

Literature Review:

The role of nation states in managing memories of disputed territories

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State education systems: memory, identity, nationalism -Agnieszka Nowakowska

In this section Agnieszka Nowakowska (University of Warsaw) draws on her expertise concerning history narratives in education to explore the relationship between the nation state, schooling systems, memory and nationalism. Agnieszka discusses the role of teachers as active 'memory makers' and how history (and other subjects) provide an important site of antagonistic memory. The discussion concludes by setting out the possibilities of adopting agonistic approaches to teaching, developing resources and encouraging critical thinking.

There is no doubt that the state school system is extremely important in not only educating younger generation but also in the upbringing of future citizens of every country (Williams 2014b, p. 2). Schools are institutions where we can observe the processes of knowledge exchange and socialization simultaneously. What is more, as Michael Apple noticed, although school knowledge may pretend to be neutral and objective, it is always involves the sharing of values and ideologies (Apple 1991). The process of passing knowledge in schools is never innocent: 'it is an ideological process that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups' (Podeh 2000, p. 66). Both, at the beginning of the 19th century, when the system came into existence and now, it is the state that plays a pivotal role in schools' existence. As Williams 2014a, p. VIII). It is all possible thanks to different mechanisms of control. Schools in most countries are financed by the state, school curriculum and textbook narrations are at least approved by the state, teachers are obliged to implement the curriculum and examination system checks if they do it correctly (Low-Beer 2003, p. 3, Podeh 2000, p. 65).

The social results of the relationship between state and school system are enormous. Michel Apple stressed that school system legitimizes and reproduces the existing social structure (Apple 1991). Younger generations are shaped by narrations written by dominant the community (Podeh 2000, p. 66, Williams 2014a, p. 3). State and elites decide what should be taught at schools, what information is relevant and what can be omitted: 'Thus schools are said to control not only people and meaning but also confer cultural legitimacy



on the knowledge of specific groups' (Young 1971). Thanks to that, the status quo of inequality is maintained and the dominant position of elites is held (Kanu 2006, p. 5).

Not only does the school system work as a tool of legitimization but it helps also to shape a sense of identity and belonging of younger generations. It has also the capacity to influence their emotions, views, opinions, deeds and habits. In liberal democracies they socialize future citizens, that will take part in elections (Clark 2008, Low-Beer 2003). Thanks to close relationship with a market (Kanu 2006, p. 13) it also gives youngsters knowledge, skills and habits required by economic system.

From the very beginning of its existence public education systems were involved in creating and constructing a specific community which is a nation. Modern nations, nation states and public schooling system are coexisting phenomena and mutually dependent. Emergence of modern, national identities and development of nation states would not be possible without public, mass, state-controlled school (Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1983; Smith 1999). Schools created modern nations and modern national identity. Even today close relationships between the state and educational systems pose a threat for schools to be turned into a form of nationalistic propaganda (Low-Beer 2003, p. 6).

Nations, those 'imagined communities' possess 'collectively shared hegemonic meanings of symbols, common national representations of the past, which could serve as the basis of a common national identity' (Jaskułowski and Surmiak 2015, p. 4). Schools are tools of reproduction of that nationally defined culture. It is good to remember that students learn how to be good members of a nation group not only by memorizing stories about their nation. School system shapes their concept of duties, habits, and attitudes towards nation. It also shows what kind of feelings should be felt – love, devotion or concern. That is the reason why the public education system is perceived as 'social cement' of national community.

Researchers prove that it is possible for schools to socialize members of national community at every turn. The sense of national belonging can be shaped by school decorations (e.g. pictures hanging on the walls), school celebrations, maps, books available in school libraries, and of course – lessons. And again – at every lesson, even at math, it is possible to provide national upbringing (e.g. thanks to accordingly formulated math problems). One has to



admit that it happened mostly in literature, geography, art and – most often – in history lessons (Carretero 2011).

