



Title	Historical Consciousness, Historical Culture, and Public History : Three Key Concepts of History Teacher Education at German Universities
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Citation	アジア太平洋論叢. 2020, 22, p. 80-86
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/95060
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Historical Consciousness, Historical Culture, and Public History: Three Key Concepts of History Teacher Education at German Universities

Susanne Popp*

Abstract

This article on history education at German universities does not offer a detailed analysis of its relevant structures, but only a very brief sketch (1). Instead, it places a special focus on the theoretical concepts of ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘historical culture’ (2). These concepts have not only played an important role for the education of future history teachers at German universities for thirty years, but has also gained considerable prominence in cultural studies-oriented historical research and teaching in Germany (‘cultural turn’). In addition, it shows a rather close connection to the newly established master’s programmes in ‘public history’ (3), which have been expanding history education at German universities for a number of years and are still on the rise.

Keywords: German Universities, History Teacher, Historical Consciousness, Historical Culture, Public History

This article on history education at German universities does not offer a detailed analysis of its relevant structures, but only a very brief sketch (1). Instead, it places a special focus on the theoretical concepts of ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘historical culture’ (2). These concepts have not only played an important role for the education of future history teachers at German universities for thirty years, but has also gained considerable prominence in cultural studies-oriented historical research and teaching in Germany (‘cultural turn’). In addition, it shows a rather close connection to the newly established master’s programmes in ‘public history’ (3), which have been expanding history education at German universities for a number of years and are still on the rise.

1.

A German high school graduate who intends to study history at German universities does not have to take an entrance examination and usually does not even need a certain grade average in his high school diploma. At present, he can choose from around 200 historical degree programmes with a wide range of specialisations.

At some German universities the history departments comprise many different historical sub-disciplines and numerous researchers, e.g. at the Humboldt University in Berlin. At smaller universities, however, the history departments have the following core subjects: (a) ancient history, i.e. the history of ancient Greece and Rome, (b) medieval history, which focuses on German and partly also European history between 500 and 1500 CE, (c) early modern history, which usually covers the period from the end of the European middle ages to the age of industrialisation in the 19th century, (d) modern and contemporary history, which, roughly speaking, ranges from the French Revolution to the present day and mainly emphasises German national history. Furthermore, there is (e) regional history that refers to the actual location of the university and often transcends the epochs.

Even if such a history department still offers many variations and students are free to choose from among the fields to some extent, these five areas represent the core of history studies in Germany, especially for teacher training. The chronological structure reflects the so-called European resp. Western periodization scheme (ancient, middle and new/modern history), which represents a concept introduced by the European Renaissance that now is so deeply rooted not only in the German and Western understanding of history that its origin is often no longer consciously perceived (Green 1992).

Finally: if the respective university offers the subject of history as a study programme for future school teachers, then also the discipline ‘didactics of history’, defined as the science of historical consciousness and historical culture in society, is mandatory. It is part of the history departments, and this position is in contrast to the practice in many countries where history didactics usually is allocated to the educational sciences. The affiliation to the history department is linked to another characteristic feature: In Germany, the subject ‘history’ usually stands for itself in teacher training and in school and is not integrated into a combined subject such as ‘civic education’ or ‘social sciences’.

In addition to the core structure described above, many history departments, especially the larger ones, offer numerous other historical sub-disciplines, such as the history of foreign states, European history, transregional history, economic and social history, Jewish history, cultural history and – in recent times – global history and public history, whereby the latter is sometimes combined with history didactics. Historical studies are also offered by the so-called ‘area studies’, which deal with non-European regions, like the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. Since area studies do not deal exclusively with historical topics, however, they are usually not part of the history departments, even if there are many forms of cooperation.

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In general, national history continues to dominate university history education in Germany, followed by European history. This is especially true for history curricula in schools. However, more and more German historians with a focus on national history try to link their research priorities to transregional or even global historical contexts. And even though, as stated above, global and transregional or transcultural history are on the upswing, there are no chairs or research units for 'world history' in Germany.¹ Nor is the history of non-European world regions subsumed under the term 'world history', as it is sometimes to be found in other countries. There are many reasons for this German distance to 'world history' as a scientific discipline. One important factor is that the term is associated with a (German) tradition of speculative approaches that by scientific standards have become obsolete already a long time ago. On top, some of those Eurocentric German 'world histories' had a very questionable ideological character.²

Although the term of 'world history' does not play a role in the German historical sciences, for some years now popular works on 'world history' – in the sense of a more or less comprehensive overview of the history of mankind – have received considerable public interest (e.g. Diamond 2006 [1997], Harari 2013, Christian 2018). One could say that there is a gap between the historical sciences and the historical culture in Germany.

