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Teaching ancient national heroes in today's Europe

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Abstract

In general terms, Viriathus, Vercingétorix and Boudicca were represented as warriors who confronted the Roman invasions in Europe between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D. These mythical-historical figures became both national and local icons on several different accounts. Portugal, England and France integrated and promoted their image as dignified ancestors. Since education became a major contributor to citizenship identity and nation building, it seems interesting to follow these three heroes on their journey through educational programmes, from the patriotic beginnings until nowadays.

History compendiums are at the core of a complex series of relationships of power. They represent particularly relevant analytical objects as they crystallise conventional conceptions of national and European fictions. (Araújo, Maeso, 2010: 240)

With the time passing it became clear that education of young generations is set to be an important asset to citizenship. And if during the emerging days of national education programs the first priority was literacy¹, it was soon obvious that the issues for such enterprise were crucial when seeking patriotic unity. What better way to captivate the children than a good old story? A story that could easily become national history and therefore transmit the awareness of descending from a great lineage of warriors to children. The more pure and ancient the warriors, the more legitimate the nation. That is basically how Viriathus, Vercingétorix and Boudicca were successfully utilised to embody the patriotic roots of Portugal, France and England. But who were they and most importantly, how did they become important in education? Furthermore, if national identity and its inherent values tend to evolve, do these three heroes evolve similarly and if that is the case, how do they evolve? Such a comparative perspective allows us to compare and contrast different yet parallel strategies of appropriating these ancient warriors, revealing specific processes of identification with collective values of national citizenship.

This task requires a historiographical approach towards national education strategies that proposes an original and appropriate historical background. The purpose of this first epistemological step is that it allows us to understand the contemporary educational priorities and choices concerning these heroic figures. Thanks to a comparative analysis, it becomes possible to expose, understand and connect pedagogic options on

¹ See, for example, Galupeau (1992) or Loison (2007).

transmitting the ancient hero. Influences, controversies, methods, trends, naturally emerge from this methodological perspective. Comparing and confronting periods, ideologies, educational curricula, textbooks structures and speeches, this study seeks a complete understanding of the role played by ancient heroes in transmitting collective identities. And if in Portugal or France it is an easy task, in England things are presented differently. Since the early years of Portuguese and French educational programs, history textbooks have been regularly conceived and officially approved. Therefore, these continuous didactic materials are easy to access today in public libraries, along with the contemporary versions for the new generations, available in every bookshop. On the other side, English curricula do not require official textbooks. This does not mean that there are not any, only that their existence is the fruit of sporadic initiatives, more or less popular but not necessarily compulsory in schools. If they are nevertheless useful, they need to be viewed alongside teacher's resources such as those created by Devon Curriculum Services, for instance.

With the emergence of school programs over the last century, the predominant patriotic way of understanding the nation building creates homogeneous yet different ideological educational knowledge. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, when state schools started to spread though all Europe, the patriotic feelings couldn't submerge schools' first priority: to teach basic literacy skills. But with the progressive understanding of ways to educate, and most of all, with the conscience of the results emerging from a single way of thought, the preoccupation of what should be taught to the young generations became a priority for a number of emerging nations. In this process history became a clear instrument for transmitting collective values as ideological foundations to which there could be some common identification. The deeper these foundations, the deeper would be the belief and the more solid the nation. That is what initiated a search for a myth that would not belong to others, a pure and local root that could be incarnated by a charismatic figure, giving birth to unique ancestors.

For a long period, the Greco-Roman heritage, and particularly the Trojans, were commonly elected as genitive ancestors in many countries of Europe without seeking for singularity. But, sharing the same roots prevented any differentiation between countries who were anxious to establish their own individual legitimate political and cultural autonomy. In this process, an indigenous candidate would therefore provide a unique and pure source to local identity. And if these ancestors have in addition faced a gigantic power, like the Romans, they will be worthy of worship.

In the Iberian Peninsula, during the second century B.C., the shepherd and brigand Viriathus, saved an entire Lusitanian² army by reconsidering tactical warfare manoeuvres. He became their chief, leading them to a long set of victories against several Roman generals. Almost a decade later, and after being nominated by the Romans as *Amicus Populi Romani* (friend of the Roman people), this great tactician was assassinated in his sleep by three Lusitanian generals corrupted by those who could not accept the humiliation of such nomination. Almost seventeen centuries passed before Portuguese scholars started referring to him as the first hero of the kingdom. Such links

² They were a Celtiberian people from the west central region of the Iberian Peninsula, now between Portugal and Spain.

tend to get strengthened and enriched with patriotism and ideology, where Viriathus becomes an icon of national identity.