Cajani notices that history lessons were especially important in the 19th-century schools, when nation states were created: 'History, identity and citizenship developed into a strong triad in Europe during the 19th century in the establishment of the nation-states' (Cajani 2007, p. 1). Grand narratives of national histories became 'biographies of nations' passed on to students during that lessons. It was a biography written in a specific way – vaunting own great national deeds, forgetting at the same time about its mistakes and misdeeds. Schoolbooks narrations disseminate 'ethnocentric views and myths, stereotypes and prejudices' (Podeh 2000, p. 68). The memory passed on during those lessons has mainly features of antagonistic memory. Main goals of education of that time were developing national identity in students, love toward their nation and the country, pride of belonging to national community and desire to fight for it against enemies (Cajani 2007, p. 2).

It is a tough task to break up with such a difficult heritage. As researches show school history developed and uses a specific narrations, bearing a strong resemblance to 'nationalistic discourse' descripted by Ruth Wodak (Wodak et al. 1999). Let us mention a few characteristic features of this kind of discourse: nations are depicted as eternal, natural and inescapable entities. Nations are the main agents of history, and actions of particular individuals are described and perceived as action of a member of a nation. In school narrations we can also find particular standards of morality – everything that is good for a nation is morally right, and what harms it, is considered to be bad.

Thanks to history lesson students learn that they belong to a broader community that inhabits a certain place in the world (nation state) and lasts uninterruptedly throughout centuries. They are also taught that they can belong to only one nation, fundamentally different from the others (Careterro 2011).

Another feature of history narration at schools is its selectivity – it shows students the nation's glories, forget about its wrongdoings. It also attempts to create a homogeneous society, silencing alternative and competing memory discourses' (Zembylas and Bekerman 2008, p. 129, Burszta 2018, p. 2).



It is worth to confront theoretical considerations on the existence of nationalism at schools across different countries. It will allow us to see in how many ways links between a state, schooling system, memory and nationalism can be developed in everyday life. Every country realizes its own educational policy, conditioned not only by current events, socioeconomic conditions or membership in international organizations, but also by its history and traditions. It seems that in democratic countries there is a tendency to look in a more favorable way at decentralization of the educational system, growing autonomy of schools and teachers. At the same time politicians and elites more eagerly support multifaced memory narrations that appear at schools. Those are stories told by their potential voters. In Eastern and Central Europe, after the decline of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union one can observe rediscovery and reassertion of national history. School narrations in those countries tend to stress the importance of the nation, that supposed to be homogenic and coherent community.

In the following short fragment I intend to show a few different case studies that show how different relation between nation, state and educational system can be. Of course, it does not cover all types of possible relations. My plan is to take a short glimpse into a variety of possible settings. I would like to start this overview from Australia – a country that tried to re-nationalized its history curriculum. In 2006 a heated public debate concerning history teaching started (Clark 2008). Two main questions can be distinguished in this debate: what is the sense of history lessons and what history narration is supposed to be convey to Australian students? The debate was launched by John Howard, Australian Prime Minister. At that time history lessons were focused mainly on world history and history source analyses. In his opinion that was a mistake and schools were supposed to promote 'Australinness' to the nation's youngest citizens' (Clark 2008, p. 33). He also stressed that lack of history of Australia at schools 'could threaten the future of the nation itself'. It turns out that many Australian intellectuals, historians and journalists supported Howard's point of view. In many interviews and articles they expressed concerned for the future of Australian identity. It was stressed that the education and national identity should be deeply and strongly interlinked. Young Australians should be taught national pride, attachment to national heritage. According to Clark a general agreement was observed that without any



changes in curriculum and school books, the future of the Australian nation was supposed to be at risk (Clark 2008).

A rather different attitude towards memory at schools and nationalism can be observed in Estonia, a country which regained independence in 1990 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Part of the Soviet heritage in Estonia is a Russian minority consisting over 25% of the population. This group consists mainly of descendants of migrants, who came to Estonia during Soviet times. Estonian and Russian memory of the Second World War and the Soviet times differs substantially. That antagonistic memories of the 20th century lead to civil unrests (e.g. Wertsch 2008).

According to Kello and Wagner (2014) the atmosphere concerning history teaching is full of understatements, and the history curriculum is written in an ambiguous way. On the one hand it can be presented outside (e.g. to European institutions) as promoting tolerance and multi-perspectivity. On the other hand it can be also understood as promoting ethnocentricity. Researchers show that according to the state and social expectations teachers should consider themselves agents of the Estonian state, provide students Estonian version of the past and instill patriotism into their students. History teachers working in the Russian schools in Estonia (for Russian minority, with Russian language of instruction) are suspected of being disloyal to the state and teach their students 'incorrect' or even hostile Russian interpretation of the past.