2.

'Historical culture' (*Geschichtskultur*) (Carretero et al. 2017) is a theoretical research concept of history didactics which, in the course of the 'cultural turn' (Jameson 1998) in the late 20th century, has spread into various areas of the (postmodern) historical sciences as well as in 'memory studies' (cf. Halbwachs 1980, Nora 1989, Erll 2011) and 'heritage studies' (Lowenthal 2015, MacDonald 2013). Although the latter disciplines often use the concept of 'memory culture' (*Erinnerungskultur*), which is not equivalent to the concept of historical culture, both have a common basis in the broad field of relationships between individuals, groups and societies with their past. From the point of view of the history didactics, however, the cultures of recollection, commemoration, memory, and heritage in a society are considered as integral components of a more comprehensive idea of historical culture (Seixas 2015a).

(West) German history didactics started to develop the concept of 'historical culture' in the 1970s. It partially referred back to concepts in the German tradition of philosophy and theory of history (e.g. Hegel, Gadamer). Over the next two decades the concept gained increasing importance until it was anchored – together with the previously established concept of 'historical consciousness' (e.g. Clark/Grever 2018) – as the disciplinary matrix of the German 'didactics of history' in the 1990s.

One of the main advocates of the relevance of the new concept for the research of history didactics was Jörn Rüsen, a prominent German expert for theory of history. He made a distinction between an inner and an outer side of historical learning ('learning' in the broad sense of formal and informal as well as conscious and unconscious lifelong learning from early childhood on) (Rüsen 1991: 17). The 'inner side' (*historical consciousness*) is related to individual psychological processes of cognitive, emotional, and/or imaginative perception, appropriation, and use of references to the past and history. The 'outer side' (*historical culture*) refers to the ways in which society is dealing with past and history. The concept is now defined as the totality of all observable communicative references to past, history, memory and heritage in a society, including formal and informal learning processes. It makes no difference whether the nature of those references to past, history, memory, and heritage is argumentative, appealing, expository, narrative, polemical or imaginative, or how much historical expertise, theoretical reflection, and intellectual honesty are connected with them. Further, from the theoretical point of view it is irrelevant which social, political, ideological, or commercial purposes they serve. Finally, historical culture includes both phenomena of cultural memory and communicative memory. 'Cultural memory' (Assmann 2008, 1995) is defined as detached from personal experience, while the 'communicative memory' (Assmann 2008, 1995) is established in the current communication of the recollections of families and social groups and usually dating back no more than three generations. The latter, above all, serves the social cohesion and identity construction of the respective social group whereby its interpretations of the past can differ considerably both from the scientific research findings and from official state history policies (Welzer 2010). But, of course, identity-forming functions of history, memory, and heritage are by no means limited to communicative memory (Zerubavel 2003, Wertsch/Roediger 2008).

The inner and outer sides of dealing with past and history ('learning') are structurally and systemically connected with each other. They are triggering and influencing without determining each other.

The turning of history didactics towards the concepts of historical consciousness and – later – historical culture started in the historical context of the intellectual debates of the 1970s that made the traditional understanding of 'didactics of history' obsolete. Until then, history didactics, which barely existed at universities, had primarily been seen as an a-theoretical and experience-based practice that was to 'translate' the 'canonized' topics and ideas of the official cultural memory into a form understandable to students and guide the student teacher to develop 'good' and 'efficient' lessons in a manner considered 'professional'.

