

# **Critical Historical Consciousness as the goal of History Education? Thoughts on a possible operationalization in the classroom.**

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## **Introduction**

The future starts today. Having students realize they can be agent of social change gives a purpose to the learning of the social sciences. Yet, how can we help a student see the links between past, present and future? How can we turn them from passive to active citizen? How can we make sure that they develop the critical thinking tools necessary to be open-minded citizen? My work will try to answer these questions through the lenses of history education and more specifically in regards to the learning of a critical historical consciousness.

Before I go any further, I will just give you a few background informations on the state of history education in Canada. In Canada, every province, the ten of them, have a different ministry of education and thus, a specific history curriculum. What students learn and when they learn it is different if you live in Montreal or Toronto for example. Yet, most of the history programs share a similar theoretical backbone. Ever since the early 1980s, the aim of the history course and social sciences in general is no longer the memorization of a unique patriotic narrative, but rather the development of a form of critical thinking specific to history, namely historical thinking (MEQ, 1982). The development of historical thinking presupposes that students are familiar with the concepts and methods necessary to interpret the past and that they will be able to transfer these concepts and methods to become agent of change in their own society. In fact, the current Quebec program stipulates that: “Historical thinking refines the critical mind of the pupils and develops an intellectual rigor, thus providing them with the tools necessary for deliberation on contemporary problems and social participation” (MEES, 2016, 1). Thus being able to think historically is understood as a key factor in the development of an open-minded and active citizen. However, many empirical studies show that historical thinking is rarely the focus in Canadian classrooms. Teachers still prefer to rely on a transmissive teaching of history based on the memorization of facts and events (Boutonnet, 2013, Demers, 2011, Moisan, 2010). This situation is partly caused by the difficulties that students experience when

developing their historical thinking skills one of which being the difficulty of transferring the concepts of historical thinking from the specific field of history to analyse a current social issue (Duquette, 2015, Körber and Meyer-Hamme, 2015, Sandwell 2005, Seixas, Gibson and Ercikan 2015, Wineburg 2001). Faced with this situation, some history educators have turned to the concept of historical consciousness as a possible solution (Duquette, 2011, Seixas, 2006). Indeed, historical consciousness has the advantage of clarifying the relationship between past and present events thus enabling students to understand why they were taught to think historically and how it can be used to analyse current events. Through historical consciousness, narratives are no longer just an amalgam of dates, characters and events, they become a key to understanding today's society. However, historical consciousness remains a polysemic concept (Duquette, 2011) and its use in the history or social study classroom is still up for debate. Can historical consciousness be considered as a form of thought that can foster both the development of critical thinking in students and their ability to become agent of social change? If so, how should we promote its implementation in the classroom?

## **1. A definition of historical consciousness**

So, what is historical consciousness? Historical consciousness is originally a Germanic concept that has its roots in the works of philosophers such as Hegel and Dilthey, but it is with the writings of Gadamer (1963) that the term seems to really emerge in the literature. Gadamer (1963) describes history as the discipline that allows people to make sense of time and concepts such as past and present. A completely objective interpretation of the past is, according to him impossible, because one must always take into consideration its own subjectivity. Thus, according to Gadamer, a person will demonstrate historical consciousness when he tries to better understand how the past influences his present and how both past and present will, in turn, influence his future. This past-present-future triangle is found in most definitions of historical consciousness given by modern writers. For example, Charland (2003) describes historical consciousness "has part of the present and invites action in the future" (131). A vision of things that is taken over and detailed by Tutiaux-Guillon who proposes that it:

[...]historical consciousness conjugates not only past and present but past and future: to be aware of what society, the social man, was, allows people to judge, to choose, to give meaning, and thereby to imagine a possible future [...] (Tutiaux-Guillon, 2003, 28).

The same definition can be found in Rüsen (2004), which emphasizes in particular the role of historical consciousness in understanding the links that unite the past with the present and the future. Modern writers therefore consider, like Gadamer, that historical consciousness is a form of historical behavior; that is to say a behavior that pushes the human to interpret the past to understand the present and to consider the future.

