

What Does it Mean to Think Historically?

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This was what history teachers call the Inquiry Question which faced more than 250 participants on February 7th when the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research put on its first major event. The organising committee had consulted widely, and this was reflected in the fact that the platform speakers on Cypriot issues were four Turkish Cypriots, an Armenian, and three Greek Cypriots.

One of the premises behind the Association's thinking is that there is more to history teaching than having a textbook which supposedly contains "the truth" about things. A lot more. Consequently, proposals to "change the textbooks" while they may in many cases be justified, are by no means all that is needed to modernise the teaching of history. The challenge is to find innovative teaching methods which open minds, develop minds, expose them to knowledge, and impart concepts of rigour, scepticism and evidence. The truth can be put on hold, and the students will be assumed to have finished their studies when they can think rigorously for themselves. Back to the Socratics - not what to think, but how to think.

Nicos Peristianis in welcoming participants, including "our Turkish Cypriot compatriots", emphasised the need for modern education to help break down ethnocentric and nationalist stereotypes. As the meeting was taking place at Intercollege, an institution committed to English-language education on modern, internationalist lines, these were the right words in the right place to the right audience.

Alison Cardwell, representing the Council of Europe, the leading sponsor of the "European dimension" in history teaching, told us how in numerous trouble spots, the Council supplemented national histories with packages which would help move the users towards mutual respect and tolerance. Manuela Carvalho then informed us about Euroclio, the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Associations [\[www.eurocliohistory.org\]](http://www.eurocliohistory.org).

But the fireworks started when Christine Counsel!, Senior Lecturer in Education from Cambridge University, addressed us. History teaching had to be critical, it had to impart knowledge, [and the teachers needed to acquire this knowledge by thorough preparation] and it had to argue rigorously. The time needed to formulate the Inquiry Questions appropriate to the cognitive skills and social maturity of the pupils was crucial. Get the question wrong, and you will shut down the possible enthusiasm the learner can feel when encouraged to think, and when helped to do

so. She took us through a number of case-studies - British twelve year olds dealing with civil war religious conflicts in Suffolk, and being led to use their eyes to appreciate how the local landscape might have played a part in taking sides: eyes-on, if not hands-on learning. Fourteen year olds in the Netherlands were helped to understand the concept of Empire both geographically and politically through maps, texts, diagrams and more. "These children will never use the word 'Empire' again, without thinking" Christine Counsel! told us, and we believed her. Fifteen year olds dealing with subtle differences in accounts of the birth of the state of Israel, eleven year olds dealing with the Terror and Robespierre, and seventeen year olds in Federal Canada's province of Quebec wrestling with the concept of "cause" [as in, what caused the First World War?] by using cards to experiment with prioritising causal factors - these glimpses of exciting teaching practices held us spellbound. If only most university teachers were as lively as these primary and secondary school teachers. Her passionate persuasiveness set such a clear example of what it means to teach effectively we had it in mind for the rest of the day, but few other speakers could match her, [Meltem Onurkan coming closest]. Ms. Counsel, I shall never use the phrase "history teaching" again, Without Thinking.

Carmel Gallagher now took us through the very real difficulties of attempts to teach history in N. Ireland so as to help move the two communities away from ideological fanaticism. She quoted Martin Skilbeck to the effect that "teachers can be nai"ve bearers of sectarian cultures" without realising it. She wanted to promote the idea of history education as necessarily standing back, seeking objectivity, promoting rationality, and looking at the other community unemotionally and empathetically. Laudable goals, but difficult in' practice. Many teachers had clearly been afraid to teach about "the other community", so attempts at "cross curriculum" teaching tended not to work: The Protestants couldn't teach effectively about the Catholics, nor vice versa. We would face similar problems in Cyprus. There has been substantial work in N. Ireland however towards a new curriculum. Carmel Gallagher told us not to wait for the politicians. The younger people in front of her did not seem to be waiting for the politicians. They made it clear that they would have to work around the political control of education which is a patent fact about both sides in Cyprus. It is too early to challenge it frontally, and perhaps "gentle persuasion" under EU auspices and in the name of "new methods" will work better.