In the 1970s, the attitude of West German society to the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust started to change from denial and suppression of the recent past to vivid (and often controversial) public discussion with the aim of 'coming to terms with the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) in order to create a solid base for a democratic future. In this context an important impetus for history didactics was given by a younger generation of German historians from the new field of social history who defined the historical sciences as 'social sciences' and criticised the traditional understanding

of history in a fundamental way. As a result of this re-orientation the traditional goals and canonical contents of history teaching in schools and teacher training at universities, which had been taken for granted until then, were also basically questioned.³ As a consequence, the experts in history didactics were no longer in a position to confine themselves to their traditional attitude of professionally conveying a given canon and teaching methods to student teachers. Moreover, the historical example of the experience that National Socialist teachers were quite capable of organizing an ideologically 'effective' history education supported the new ideas of reform. In order to fulfil its social responsibility in an open and democratic society, history didactics had to establish itself as a critical science. This required the development a theoretical framework comprising the whole of both individual and collective social practices of dealing with past, history, memory and heritage – with history teaching as an integral part and with reference to an overarching context of both scientific norms and ethical, political and social values. In this sense, in 1977 Karl-Ernst Jeismann defined the renewed discipline of the didactics of history as the scholarship of

'[...] historical consciousness in society, both in terms of its given status, the existing contents and figures of thought, and in its change, the constant reconstruction and construction of historical concepts [...]. [History didactics] is interested in this historical consciousness [...] in all groups of society, both for its own sake and under the question of the significance of this historical consciousness for the self-understanding of the present.' (Jeismann 1977: 12f.; transl. S.P.)

With this theoretical foundation, which did not yet clearly differentiate between historical consciousness and historical culture, the institutionalization of the didactics of history as an academic discipline in the history departments of German universities began. This was followed in 1980 by the founding of the first international academic association, the International Society for History Didactics (<https://ishd.co/>), which continues to this day.

The orientation towards the concept of historical consciousness started to change the understanding of the goals of history education. The accumulation of canonised historical knowledge in the sense of an extensive and detailed declarative knowledge on prescribed historical names and dates no longer was considered as the overriding priority of history teaching. Rather, declarative historical knowledge was (and is) regarded as the (indispensable) basis for achieving more far-reaching objectives. These included, on the one hand, the initiation of an understanding of the fundamental historicity of the human world, and the complex interrelations of past, present and future. This is aimed at the development of the competence to link the interpretations of the past to the experiences of the present and the expectations of the future in a rational and reflected way, i.e. on the basis of the epistemology, principles and methodology of historical science.

On the other hand, the purpose is to provide students both at university and in school with essential insights into the constructivist and multi-perspectival nature of 'history', private and public 'memory' and 'heritage'. At the same time, it is necessary to help them to understand that the constructedness of history does not affect the fundamental historical claim to truth (or validity) of any statement about the past, which is rooted in discipline-based and intersubjectively verifiable analyses and interpretations of historical sources as well as in ongoing open and critical discussions. In summary, the orientation towards the concept of historical consciousness calls for a history education at schools and universities that enables the students to critically reflect on both their own historical consciousness (including imaginations, emotions, interests, ideological beliefs, identity issues, and values) and the historical culture, including the historical sciences, around them. This should provide them with a historically informed orientation in order to become responsible citizens in the present world. To achieve these goals, students need well-developed skills and competences of historical thinking and critical judgement as well as the readiness to deal with multiple views on past and history.

At this point, it seems necessary to explain that both concepts, historical consciousness and historical culture, have a fourfold functional status. Firstly, they represent theoretically elaborated meta-concepts for the scientific discourse and for research in the discipline. Secondly, they are understood as analytical concepts for the empirical exploration of any kind of past/history-relationships within society. While the concept of historical consciousness focuses on individual mental processes, the concept of historical culture examines the wide range of manifestations resp. communications of historical consciousness in society.

The latter leads us, thirdly, to the normative dimension. Like in all educational (in the broadest sense) and value-bound contexts it is indispensable in our field, too, to formulate a theoretically (and perhaps also empirically) justified answer to the question about the norms, values, and standards that define an elaborated historical consciousness resp. historical culture. Just to give an example: Along the theoretical concept, everyone, even a 5-year-old child, has a certain level of historical consciousness that can be empirically described, regardless of the quantity and quality of the available references to the past. But when we talk about the goals of history education at school and university or the demands of responsible citizenship, we use the term 'historical consciousness' in a normative way by postulating a certain level of independent elaboration and reflection. The same applies to the concept of historical culture that can be understood as an empirically given area of social reality – including, for example, a culture of historical 'fake news' and lies – on the one hand and as a normative and critical concept on the other.

Finally, there is the pragmatic dimension of these terms. It is about how history education inside and outside schools and universities (e.g. in museums and at memorial sites) could promote the development of a "high-quality" level of

historical consciousness, and how citizens could be motivated to critically question and judge the public historical culture around them as well as to competently participate in it.