## 2. Historical consciousness: a form of critical thinking?

The tripart nature of historical consciousness seems to be the only point on which modern authors agree. Beyond this, we can find several models, sometimes contradicting one another, trying to explain with more or less precision how a person might develop his or her historical consciousness. For some authors, such as Rüsen (2004), historical consciousness develops from the available narratives. According to this model, historical consciousness, as opposed to historical thinking, is not considered a tool for interpreting the past, but rather how a person would use the available narratives found in his society to understand the present and envision the future. In contrast, some authors, such as Straub (2005) and Seixas (2005), consider that historical consciousness is more than a simple appropriation of available historical interpretations. Historical consciousness becomes a process of interpretation in the same way as historical thinking is. According to them, historical consciousness is the state in which we think history. These different definitions underlie a great debate: can the historical consciousness be a critical consciousness? Is the choice of narratives that compose historical consciousness based on criteria and consideration of the historical context (Lipman 2003, Gagnon 2010) or a more simply on the popular narrative found in society? Can historical consciousness evaluate the accuracy of narratives (Gagnon, 2010)? The ambiguity as to a possible critical historical consciousness comes from the relationship it seems to maintain with both memory and historical thinking, because if we agree that narrative is the form by which historical consciousness becomes operational, it remains to be seen whether it succeeds in discriminating the narratives that compose it.

### *2.1 Links Between Memory, Historical Thinking and Historical Consciousness*

If history “is a construction, or a reconstruction, that can feed on memory and / or oppose it” (Heimberg, 2003, 125), what about historical consciousness? For some authors, such as Laville (2003), there is a closeness between the concepts of historical consciousness and memory in the sense that historical consciousness would draw from memory the narratives that allow it to make sense of the past, present and possible future. It is the more or less critical character of the narratives sustained by memory that poses a problem. Indeed, societies share a form of so-called collective memory that is composed of a collection of stories that are more or less accurate interpretation of the past and that are commonly shared by a group of people (Halbwachs, 1950). For example, the studies of the Quebec historian Jocelyn Létourneau and his collaborators (2014, 2008, 2004) have helped to better know the collective memory of Quebec students. Indeed, it seems that students share a homogeneous narrative of Quebec history where the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (where the French lost the colony to the English), an event that took place over 250 years ago, is central (Létourneau, 2014, Létourneau and Moisan, 2004). The student seems then to “forget” the entire British period, a period that last from 1763 to 1867. I call this the British

Blur. Their story picks up in the 1960's when things get more interesting. What is problematic with these stories, as Todorov (1995) points out, is that memory can be both sacralized and trivialized, resulting in a form of paralysis where any critical examination of the stories supported by a community becomes impossible. To avoid this, the narratives included in one's collective memory must be reinterpreted many times using a rigorous methodology.

Yet some authors see a bigger proximity between historical thinking and historical consciousness. For example, Peter Seixas (2006) indicates that historical consciousness is "[at] the intersection of public memory, citizenship, and history education" (Seixas, 2006, 15). The teaching of history, which involves the development of historical thinking, develop a critical historical awareness among students. Historical thinking here becomes one of the elements that make up historical consciousness, just like memory and a sense of citizenship. However, historical consciousness, which feeds on the past to understand the present and envision the future, is not *de facto* a form of critical thinking, in that it does not necessarily question the accuracy of the narratives that it uses to give meaning to time. Yet, I argue that students can train their historical consciousness to question the accuracy of the narratives it uses. As a result, historical consciousness can both base its understanding of time on the fixed narratives associated with a form of memory abuse, as Todorov (1995) puts it, as well as on the critical narratives that result from the work of historical thinking. It is this ambivalence that is problematic in the school context, since a history teaching based solely on the development of historical consciousness would not necessarily lead students to question the past, but could rather promote learning a narrative whose role is to "forge a sense of identity and legitimize the social and political order" (Charland, 2003, 20).

In short, historical consciousness does not always distinguish the righteous from the arbitrary or the absolute from the relative. How then in the course of the teaching of history can one "promote a critical historical consciousness rather than a more or less closed consciousness based solely on collective memory" (Heimberg, 2003, 10)?

### **3. Models of development of historical consciousness**

At this point, our hypothesis is that including historical consciousness in the classroom could benefit the teaching of history and promote both the development of critical thinking and of civic agency. This hypothesis presupposes that historical consciousness can make the difference between narratives coming from "memory" and those examined through the lenses of historical thinking. If we believe that historical consciousness can become a form of critical thinking, we still need to understand how to do it. Fortunately, several people have thought about this before us and many

models are available in the literature, for the purpose of respecting my time limit, I will quickly present five models of historical consciousness.