After the overseas guest speakers we heard from teachers working in Cyprus. The head of the Armenian School spoke first, emphasising that his school worked to maintain an Armenian identity, based on respect for other ethnic groups. This left us in the dark about how he dealt with really difficult issues. We had been not asked by Ms. Counsel! to pass over them in silence, but to deal with them more thoughtfully and more even-handedly.

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The Turkish Cypriots' speakers, in contrast, were openly dissatisfied with the one-sidedness of Turkish Cypriot official history education, and emphasised how boring it was for the students. This raises an interesting question: Judging by the vigour of the youth participation in the anti-Denktash demonstrations during the spring of 2003, official education had failed to keep control of young minds. Perhaps some of the teachers had already been introducing critical thought into their classrooms, focused on the very textbooks they deplored? I had previously supposed that bad history might be cognitively disabling, but it seems just as likely that bad history forces thoughtful people to think for themselves just to relieve the monotony and inadequacy of the official texts, on both sides of the Green Line. But the deeper political problem is, what happens to the less thoughtful pupils? Spyres Spyrou's work with Greek Cypriot schoolchildren suggests some of the dangers, but his work has been with younger children. What happens when they reach sixteen and eighteen?

We heard about an experiment in curriculum enrichment carried out in Larnaca, giving Byzantine history a wider pan-European perspective and we heard a clear message from a Council of Europe expert that the European dimension in education means replacing nationalist history with an education in civic values, tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

There was an inspiring presentation from an international fee-paying school in which children were allowed to choose how they wished to do various assignments. We saw extraordinary attempts to express Chinese culture through paintings, through mixing perfumes, and a video about Khirokitia by an eleven year old. We were enchanted, and persuaded that these methods work, but they clearly depend on a good deal of support at home, or on attending a school with ample teaching resources and staff free to make them accessible.

In a survey soon to be published Maria Hadjipavlou finds that only 5% of Greek Cypriot respondents now identify themselves as "Greeks" first and foremost¹ and 80% of Greek Cypriots and 75% of Turkish Cypriots feel proud to be Cypriots. This helps us understand one of the messages from this inspiring conference. First, these young historians are not willing to be stifled by the old myths, or the old enmities. The thoughtful young are hungry for a new deal, and, this is the second message, they know how to move things along. They have learned how to work some of the EU's systems, and have learned who their allies are, and what they can offer by way of solidarity, which will be needed to sustain this generation as it struggles to loosen the grip of Cypriot gerontocrats and party bosses on the micro- mis-management of Cypriot society.

I have heard thoughtful people say that teaching history in a new Cyprus will not

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be easy, and suggesting that some versions of history propagated by some bi-communal activists are as misleading as the nationalist histories they seek to replace, because they lack empathy and insight into just why people fought for Enosis or Taxim. This sounded plausible, but perhaps we have been overestimating the difficulties?

The Council of Europe's Council for Cultural Co-operation gave each of us an exciting monograph by Robert Stradling Teaching Twentieth-century European History. The proposals of Counsell and Stradling will not encourage poor quality revisionist history, because they insist on a critical approach, evidence-based interpretations, rigour **and** empathy. The multi-perspectival approach they are promoting is not meant to promote an "anything goes" relativism. If you allow more voices to be heard, more points of view to be examined, it does not license giving the same weight to all voices and all values, in the final analysis. Historians will always have to prioritise causes, and responsibilities, and be explicit about their own standpoints.

The EU's brand of history teaching clearly seeks to promote peace and tolerance, but it seems unlikely to destroy our critical faculties in the process. The young teachers who assembled for this conference will, one suspects, turn their critical minds to re-analysing any unsatisfactory history that comes their way.

The sponsors included USAID, UNDP/UNOPS, the A. G. Leventis Foundation, the Council of Europe, Helios Airways, and Nicosia Municipality. They are to be congratulated on backing this impressive initiative.

Hadjipavlou, M. (2004) 'Inter-ethnic stereotypes, neighbourliness, separation: paradoxes and challenges in Cyprus'. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Spring.