such talk would make sense to *them*?

Finally, the concept of historical agency also opens up questions about how students live their lives, beyond their beliefs and understandings: what kinds of individual and collective action do they take, with what kinds of understanding of its historical situatedness? Opening this trajectory for research on historical thinking begins to tie history education research to questions of efficacy and action that have occupied civic education and social studies researchers quite centrally; conversely, it could bring to questions of citizens' decision-making in these areas of research new layers of theoretical richness (HAHN, 1998; TORNEY-PURTA, 1999).

Some final thoughts

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer offered the following on historical consciousness:

The appearance of historical self-consciousness is very likely the most important revolution among those we have undergone since the beginning of the modern epoch [...] The historical consciousness which characterizes contemporary man is a privilege, perhaps even a burden, the like of which has never been imposed on any previous generation. (GADAMER, 1987, p. 51)

As Gadamer's tone suggests, historical consciousness doesn't make life any easier. In fact, one of the first things we learn from studying history is what happens to "the best laid schemes of mice and men": purposeful action has unintended consequences. This is why the easy justification for the study of history--those who don't learn from mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them—is so unsatisfactory. The promise of historical consciousness is not so much that we will be able to fix the future, as that we be able to meet it with our eyes wide-open.

Here are the words of Tom Crick, the fictional high school history teacher in Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*. He has been challenged by his class to explain why they need to learn history:

And what does this question Why imply? It implies—as it surely implies when you throw it at me rebelliously in the midst of our history lessons—dissatisfaction, disquiet, a sense that all is not well. In a state of perfect contentment there would be no need or room for this irritant little word. History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret [...]. Yes, yes, the past gets in the way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates, makes difficult. But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make-believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky – to be realistic. (SWIFT, 1992, p. 106-108)

We can think of a healthy concept of historical agency as one that has a reasonable sense of which conditions are changeable at a particular historical juncture, and which are not. There is a danger, on the one side, of irrational "cure-alls, wonderworkings, pie-in-the-sky," grandiose interpretations of one's potential and capabilities. As someone who lived through and participated in the radical movements of the 60s, and who went off to a wilderness commune in British Columbia for three years, in order to provide a model for the remaking of the modern social order, I can speak from first-hand experience of this danger.

On the other hand, there is a danger of historical paralysis, of giving up on any possibility of active agency, of effecting any significant change at all. In fact, this may be another aspect of the default position of many students, who take the world they are given as the only world possible. In the face of these students, what kind of lessons, what kinds of demonstrations, will bring them face to face with the possibility of committed action and the

possibility of profound historical change? The answer to this question points us to the central pedagogical question, how do we teach historical agency? Making historical agency one of the central concerns of history education, can help us to do our best to map a course between these two dangers, particularly if we are aware that there is a dangerous turn on each side of the road.

But even doing our best to steer down that road, history is full of surprises: “powerless” people taking charge and effecting huge change, powerful people standing by and doing nothing. Who predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall or that of Saddam Hussein? Or the unintended consequences of either of those events? The teaching of history seeks, then, to avoid despair, avoid pie-in-the-sky, and open students eyes to the possibility of the unexpected. The historical responsibility of history teachers now looms very large: it is to help young people learn how to subject material from the unconscious legacies of the past to critical examination.

The problems facing humanity on earth—increasingly skewed wealth, the erosion of the commonweal, the resurgence of ethnic hatreds, the looming threat of environmental disaster—are formidable. They are also demonstrably the products of our recent and not so recent histories. Cultivating the collective agency of next generation to face them forcefully and realistically must be one of the central goals of education.

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