



Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

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History Canon -- The Abiding Power of Nationalistic Myths

“Like fairy tales-tellers in non-writing and non-literate societies, textbooks in history... are charged with the responsibility of conveying to youth what adults believe they should know about their own culture as well as that of other societies”.

However one defines a *History Canon*, whether as the list of works on our syllabi, or those selected for survival because they are deemed superior by the arbiters of scholarship, or as a cultural institution that legitimizes the social and ideological prerogatives of a leading elite, or as the group of works appointed by hegemonic social structures to perpetuate and validate cultural cohesion and established power, history canons are often created as a part of the general scheme of building national ideologies that serve to preserve traditional cultural values. (Murat Belge and Jale Parla)

History textbooks serve both a “missionary” function” and act as “fundamental narratives” representing national identity and at the same time create the image of the “other”. Thus they are a most instrumental in the creation of the *History Canon*, which is surprisingly persistent, conservative and influential.

(For example the overwhelming discourse in Bulgarian history is still the ethnic – nationalistic one, understood as “patriotism”. Even the Communist ideology was not able to annihilate the overwhelming “grand narrative” and the myths of the sufferings, struggles and the virtues of Bulgarian people and, at the same time of the uniqueness of its culture...)

Why are nationalistic myths seen as problematic and counter-productive? Some of the these myths proliferated by the *History Canon* could be regarded as myths of a weakness and as a compensation for this weakness. They turn the fatalism and the

passivity into a personal quality; they also claim special moral superiority because of the suffering -- a founding feature of the Christian doctrine -- and they are in position to lay claims even nowadays. (George Schoppflin)

Is the change of the nationalistic - mythological *History Canon* a mission impossible?

My belief is that the link is broken between academic historiography, that is constantly providing advanced and most adequate knowledge of the past -- and the production of common historical knowledge (rather myths – fabrication) aimed for the general public. This “common knowledge” is mostly proliferated by the more or less petrified institution of the textbooks. (Let us not forget though, that they are our parents’ view of the past!)

I consider this rupture between the “high academic history” and the “national propaganda history” a generic “birth mark” not only of the abuse of history knowledge in Bulgaria, but a common trend in many national historiographies.

One possible question is how to create not another *History Canon*, but rather how to undermine the existing deeply nationalistic one using a civic, inclusive, tolerant approach to the past of the region and / or the continent. An approach that will be open and innovative, developing and interactive? Maybe new textbooks will be written also by students, not only by their parents?