### *3.1 The model of hermeneutic philosophy*

The first model that we will approach comes from hermeneutical philosophy, particularly the theories of Gadamer (1963) and Lukacs (1968). Gadamer (1963) defines historical consciousness as: “the privilege of modern man: to be fully aware of the historicity of all present and the relativity of all opinions (p.7)”. This leads Lukacs to propose that historical consciousness can be both conscious and unconscious. This cohabitation is possible, according to Gadamer, because humans are part of time or history and because of this, it is impossible for them to detach themselves completely from it. It is possible to see here two levels of historical consciousness emerge. At the first level, a person will accept all the narratives that seem correct to interpret the past, to understand the present and to envisage the future. At this level, historical consciousness remains unconscious or non-critical. At the second level, a person becomes aware of his own subjectivity and the influence of his present in the way he or she questions and understands the past. In this case, historical consciousness becomes a critical consciousness. In short, for historical consciousness to become critical, the individual must realize that history is an interpretation of the past and not a fixed truth. In so doing, his historical consciousness will move away from collective memory and prefer an epistemological understanding of the discipline that “aims to determine what is reasonable to believe” (Gagnon, 2010, 167).

### *3.2 Freire's Model*

A second model of development of historical consciousness is found in the writings of Freire (1973, resumed in Martineau, 1991) where he describes a dynamic evolution of consciousness. Freire does not speak precisely of historical consciousness per say, but the model he offers is interesting because it examines the role of education in its development. For Freire, the evolution of consciousness is directly influenced by the cognitive development of the child. Thus, at birth, the child would have a semi-intransitive consciousness governed by his primary needs. In other words, the child is only interested in his immediate needs: eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. It is when he grows up that he develops a transitive-naïve consciousness where he tends to seek easy explanations, sometimes magical ones, rather than to question reality and go to the bottom of things. At this stage, it is the nature of the teaching received that will influence the development of one's consciousness. If students receive an education based on the development of critical thinking, they can develop a critical transitive consciousness. This will enable them to become a critical, open-minded and active citizen. If, on the contrary, they go through a process of massification, student will develop a fanaticized consciousness in which people become objects. Even if Freire

is not explicitly dealing with historical consciousness, he highlights the crucial role of school and education in the building of a critical consciousness. It is thus tempting to see a relationship between the development of a critical historical consciousness and how history is taught in class.

### *3.3 Seixas' model*

In his writings, Seixas (2010) questions both the construction of a critical historical consciousness and its role in the learning history. For Seixas, historical consciousness is a state at the crossroads of memory, citizenship and historical education. That is, memory, citizenship, and historical education would be the three spheres influenced by historical consciousness. For example, a young person would use of his historical conscience when he questions the narratives found in his collective memory to build his identity, or when he faces a citizenship problem. Historical consciousness allows, according to Seixas (2006), students to:

- understand the limits related to the use of historical evidence;
- understand the distance between the present and the past;
- understand the immensity and complexity of the past.

In other words, historical consciousness would serve: “to assess” (Gagnon, 2010, 166) our understanding of the past. To achieve this, students must develop the concepts of historical thinking that are six in number. These are: historical evidence, historical relevance, continuity and change, causes and consequences, historical perspective, and ethical judgment (Seixas & Morton, 2013). According to Seixas (2006), historical consciousness becomes critical when it is based on the work of the six concepts of historical thinking. In short, the critical character of historical consciousness would depend on historical thinking.

Although the model proposed by Seixas (2006) allows an interesting link between historical thinking and historical consciousness, it does not take into account the non-critical character of historical consciousness. The latter appears in Seixas as being naturally critical since it emerges from the exercise of historical thinking. However, it has been proposed here that historical consciousness has links with both memory (non-critical narratives) and historical thought (critical narratives) (Charland, 2003). Is it possible that the factor that allows consciousness to move from its non-critical form to its critical form is historical thinking? And if this is the case, what are the peculiarities of this evolution? Rüsen's model provides a partial answer to these questions.

