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What about history-teaching in hybrid societies? - The profile, structure and context of history as a school subject

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In this paper I discuss the revision and adaptation of history-teaching in so-called 'multicultural' societies, such as Sweden. The analysis is based on a problematisation of 'universal' and 'communitarian' (also called 'the politics of recognition') interpretations of 'multicultural societies'. In addition, these two models of interpretations of multicultural societies are compared and contrasted with a 'post-structuralist' understanding of identification and history-teaching. The first two approaches have been discussed in *Multiculturalism – Examining the politics of recognition*, in which Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas and other philosophers debate the future of 'multicultural societies' (Taylor 1994). The third model is mainly discussed on the basis of Joan Scott's theories (Scott, 2005; Scott, 1999; Scott, 1996).

The aim of this study is to give an overview of the contents of interviews with twenty-four high school pupils and their opinions on the content of history as a school-subject. The study was conducted in the Swedish city of Malmö.¹ Over forty percent of the children aged between six and fifteen who live in Malmö have a 'foreign background' (Pettersson, 2005, p 11). Here it is important to point out that 'multiculturalism' ought not to be automatically equated with 'immigrant cultures'. In the context of this study, the fact that the city of Malmö has many inhabitants with different ethno-cultural identifications makes it an interesting place in which to carry out the fieldwork.

Multiculturalism and its hallmarks

The advocates of the politics of recognition state that a universal approach to the questions of identity misrecognizes groups that are culturally, politically and/or socially marginalized and which do not have a 'norm-forming' position. According to communitarians, society, which also includes schools, should secure the survival of different groups' collective features and interests. The idea is that each and every group and its culture should be recognized.

In Sweden universalism has had a dominant position in the education system. Based on universalism, education has emphasized the idea of 'the common good', i.e. the development of democratic norms and values as well as 'general education'. At the same time, history as a school subject aims, according to the curriculum, to give 'a perspective of one's own person' and thereby strengthen pupils' personal identity and provide 'insight into our own cultural heritage, as well as that of others, not least concerning the origins and cultural heritage of national minorities' (Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, 2007). Here it should be observed that 'others' cultural heritage relates to 'national minorities'. This seemingly universal perspective ('our own culture', here written in the singular form) could be interpreted as a dialectic construction of a 'we-group', i.e. the recognition of differences between normative cultures (we-group), or, in other words, the group that is regarded as representing 'Swedish culture and its cultural heritage'. National minorities are thus seen as a counterpoint to the norm. Michael Billig regards similar marking-processes as examples of banal nationalism: *Not only are 'we' (and 'them') flagged, but so is the homeland; and the world as a world of homelands is also conveyed. A banal mysticism, which is so banal that all the mysticism seems to have evaporated long ago, binds 'us' to the homeland – that special place which is more than just a place, more than a mere geographical area.* (Billig, 1995, p175)

Attempts to give 'ethnic minorities' and 'their cultures' freedom to express and affirm their 'interests' have been made in Sweden, above all through the rights of establishment of private ethno-religious schools and the introduction of mother tongue instruction. These educational policies can be interpreted as examples of politics of recognition (Gustafsson, 2004).

Pupils' views on communitarianism

Some of the interviewed pupils see educational policies, based on the politics of recognition, as an interesting and somewhat desired model. Abbas, whose mother is an 'ethnic Swede' and whose father came to Sweden in the 1980s from Algeria, expresses an interest in North African culture and the political

history of Algeria. According to him, the prevailing history is Eurocentric. In his view, history teaching overlooks the importance of other cultures. Nadja joins Abbas in his interpretation of how history is taught and adds that she would like to know more about Iran. At the same time, all the interviewees, both with 'ethnic Swedish' and 'immigrant' identifications, state the importance of transmitting knowledge about Swedish and European history. In this way they pursue identity politics. Charles Taylor underlines that individuals have a genuine interest in 'their' cultural heritages and strive to understand themselves (Taylor, 1994).

Swedish historian David Mellberg remarks, in his analysis of history teaching and questions of ethnicity, that it is a problem that 'immigrant' pupils 'do not get share of their "own" history' (Mellberg, 2004, p 332, my translation). The question is, however: How much of pupils' identity is tied up with their parents' country of origin and ethnic background? Before pursuing this debate further I will outline the relations between history-teaching and universalism.