Kello and Wagner made a series of interviews with history teachers of Russian and Estonian identity. The results of their research show that both groups have completely different opinion on their work and state's attitude towards it. According to teachers with Estonian national identity, their main task is to pass on the objective, historical knowledge to their students. In their opinion any connections between schools, curriculum and any ideology (e.g. nationalism) make a negative reference to Soviet times. As they say, working in this way, they realize the state's expectations. At the same time teachers with Russian identity feel much less comfortable concerning their work. First of all, they believe, that they are observed by the state that checks if they educate loyal citizens. They do not see objectivity in educational materials and school books. In their opinion their narration provides Estonian, anti-Russian point of view on the past.



The research conducted by Krzysztof Jaskulowski's team in Poland showed very close relations between school system and nationalism. One of the main aims of history teaching is passing on standardized, homogenous and national narration of the past. In Poland, that is actually a monoethnic country, there are not many problems with counter-narrations of the past by ethnic minorities. Schools, and mainly history lessons, teach youngsters that they are Poles and should be proud of their national heritage.

Jaskulowski made interviews with history teachers asking them, 'what is the main goal of your work?'. For almost all of them it was 'natural and taken for granted' (Jaskułowski and Surmiak, 2015, p. 1) that they should strengthen Polishness of their students, build attachment to the Polish nation and the nation-state. Some of them avoided discussing contentious issues, and focused on glorious events to perform this task better. In Jaskulowski's opinion history teachers in Poland internationalized nationalism so deeply, that they were not able to notice it in their work. Nationalistic narration became and objective history.

When it comes to the research of interlinks between memory, nationalism and school system we can observe domination of curriculum standards and school textbooks analyses. It is impossible to mention all publications dealing with this issue. Researchers from all over the world put in hours to analyze them. So much efforts is put in this area, as school-books are consider to be 'important tools in transmitting 'official' images of nation'. When they are used by thousands of students, they are even called 'state's weapon of mass destruction'. They are mainly analyzed as 'tool of dissemination of the cultural patterns models that the social power holders wish to spread' (Kosi 2018, p. 2). They are tools used by the state to provide students with the same set of stories that are considered to be true and objective. The examination system ought to guarantee that narrations they consist of will be memorized and internalized by students.

Most often researchers analyze school-books' narrations. It seems that most of all they are interested in the way different social groups are depicted. They analyze how the ingroup is presented, what the images of different kinds of outgroups are (e.g. Andersson 2010, Kosi 2018, Morgan 2005), and what the relationship between them are (e.g. Podeh 2000). They



observe the way of presenting social phenomena like progress, feminism or nation (e.g. Lazarević 2013). Changes in the narrations are also described. Much effort has been put in to comparing narrations of similar issues present in different schoolbooks from different countries.

Iconographic materials that can be found in different kinds of educational aids are also analyzed. When it comes to history teaching much has been said of the maps contained in atlases and schoolbooks. Researchers show, how powerful effect they have on e.g. student's image of the territory and features of their country and its neighbors (e.g. Black 1997, Kamusella 2010). Kamusella proves, that maps in Polish atlases show Poland (does not matter it concerns 10th or 20th centuries) as the monoethnic country, inhabited only by Poles.

There is, however, a group of researchers, who try to prove, that relying only on analyzes of textbooks and curricula cannot give us a proper insight into relationship between schools, memory and nationalism. They stress that looking from schoolbook's point of view we are offered rather a superficial picture of situation at schools. In this perspective researchers emphasize active position of teachers, who are perceived as 'memory makers' (Kansteiner 2002, p. 197). They are treated not as 'passive textbook users' (Jaskułowski, Majewski and Surmiak 2017, p. 3), but as active, thoughtful agents, who modify and interpret official state narrations. Looking from this perspective we can see that schools do not educate children using only written materials. Extremely important are also teachers' efforts and stories they tell students.