### *3.4 Rüsen's model*

Rüsen's (2004) model of progression is based on two theoretical presuppositions, the first is that historical consciousness is composed of narratives and the second that what changes from one individual to another is the scope of this narrative when trying to understand the present (Rüsen, 2004). Thus, Rüsen proposes a taxonomy divided into four levels of progression. These levels are called traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic. This scale allows, at least in theory, to identify levels of historical consciousness in individuals. If we bring this taxonomy back to the field of history teaching, students who demonstrate traditional historical awareness will understand the past as unchangeable and therefore as an inheritance to be preserved. At the exemplary level, students will understand the past as an example of the present. The distance between the past and the present is non-existent since the past is repeated in the present. At the critical level, students view the past as completely foreign and unrelated to the present. Note here that the term critical refers to a form of negative judgment and not to the concept of critical thinking. The fourth and last level is the genetic stage which, according to Rüsen, is the culmination of the development of historical consciousness. The past is perceived as an interpretation that originates from the present and is therefore biased. However, the use of the past to understand the present is still possible since this subjectivity is taken into account. This taxonomy offers the possibility of identifying the evolution to a critical historical consciousness in students.

### *3.5 Our model of development of historical consciousness*

Of the four models we've analyzed, it is very difficult to choose one that is more accurate than the others. It seems, on the contrary, that a mixt model is the best way to apprehend the concept. Thus, like Gadamer (1963) and Lukacs (1968), historical consciousness could be understood as being both non-critical and critical. Historical consciousness would be non-critical when there is an unquestioned acceptance of all narratives to understand the past-present-future triad, and critical when there is an awareness of the limits and subjectivity of narratives. School and by extension the teaching of history would play a central role in the development of a critical historical consciousness according to Freire (1973). Learning history through the six concepts of historical thinking would be the way to achieve this (Seixas, 2006) and this learning could be assessed using the scope of the narratives used by students to understand the world around them (Rüsen, 2004).

I've put this mixed model to the test in an empirical study with 148 Secondary V students (between 16 and 17 years of age) in French schools in Quebec. Students had to respond to a problem from their present, but whose origin came from the past (e.g. the causes of poverty in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa). Student responses took the form of narratives. There were two meetings with the participants, the first time



to record the initial narrative and a second time to get a second narrative written after having completed an activity based on the analysis of historical documents. We tried to organize the students' narratives using Rüsen's taxonomy (2004). However, the data did not reflect the characteristics of this model. In his categories, Rüsen considers that the individual constantly refers to the past when he questions the present because the origin of the narratives he uses are in the past. However, the constant reference to the past is not present in our participants since few of them use a narrative that we could describe as historical. For example, students tell how African countries are poor because of drought and climate change. This is a bit rich, I feel, from kids coming from a country that freezes over 6 months per year. Like anything would grow at -26 degrees. More seriously, it was clear to us that the stages of Rüsen's taxonomy did not allow us to observe how historical consciousness develop in our students.

This situation led us to develop our own model of development of historical consciousness. A careful reading of the narratives provided by the students made us prefer a categorization based on whether or not the participants took the past into account when building his narrative.

It is thus from this second categorization that it was possible to specify whether or not the students managed to develop a critical historical awareness. This process has highlighted four levels of historical consciousness (HC) in our students. The first two levels would be associated with a form of non-critical historical consciousness, because the past-present links are never taken into account and the student does not justify his ideas or opinions. The first level is named primary HC and it regroups students who have trouble explaining the phenomenon of poverty and the second level is named immediate HC and it brings together students who propose a narrative focussing only on present events. The 3<sup>rd</sup> level is called the composite level because it brings together students whose narratives bridge past and present but in an awkward manner. The fourth level is called narrative historical consciousness which regroups students who managed to give nuanced account of the evolution of the concept of poverty. Both composite and narrative level are more akin to a critical form of historical consciousness. The stages identified here are not meant to be a theoretical model rejecting other models of development of historical consciousness, but rather a model to better observe the characteristics of student's critical historical consciousness which can be used to find criteria for operationalizing it in a school context. The study therefore makes it possible to observe how students compare the different narratives that are proposed to them and assess their relevance. The study also shows how students justify their view of the past, how they relate the past to the present, and how they use their understanding to act in the present. In sum, the stages tend to show how students manage to develop a form of critical thinking through the work of historical thinking.