Paradoxes of universalism or hegemony of the normative culture?

Karin and Anna-Klara, whose parents were born in Sweden, state that Swedish ethno-culture and history are probably the most essential fields of study in the teaching of history. Josefa comments that 'the ethnic groups should learn Swedish history.' These standpoints speak implicitly of the implementation of cultural norms of 'ethnic majorities' as well as the group's demand for the study its 'own' history. Anna, Monica and Kristina declare that there is a distinction between Swedish and immigrant cultures, and point out that Swedish culture must be kept intact. In addition, they mention that all pupils should be taught the same historical knowledge. On the one hand they are following the communitarian view in as much as they believe that 'we' should preserve 'our' culture, although on the other they are suggesting that this same historical narrative about 'our common' culture/history should have a universal position within the school system. These are clear examples of dichotomization and cultural hegemony.

Furthermore, Anna and Kristina are of the opinion that schools are objective and neutral and that history-teaching is not ethnocentric. Unlike the pupils with 'immigrant' backgrounds, many interviewed 'ethnic Swedes' consider ethnicity as a relatively unimportant issue in Sweden in general and the Swedish education system in particular. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen observes that while norm-setting groups see themselves as free from ethnicity, they nevertheless regard 'the others' as ethnic (Eriksen, 2002). This denotes that universalism often prioritizes the normalizing group's interpretations. In the past few years many scholars have published reports that criticize an allegedly Eurocentric and universal view of history and historical narratives (Runblom, 2006; Kamali, 2006; Nordgren, 2006). It would seem that universalism shows signs of ethnic as well as cultural blindness. In spite of these critical positions, it is appropriate to ask whether communitarianism is a solution to these and similar problems.

Instability of identities and intolerance of communitarianism

Philosopher Anthony Appiah holds that the authenticity that communitarians talk about 'speaks of real self buried in there, the self one has to dig out and express' (Appiah, 1994, p 155). There is nothing to indicate that young people's identities and cultural/historical experiences are fixed in this way, however. Even though many youngsters are interested in their parents' countries of birth and their life-stories, these pupils' identities are complex products of socio-cultural and historical relations as well as processes that continuously alter the shape of identities (in both time and space). Moreover, identities are constructed dialectically. It is difficult to fix a person's identity on the basis of his/her parents' ethno-geographic origin. In the interview with Ada, she remarks that even though both her parents are from Iran, she talks to her mother in Swedish but talks to her father in Persian. She also declares that she has had and still has an 'identity crisis', because she feels that she is neither part of Iran nor of Sweden. According to her she is not, and has never been, accepted as a Swede.

Ada: I just remembered one thing; this thing about double-identity. [...] I don't see myself as a native Swede, for the reason that other people don't see me as one. [...] It's like when I travel through the immigrant ghetto of Rosengård, and if I were to talk to a guy who has lived entire his life in Rosengård and they have like parents from Iran or from Iraq or wherever and they have an accent. So, when I talk to them I feel very, very much as a Swede. [...] It feels strange in that sense that I am fully aware that I

don't look Swedish but when I talk to them so I feel like I am very much like a native Swede. So it's like, it depends on which situation you are in, and who you talk to.

Dejan says that he feels like 'an Afro-American, like a Bosno-Swede.' Alma states that 'a Swedish person would have regarded me as a foreigner, a person with an immigrant background; but if I were to go to Egypt they would have regarded me as a Swedish person.' Homi Bhabha refers to these and similar identifications as 'hybrid':

This 'part' culture, this *partial* culture, is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture's containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture's 'in between', baffling both alike and different. [...] Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (Bhabha, 1996, p 54, 58)

It is imperative to draw attention to the fact that in multicultural environments – where people mix with each other (very often over 'ethnic' and national boundaries), where young people's parents come from all over the world and where Swedish and English, together with exposure to the media, are some of the most important unifying cultural factors – it is difficult to draw a dividing line between different 'ethnic'/'cultural' groups. If identities are as fluid as some of the pupils' stories seem to indicate, can communitarian educational policies and teaching of history be practiced?