One must admit that researches on teachers are far less common than on schoolbooks. I have found several studies based on interviews conducted with teachers. The main topic of those talks was teacher's perception of their work (e.g. Jaskulowski, Majewski and Surmiak 2017, Jaskułowski and Surmiak 2015, Kello and Wagner 2014, Akinoglu 2009). Occasionally we can also find analyses of lesson observations (e.g. Hawkey and Prior 2011, Christou 2007).

It seems that even less commonly conducted at schools are researches on phenomena, that Michael Billig called 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995) – everyday practices, which build and solidify a sense of national belonging and identity. Although they are part of school



everyday life, let's mention only about oaths to the flag or the celebration of patriotic holidays, analyzes of them are rather rare. Researches based on methodology of classroom ethnography are used mainly as a background for description of another issue connected with nationalism or memory (Christou 2007).

Looking over different kinds of research on the topic of memory and nationalism, we must not forget about another important agent – students. There are many quantitative and qualitative studies on the shape of their social memory, ways and means it is constructed. They raise also an issue of students' national identification (Barton, McCully, Conway 2003), show their attitude towards different narrations of the past present at schools (e.g. Audigier 2005). However, it is very often stressed, how difficult it is to interpret results of those researches, when we want to learn about the efficiency of school education. Although school system tends to have an ambition to be the only one source of knowledge for younger populations, it is impossible to achieve. Their identity and social memory is also shaped by another media – e.g. family or mass media. That raises another question – what do we learn about schools asking youngsters about their vision of the past or sense of belonging?

There are very few researches showing that school education has little effect on a sense of national identity at all. Ann Low-Beer, analyzing history teaching in Scotland, states: 'In Scotland several articles have shown that there has been very little teaching of Scottish history in schools. Yet, despite this, a sense of Scottish national and cultural identity has grown apace' (Low-Beer 2003, p. 5). One can make the same remark on the Soviet school system. After several decades of constructing 'homo sovieticus' featured by 'soviet patriotism' (Heller 1988) in the 80's was observed a fervent rebirth of national feelings in the whole country – one of the reasons of collapsing of the Soviet State.

Another perspective of looking at the school system is discourse analysis. It is focused on the issues of social perception of its aims, expectations of its role in building national identity of younger generation. Ann Clark scrutinized debate concerning re-nationalization history teaching in Australia (Clark 2008). She was interested in politicians' speeches, interviews with intellectuals and historians.



Researchers involved in issues concerning the relationship between school system, memory and nationalism have several ideas of how to overcome this closeness, perceived as negative and even dangerous for contemporary societies. In the following paragraphs I elaborate a few ideas referring mainly to history teaching.

According to Luigi Cajani one of the biggest problem of school narration concerning the past is that it divides people into 'us' and 'them', ingroup and outgroups, my nation vs other nations. In his opinion it is one of the main sources of ethnocentrism in Europe. Even if we stop thinking in the narrow way, using categories shaped by nation states and start thinking more broadly, consider ourselves as Europeans it will not solve the problem completely. It will lead us straight to Eurocentrism, where 'we' means Europe, and 'they' – the rest of the world. He proposes to overcome the problem of different 'centrisms' and adopt 'a view from the moon' – 'shifting the focus from the ethnic or cultural group to humanity as a whole' (Cajani 2007, p. 5). In this perspective the whole humankind would be the ingroup, what would involve writing common schoolbooks for everyone.

It seems that there are less revolutionary and more feasible attempts to make schoolbooks less nationalistic, more open to dialogue with another groups' narrations. Thanks to efforts by UNESCO, Council of Europe and Georg-Eckert-Institut in Braunschweig (Germany) several textbooks commissions were founded in the second half of the 20th century. There are organized meetings of researchers, teachers and intellectuals coming from two or more countries are, where contentious issues are put into discussions. In Poland there are organized meetings with representatives of all neighbor-countries, and their discussions have some impact on schoolbooks used in Polish schools. Many European institutions e.g. Georg-Eckert-Institute also organize workshops and conferences for teachers, where they are trained how to conduct history lessons free from nationalism.

Another way of dealing with nationalistic narrations and antagonistic memories in schoolbooks are common educational materials prepared by specialist from two or more countries, very often 'former enemies' or between countries where there were border 'disputes'. For example, German-Polish cooperation resulted in common history schoolbook



'Europa. Nasza historia' – 'Europa. Unsere Geshichte'¹. Similar initiatives are also organized in Asian countries. Historians from Japan, South Korea and the People's Republic of China wrote common textbook (though it was not acknowledged by any country) dealing with the history of this region in 19th and 20th centuries (Cajani 2007, p. 5).