## **4. Criteria for the development and operationalization of learning a critical historical consciousness**

When analyzing the stories found in the four levels of historical awareness, it is possible to identify criteria that are common to each level and that seem to evolve from one level to the next. These characteristics relate to students' narrative competence, their ability to make use of the concepts of historical thinking, and their epistemological understanding of historical discipline.

### *4.1. Primary Historical Consciousness*

Students with a primary historical awareness have difficulty in formulating a narrative. For example, in our study, when they had to explain a concept whose origin is in the past but which is still present today, such as poverty, either they answered by "I do not know" or they were indignant at the injustice of the situation. They would say: "This is a terrible, terrible situation. These poor people, we must do something" but when I asked what actions should be taken they simply answered: "I don't know". At this level, it is difficult for the students to make connections between past and present and they did not seem to be able to use a narrative form to express their ideas. They struggled to identify the causes and consequences of an event and this affected their ability to produce a causal narrative. When asked to question the historical sources provided, they did not link past events with current ones. In fact, they didn't seem to understand why we were working with historical sources. These students, in addition to being unaware of the links between their present and past events, did not seem to have developed the intellectual skills associated with historical thinking. The epistemological understanding of the historical discipline was also limited, if not absent, since students struggle to look to the past to try to better understand his or her present. Resulting, in our opinion, on an inability to fully understand the historicity of social problems and move away from an emotive response. Note that I don't think that emotion should be avoided, we are not robots, but acting solely on them might be problematic.

### *4.2. Immediate historical consciousness*

The main characteristic of students at the immediate level is that they perceive the past and the present as two different entities. These students, like those at the primary stage, seem to have a hard time getting away from their present and they tend to use elements drawn from their everyday lives to interpret the past. They also base their assumptions on common sense more than on their historical knowledge. Consequently, their interpretations are studded with anachronisms. Students struggle to understand that the values and customs of societies might have changed over time. While half of the students at that level managed to construct a narrative that evokes both the present

and the past, a detailed analysis showed us that these students limit themselves to making comparisons between the past and the present seeing no continuity between them.

This difficulty in observing how things change, tends to suggest that students are at the beginning of their learning of historical thought. The concepts of continuity and change as well as those of causes and consequences seem to have been little developed by the students. Moreover, they never use a historical perspective when analyzing sources. In this regard, students in the immediate level are those who most frequently mention history classes and films as sources of information to better understand the past. The films seem to appear as reliable and truthful as the information provided by their teachers. They fail to assess the accuracy or appropriateness of the sources they use to understand their society. They seem to entertain the idea that history is the telling of the unique and truthful story of the past. The interpretative character of the discipline is unknown to them. Therefore, immediate students would base their understanding of history on their understanding of the present and judge the relevance, accuracy, and complexity of past events not from critical thinking perspective, but from a moral judgment rooted in the norms and values of the society of today.

#### *4.3. Composite Historical Consciousness*

The composite level brings together students who seem to be in the process of developing a critical historical consciousness. Indeed, the narrative abilities of students at this level are improving and they often, but not always, make connections between past and present events. These students are able to use the concepts of anteriority and posteriority. They propose a causal narrative although it remains clumsy. In this sense, they seem to have developed their competency to establish causality and to detect the elements of continuity and change but without being able to always explain in full detail their relationship. The data also highlights that a high number of composite-level participants still base their assumptions on common sense. In addition, few students at this level question the interpretations given to certain facts of the past. Indeed, they often consider information from films or television shows as trustworthy than other sources and they do not have the reflex to question the accuracy of the information presented to them.

A student at the composite stage is in the process of learning of historical thinking, his understanding of the discipline is still changing. At this stage, students know and apply the different historical thinking concepts: they analyze sources, they identify causes and consequences, and they generally see the links between their present and the past. However, these techniques are put at the service of getting the “right answer” where history, resolutely a school discipline, remains a unique and truthful story. A form of openness to the plurality of perspectives and narratives is detected, but the pupil does not manage to see this on his own. In short, students at the composite level

seem to lack the necessary critical distance to take into account the complexity of the past and its relationship to the present. This leads us to believe that students at this stage are still in the middle of learning historical thinking and that they are in the process of developing their critical historical consciousness.