In my view, processes of identification are discursive and historical constructions are situational and variable (in time and space). Since people are always placed in different social positions, it is difficult to fix their cultures/identities even though certain normalizing matrixes (pre-)exist. We cannot describe individuals or different socio-historical processes in a simple way. Interpellations and descriptions can never fully describe and fixate a person's identity or different socio-historical processes. Sociologist Nikolas Rose suggests that history should work towards the implementation of studies of 'the genealogy of subjection'. This approach involves the analysis of different processes of construction of a subject, 'individualized, interiorized, totalized and psychologised understanding of what it is to be human' (Rose, 1996, p 129). Accordingly, we may be able to avoid those paradoxes that traditional universalism and communitarianism bring about, namely the construction of dichotomous social relations between 'us' and 'them'.

Interpellation – an approach that creates an 'immigrant' subject?

Interviews have shown that other people's interpretations of our identities, their views of 'us' and 'our histories', contribute to the construction of our self-concepts and thereby our identities. Identity-construction is a process whereby people are interpellated and dichotomised. Ada's story about her mother tongue teacher's views on Ada's ethno-cultural background shows how the boundaries of one's own identity are formed:

Ada: The teacher asked us: "Which countries border your homeland?" And I said: "Norway, Finland and Denmark!" And then she said that it is not like that; because it is like, Iraq and stuff. So I said: "No, it is Norway, Finland and Denmark!" [...] I mean, I have never been there and I am like, not going to go there. There is a lot of stuff like that.

The teacher sees the core of Ada's ethno-culture as her parents' country of origin, which implies that Ada's identities are formed in social environments. When her mother tongue teacher marks out the boundaries of Ada's ethno-cultural and historical heritage her identity is constructed. The consequence of Ada's dissatisfaction with the teachers 'nationalistic' treatment/attitude was that Ada dropped out of the course. Judith Butler points out that: '[e]xceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound' (Butler, 1997, p 11). Another similar example of interpellation is when one of Ada's Swedish-language teachers wonders why Ada reads Swedish faster than 'our pupils with a Swedish background'. Ada points out that she was born in Sweden and that it is therefore rather strange that the teacher expects her to be inferior to the rest of her classmates.

So, the bottom line is that our identities do not exist *a priori*. There is no subject before social relations are established. An individual is a product of performative acts/processes to which teachers and historians are contributory factors. An example of this is Jala's opinion that she 'speaks the language' and 'has become part of the system' but does not get 'the vibes' (i.e. she is not accepted as a Swede). All things considered, history teachers and the authors of textbooks should not take it for granted that just because somebody has a 'foreign background' he or she has a need to study 'one's own country of origin'. A way of overcoming these problems could be to teach history in accordance with deconstruction, as detailed below.

Teaching history in accordance with deconstruction

One way of reducing the problems associated with communitarian and universal views of history and culture and the foundationalist dilemma has been presented by Joan Scott. She points out that inserting "marginalized groups" into a metanarrative (re)produces a marginalized subject and thereby contributes to the reproduction of power relations:

Feminism was a protest against women's political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate 'sexual differences' in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of 'women' (who were discursively produced through 'sexual difference'). To the extent that it acted for 'women', feminism produced the 'sexual differences' it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse 'sexual differences' – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history. (Scott, 1996, p 3-4)

Similarly, Sara Edenheim explains that we should focus on the analysis of the production of subjects (i.e. show how women/men become subjects 'women'/'men) and how different categories are described and interpellated. In her view, we ought to analyse the 'contents' by which these 'bodies' are permeated (Edenheim, 2006). Likewise, Scott indicates that: 'The evidence of experience becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world' (Scott, 1992, p 25).

Universalism in the shadow of a canon

In this section I describe pupils' criticism of an alleged Euro-centric metanarrative. Critics have pointed out that universal forms of historical writings and narrations are based on the canon that explains history from a rather narrow, white, male and European point of view. Historical narratives are made at the cost of other cultures' representations of history (Jonsson, 2005). Bonnie G. Smith claims that the canonical narratives that dominate general history have not given enough space to alternative narratives and interpretations, i.e. interpretations that include marginalized groups in the metanarrative (Smith, 1998). For my part, I was rather surprised that so many interviewed pupils pointed out that Euro-centricity is the most noticeable problem. In the following extracts, Amir and Abi elucidate this view:

Amir: I mean it was quite good, but it was just Europe. That was the primary concern. You know, it is Europe and World Wars I and II. [...] I mean, for me the perspective that dominated in school led to me losing interest. If it had been spread out a bit more, I would have been more interested.