The first century B.C. was the time of the Roman leader Julius Caesar and his conquest with the intent of pacification of a large region that was so called Gallia. This mixture of numerous ethnic groups in constant quarrels was united under the command of a convincing political leader: the Arvernian³ Vercingétorix. During nine months, the two war leaders commanded many dozens of thousands of warriors to battle. The city of Gergovia saw the victory of the Gauls whereas the *oppidum*⁴ of Alésia was the scenario of the last resistance to the Roman conquest. In order to spare his own people, Vercingétorix offered his life to Caesar, depositing ceremoniously his weapons at his feet. France only acknowledges Vercingétorix as an ancestor at the very end of the nineteenth century. Defeated by the Prussians in 1870, the French ideology was at half-mast and found in the proud attitude of Vercingétorix towards Caesar, an example to be followed by all.

King Prasutagus of the Iceni⁵ and his wife Boudicca ruled in harmony with the Roman colonies nearby. At his death, and regardless of the testamentary indications, the Romans imposed their authority and claimed his kingdom, flogging Boudicca and raping her daughters. The consequence was almost immediate and consisted of the total destruction of three Roman colonies: Verulamium, Camulodunum and Londinium⁶. The massacre of the inhabitants was brutal and violent but was stopped by a final battle where Boudicca died. This unique feminine war leader was adopted fifteen centuries later as a historic figure during the Elizabethan era in order to legitimate her reign. Queen Victoria followed in her steps, and many saw in Boudicca the defender of the feminine cause.

Having been integrated within the history of these three countries, Viriathus, Vercingétorix and Boudicca, fitted the demand for noble and very ancient ancestors as part of a heroic heritage. Portugal, France and England nourished, from different periods, a very patriotic interpretation of these heroes which they intended to transmit to all citizens. The main purpose was to make them share the feeling of belonging to a whole historic nation whose ancestors struggled with passion and conviction for the sake of their successors.

Facing sentimental versions of their lives, where children are invited to feel empathy with their sufferings as their sacrifice ennobles the nation, these three heroes' images were reshaped to fit a noble collective and didactic cause. As is common with war leaders, attached to each one comes violence and massacres that are inherent to their lifestyle. Thus, enhancing military conflicts and violence increases a patriotic revenging history in national curricula that is somehow justified as a way to attract children's attention (Jordan, 2011: 123).

³ The Arverns occupied the south-east centre of what is now France.

⁴ It was the name given to the fortified settlements in the period of the Iron Age.

⁵ These people lived in the east of England, in a region that is now known as East-Anglia.

⁶ Today St. Albans, Colchester and London show numerous archaeological evidence of these events, particularly a burned layer that reveals the destruction.

This late XIXth century were decades of emotional education, where the virtues of these ancestors were emphasized through feelings. Historic accuracy was not a priority in times of nation building: providing an accurate ideological pattern was the main purpose in the education programs. Through the history of these heroic ancestors who confronted a great Roman power, children would nourish patriotic passion. Nevertheless it was difficult to reconcile these heroes with the contradictory approach which acknowledged the rich contribution of the Romanization process that followed the fall of the hero. The only solution at that time to deal with that contradiction was to determine a symbolic frontier between the heroic adventures and the Romanization by not establishing connections between the two events that were in fact intrinsically related.

In Portugal, the description normally given to Viriathus was of a simple shepherd, intelligent and courageous, who faced with few and unequipped men the mighty power of Rome. Textbooks argued that the Romans had no other solution than to kill him by betrayal in his sleep since he had inflicted so many defeats on them. Such perspectives provide not only a feeling of injustice, but moreover a feeling of pride for having an ancestor that offered so much resistance to the great power of Rome.

As for Boudicca in England, her image of a powerful and courageous queen goes alongside that of her beauty. She is depicted as a bruised mother whose revengeful actions are justified by the injustice and humiliation inflicted by the Romans on her daughters and herself. And, as to avoid misinterpretations, the massacres she commanded against the Romans were veiled, accentuating the suffering of the indigenous people. Some emphasis is also given to the fact that she was a woman; enhancing the bravery she had to demonstrate.

The French education version of Vercingétorix is a purely romanced one. Instead of having a loser, his defeat was used to accentuate the noble attitude. Not only because he was facing the mighty Julius Caesar, but also because he proudly turns himself to save his people. Through such sacrifice he is presented even greater than Julius Caesar. At that period the fact that the Romans were highly outnumbered was not revealed, the main focus was given to his proud attitude towards the defeat. As an example, such an attitude towards the enemy is to be followed by future generations when confronted to any misfortune.