#### *4.4. Narrative Historical Consciousness*

The narrative level brings together students who seem to have developed a form of critical historical consciousness. These students systematically use a causal narrative when comes time to explain a situation experienced in the present. For example, the question of poverty in African countries is explained by the concept of colonialism and its evolution over time. Students are able to understand how this concept has changed and they identify the causes and consequences of this transformation. Moreover, they seem to be familiar with all the concepts of historical thinking. They question the perspective of the different actors of the past and argue on the importance of one event over another. They do not hesitate to use historical sources, but unlike other levels, students at the narrative level are the only ones to question the accuracy or relevance of the evidence provided. This ability to question the evidence and their interpretations seems to foster in these few students an understanding of history as interpretations rather than the vision of history as a true and unchangeable narrative.

Students in the narrative stage seem to be sufficiently equipped to interpret historical sources, but unlike students in other stages, their narrative competency and their epistemological understanding of the discipline provide the space necessary for the development critical historical consciousness. Therefore, reaching a form of critical historical consciousness would be possible only when students understand the epistemology of the discipline, have the tools to interpret the past (historical thinking) and are able to see the links between past and present in the form of narrative (narrative competency). When students at this level are invited to propose a solution to the phenomenon of poverty, their answer is much more nuanced and the solution offered is more realistic.

### **5. Involvement of the model for its operationalization in the classroom**

So how can we use this in the classroom? Research in didactics tends to show that high school history teaching is often limited to memorizing declarative knowledge (Boutonnet, 2013 and Demers, 2011) and that this situation is partly caused by the difficulties that students and sometimes their teachers have when developing their historical thinking skills (Sandwell 2005, Sears 2014). We have pointed out in other writings, that historical thinking only makes sense when it is developed with historical

consciousness (Duquette, 2011). This view is reinforced by recent research by Gibson (2017) and Wilschut (2012), which highlights the importance of learning narrative skills, particularly the ability to understand the concept of temporality in order to develop a big picture understanding of the past. As a result, while the development of a critical historical consciousness is still a laudable end for the history course, the way to achieve it should not be limited to learning the analytical techniques often associated with historical thinking.

As Rüsen (2004) points out, the form of historical consciousness is that of narrative. Narratives are also produced by historians following a fine and critical analysis of available evidence. It is therefore logical that one of the skills that students should develop in history classes is the ability to interpret, construct and deconstruct available narratives. Yet this skill seems to have been put aside in recent years, because it is often associated with the memorization of a static narrative. However, it seems to us essential for the development of a critical historical consciousness that students will be able to build their own narratives that will help them to understand their society in the present and to consider it in the future. To achieve this, it will of course be necessary to use the historical thinking concepts, but not only that. The concept of temporality encompassing those of anteriority and posteriority must be mastered as well as the ability to understand the different forms of time (Wilschut, 2012). Finally, students must be able to differentiate historical narrative from other forms of stories both by its content and by the methodology by which it is constructed. In this sense, it is important to problematize the course of history, because at the origin of any narrative is a question (Dalongeville, 2000).

To construct, or to deconstruct, a critical and nuanced historical narrative, one must turn to the concept of historical thinking (Seixas, 2006). It is thanks to the frequent use in the classroom of the concepts of historical thinking that students begin to take a critical step back from the various interpretations of the past they face. This learning allows them to take into account the context of the period, to assess the relevance of the available interpretations and to consider the epistemological and ethical aspects of historical questions. This critical mind-frame, according to our data, would be possible only when the students have both an understanding of the epistemology of the historical discipline and feel at ease when using the concepts of historical thinking. Thus, the level of historical consciousness can provide teachers with a better understanding of where their students are at in the learning of history and what difficulties they still have.

To conclude, if we want students to act in the present, we need to go further and lead the student to consider the past as infinitely vast and history as a focused, critical and evolutionary interpretation of a part of this past. By helping students deal with this complexity, we can help them understand the complexity of current events. Some will say that this causes uncertainty and a lack of social cohesion, but we believe instead that when released from the constraints of a single and unique truth, the historical

discipline promotes the openness and the freedom of reflection which are the assets of the critical thinker. Something our current society seems to be in dire need.

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