Abi: There are many interpretations of truth and many people see truth in different ways. Textbooks in history have not been the most useful because they are very egocentric, here in Sweden. They, I mean, Europeans, want to show that civilization originates from Greece. They want to show that civilization comes from us /Europe/. The most important point in history was Greece. [...] But there is something that we forget. Why is it so that we never discuss Indian culture? The Maya and Aztec cultures? We never talk about them. [...] I mean Catholicism destroyed these cultures. [...] There are hundreds of ways to describe the world. I would really like to learn more about Chinese culture and Southeast Asia because they have managed to solve conflicts much better than we have. They have managed to live much better with each other. [...] I think that one has to try to get an all-embracing picture of history, I mean in the textbooks. But now it is 80 % Europe. Of course European history is interesting, but it is important to keep in mind that people are like small chains that are connected. And Europe is part of the world. People think that Europeans were born in Europe, that they are all blue-eyed and blond and totally disconnected

from the rest of the world. And they think that it is just because of them that people in India can get food. But you know, the language used here is based on Sanskrit; meaning it originates from India. But if you were to ask people here nobody would know that. You know, they don't discuss the origins of language. They discuss religion more. But language is the most important thing the humanity has developed. So one wonders how in the hell can English originate from Sanskrit, which is in India. Why isn't the basis of Sanskrit in English?

In the empirical material a widespread condemnation of the contents of the so-called universalistic approach towards historical narratives can be identified; an approach that regards Europe as the central point of historical narratives. Ada declares that 'just because Europe is at the centre of the map of the world it doesn't mean that Europe should be at the centre of the interpretation of history.'

Universalism in a spirit of multiculturalism – a paradigm shift

Even if Scott's, Butler's and various pupils' criticism of universal principles is motivated, it does not mean that universalism should be rejected; at least not if we take note of the interviewed pupils. In order to adapt teaching and historical writings to pupils' views it is necessary to make a paradigm shift and expand the historical horizon. According to Bhikhu Parekh, the common cultures and systems of education should be based on a respect for and mutual understanding of common cultures and histories (Parekh, 2000). In this context, some theorists have suggested that:

- It is in our interest to explain different forms of social and cultural structures and go beyond national state boundaries.
- In our attempt to 'map' the content of history we should try to expand the Euro-centric perspective (Gikandi, 2005).

From my point of view (a view based on my interpretation of the informants' words), this could be done by introducing a world history-orientated approach. Historian Klas-Göran Karlsson holds that globalization, regionalization and multiculturalism have led to a situation where it has become much harder to mediate history that is only founded on a national history (Karlsson, 2004). Similarly, historian Agnus Heller points out that:

Our past is no longer the present of a single culture, but of quite different ones. It *became*, in reality and not only in our imagination, the present of humankind. 'Togetherness' is now the 'Togetherness' of *all* people living on the earth. It encompasses various cultures and various social structures that have various cultures and *various social structures that have various pasts and various past histories*. We all share our time and our space. We are bound tightly together not only with ties of economy and politics, but also with ties of moral responsibility. (Heller, 1982, p 292)

The multicultural turn – summary

In conclusion, many pupils do want to learn about 'their culture'. However, they make clear that educational policies that resemble communitarian approaches reinforce differences and contribute to segregation. A communitarian approach is also problematic in that the informants' 'identities' are characterized by 'hybridity'. Such an approach is based on identity politics that define/fix subject positions. Judith Butler declares that '[n]o individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing "subjection"' (Butler, 1997, p 11).

Likewise, it is clear that many pupils think that universalism is problematic because the model itself is Euro-centric. In the conversations with the informants, and on the basis of my theoretical approaches, it would seem that a universalism based on narratives structured from world histories could be a way of overcoming some of the difficulties associated with a universal approach to the teaching of history. In addition, I have shown that one way of overcoming some of the problems of multicultural discourses would be to introduce a deconstructive perspective. It is my belief that world history and/or deconstruction can create a more critical approach towards the discursive production of norms, categories, values, as well as entities that are often taken for granted.

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¹ In this text the pupils' names are fictitious. The interviews were conducted between November 2004 and May 2007. The majority of the interviewed individuals were between the ages of 16 and 18. Almost all the informants had at least one parent with a university education.