Later on, the cumulative effects of the terrible events such as the First and Second World wars acted as important catalysts for changes in perspectives. Patriotism became a threat to peace and was therefore progressively banned from national curricula. Official textbooks were singled out for the devastating influence of their propaganda and exaggerated idealization in numerous generations. Viriathus, Vercingétorix and Boudicca were therefore progressively and similarly reconceptualised to fit new national identity values. This time the curriculum is more concerned with historic accuracy rather than patriotic emotions. Children experience lessons on the past that advocate stepping back and they are invited to make their own choices and interpretations. Contemporary textbooks reflect changing perspectives on the nature of citizenship process, where children are encouraged to develop their own interpretations of these three heroes.

Hypocritically, if official history presents itself as objective, humanist and pluralist, we still manage to find bits of pride here and there related to these historic figures, especially in Portugal. But globally, ancient heroes are no more than illustrating examples of a specific period. The contradiction is gone, the effects of Romanization are the main aspect to be retained by children.

Portuguese textbooks keep the aura of Viriathus as a simple shepherd, emphasising this time, his particular ability as a master of military tactics. Moreover, his story enhances the image of a man who was already civilized since he was declared a friend of the Romans. Viriathus is no longer an isolated hero since he is presented surrounded by its people. Nevertheless, these perspectives are still a bit dusty ideologically. Decorated with subjectivity that nourishes the proudness and injustice feelings we mentioned earlier.

In England, through the story of the Iceni revolt, the process of Romanization is learned from the point of view of the indigenous tribes. There is no longer an interest in emphasising with drama the aspects of the injustice and humiliation that was inflicted on Boudicca and her daughters. The major reason for her presence in the curricula is the fact that children are very attracted to her story and remember it easily. The major aspect to be retained is that this episode is a marker of the Romanization process. Furthermore, as a woman leader, the story of Boudicca serves also as a positive example for young girls, defending their equality with young boys.

The end of the so-called French national-romance has permitted the uncovering historic aspects that were hidden since they tarnished the image of Vercingétorix as a national hero. Some details of the final battle reveal the superiorities on both sides. On the one hand, the Gallic side was fifteen times more than the Roman. On the hand, Julius Caesar knew how to make the best use of Roman efficiency and organization. With new objective perspectives, proudness in defeat does not raise passions anymore: the fact that the hero is a member of the whole Gallic people and his adventure demonstrates courage is less important, instead and as with Boudicca, the story marks the transition moment to a new era of Romanization. And there is no place for superiority; Vercingétorix is presented side-by-side with Julius Caesar, as a major personality of that period.

From this historic approach it seems clear that learning about Viriathus, Vercingétorix and Boudicca was faced with an emerging new educational methodology, which sought to banish all patriotic history. Since they were utilised to promote national identity, their existence as educational characters is therefore compromised. Moreover, with new European and local realities each country faces changes in identity. Contemporary textbooks reflect the changing nature of citizenship, and yet these three heroes are still present. The surprising results show that pride in being the descendant of ancient heroes that fought long ago for the same land that we stand on, still have an important place in schools. Yet, hypocritically, official history presents itself as an objective, humanist and pluralist discipline.

A symbiotic relation emerges from the use that Portugal, England and France give to the ancient hero in their education programs. These nations gained an ancestor that could

transmit values and feelings, which matched the needs in a moment of nation building, where a homogeneous patriotic feeling was the purpose of education. On the other hand, teachers had an attractive story to tell, filled with emotions to transmit to the young generations and Viriathus, Boudicca and Vercingétorix gained themselves a new popularity as examples. With identity changes, this symbiotic relationship suffered modifications while keeping its connections. The national education nourishes awareness of cultural diversity (Bellamy, 2012: 77) instead of patriotism and finds in these heroes examples of humanity. Teachers still have the children's attention with these stories, and the heroes keep their extended lives. But the legends that gave the ancient hero a place in education, with the changing historiographical requirements, became traditions to be learned. Ambitious and very embracing, this history loses vitality when it comes to transmitting identity and citizenship. However, with the effects of globalization, do we need historic identity anymore?

Further research and in order to answer these doubts, (or in order to develop a more exhaustive approach) it would be important to interview both teachers and students. The intentions and choices when transmitting ancient heroes will emerge from the first. The perceptions and accommodations when receiving these heroes would then emerge from the second. Both accounts act as individual filters for history on an individual identity basis. Nevertheless, brought together, they form the actual collective identity in its relationship with ancient heroes.

Without education there are no citizens. (José Antonio Griñan, San Fernando, 2010)

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