There are many researchers who try to deal with problems of nationalism and antagonistic memories in history textbooks from a completely different perspective (e.g. Kello and Wagner 2014, Clark 2008, Low-Beer 2003). They show that history's main contribution in education of citizens of democratic countries is the skill of critical thinking. As Anna Clark suggests: 'History's worth in a liberal democracy lies in its capacity to develop critical thinking' (Clark 2008, p. 37). It is stressed that contemporary schools ought to enhance also students' skills in critical and analytical thinking, drawing conclusions and independence in the process of gaining knowledge (Low-Beer 2003, p. 6). Schools are expected to develop students' independence, inwardness and critical thinking.

Stress that is put on the importance of developing critical thinking in education is connected with a change in perception of school tasks and with a different approach to teaching. Students are encouraged not to memorize information, but to work with it and looking at it from different perspectives. Thus teachers are not perceived as leaders, sources of objective, true knowledge any more, but they become the students' guides and helpers. Thanks to the shift in teaching history it is possible to go beyond 'parochial national knowledge'.

Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg are the authors of 'historical literacy'. In their opinion school history should be thought like 'scientific' history at universities. They must not tell univocal story of the past, but show its complexity. They also stress that history should not be 'known', but ought to be understood. At the same time schools should teach youngsters 'critical engagement, understanding why historical interpretations differ, and reconciling the values of the past with the present' (Clark 2008, p. 38).

To conclude the analysis of history teaching in an education system is good to think about interrelationship between emotions and modes in which we remember the past. It is easy to

¹ For images of this book, see : <u>https://www.dw.com/pl/polsko-niemiecki-podr%C4%99cznik-do-nauczania-historii-ogromna-szansa/a-42793918</u>)



find characteristic features of an antagonistic way of remembering in the 19th-centry, nation-centered narrations - e.g. it divides in a Manichean way the historical characters into good and evil (Bull and Hansen, 2015, 1). 'Our group', meant as an our nation is depicted most often as a positive character, whereas other nations are 'they' - suspected, and potentially bad. The ways of avoiding antagonistic mode of history were described. The first way is to change the way students are taught perceive 'the our group'. The boundaries of 'our group' are widening whereas 'other group' is shrinking. The second way is to change the way history is used as a school subject. As many academics and practitioners underline it should develop student's skills of critical thinking. Reading about different ideas of changing the way history is taught at schools it is useful to remember about a reform conducted in Spain in the 20th century. The attempt was made to write a new history curriculum and build student identity around the idea of legal framework that respects different cultures and individual rights. We can find in Spanish reforms features of cosmopolitan mode of remembering - 'emphasise the human suffering of past atrocities and human rights violations and represents good and evil in abstract terms' (Bull and Hansen, 2015, 2). Eventually the reform was not a full success. School history was perceived as 'too cold': emotionless, indifferent, alien and thus irrelevant (Careterro 2011).

In my opinion the failure of the reform is symptomatic and reveals a very interesting feature of a cosmopolitan mode of remembering. History based on abstract concepts, without any connections with student's emotions becomes irrelevant and useless. The need to find an identity in the past seems to be so strong, that only a certain type of narrations that can give a sense of belonging and stir emotions are alluring and interesting. Most likely the great success of neo-nationalistic, populistic narrations (Bull and Hansen, 2015, 2) using the antagonistic mode of remembering owes to play with emotions.

It is a good idea to ask if there is the third way between the abovementioned modes of memory. Anna Cento Bull and Hans L. Hansen (2015) propose an idea of agonistic mode of remembering. The elements of an agonistic mode of history would give school history the possibility of avoiding the heat of antagonistic mode of memory and cold of the cosmopolitan mode of remembering. A dialogue-based antagonistic way of remembering seems to be a good idea. Giving the voice to different narrations, very often contradict each



other and give the possibility to understand different points of view, develop skills of critical thinking and do not suppress students' views and opinions. In conclusion it seems important to ask another question, if contemporary schools are ready for agonistic history teaching?

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