The growing importance of the concept of ‘historical culture’ in history didactics can be attributed to the interaction of various factors. With regard to society and the public, the interplay of the so-called ‘history boom’, ‘memory boom’, and ‘heritage boom’ that unfolded in the last decades of the 20th century is to be highlighted. It manifested itself in a significantly expanded presence of highly diverse historical representations in the everyday lives of citizens. In the last two decades, this development has been once again considerably reinforced by the worldwide web and by social media, or, for example, the popularity of computer games. Even though these ‘booms’ are not necessarily linked to an intensified public attention for scholarly historical discourse or even to a serious interest in history, such trends clearly demonstrate how much the everyday world is interspersed with highly diverse references to past and history, memory and heritage.

Of course, there are many different reasons for the increased popularity of ‘history’. Just to pick out one of them: The accelerated globalization processes since the end of the Cold War, which tend to weaken the nation-states, have created specific needs among some citizens for historical identity, belonging and orientation. The resurgence of nationalisms (Bieber 2018) around the globe, which insist on an strongly accentuated national history, points as much to such contexts as the fierceness of ‘history wars’, which have been and are being fought in various states since the 1990s on the national character of history curricula and textbooks (Popp 2009).

These trends coincided with the concomitant popularity of constructivist, and partially postmodern, approaches in both history and pedagogy. By increasingly turning to the process of subjective construction of historical knowledge and meaning by individuals resp. students (Gagnon 2001), the scholarly discourse of history didactics started to pay more attention than before to those manifold factors influencing the historical consciousness, which do not result from formal educational processes, but reflect the history-related everyday culture. As a consequence, history didactics research turned more than before to the impact of historical culture on historical consciousness.

On the one hand, research started to focus on the individual starting conditions of historical learning, because no student ever enters the history lessons as an ‘empty canvas’. All of them bring along a certain prior knowledge, connected with personal preferences, interests, and imaginations in historical sense making. These ideas are already from an early age on shaped by the ubiquitous historical culture around them, e.g. through family memories and traditional and social media channels. On the other hand, the opinion gained acceptance that it's not enough that history lessons only talk about history itself. For if history education really strives to educate students to become responsible citizens who orient themselves in a historically educated, rational and reflective way towards their present world, then the way in which society deals with the past, history, memory, and heritage, i.e. historical culture, must also be an important object of history education. For only a few of the schoolchildren will become professional historians and/or deal with historical source in their adult lives. However, all of them will be confronted with the diversity of the messages of historical culture circulating in their everyday lives, always and everywhere – regardless of whether these messages are true, or misleading.

Thus, research-based student projects to explore history and historical culture in extracurricular locations (e.g. museums, archives, memorials) have become an integral part of the history curriculum. The more important aspect, however, was to provide the students with the basics for the critical examination of the given ‘world of history, memory and heritage’. This for instance requires not only basic knowledge of the fundamentals of historical culture (e.g. institutions, professions, actors, media, ‘products’, and practices), but also the ability to verify the correctness of historical information as well as skills to analyse the positionality and interest of the author and the target groups. For example, this involves questions such as who is talking about whom, whose historical experiences are excluded or negated and who may not even have the chance to participate in the discourse on history, memory and heritage. Furthermore, the social functions of the respective historical representation are to be scrutinized. The students should become able to distinguish between different agendas of such representations, for example: (a) scientific interest (the criterion is ‘truth’ or ‘validity’ of statements about the past); (b) political, cultural and social interests (the criterion is ‘power’), including identity policies, (c) intellectual interests in history (the criterion is ‘education’), (d) leisure interest, such as history-related feature films (the criterion is ‘entertainment’) or (e) the marketing of historical topics (the criterion is ‘economic profit’). Within the course of such analyses, students should get the opportunity to learn that, for example, political, economic or other agendas might be hidden behind a superficial scientific or educational concern.⁴ In this context, it is also important to introduce Jörn Rüsen's concept of historical culture, which distinguishes between the political, aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of historical culture (Rüsen 1987 *passim*). These do not occur separately, but interact with each other in different ways. In war memorials, for example, the aesthetic dimension often massively supports the political message, while cognitive aspects decline. The particular relationship between the dimensions is to be examined on a case-by-case basis.

For the time being, we can point out that the concepts of historical consciousness and historical culture are now being taken up, discussed and further developed⁵ internationally in the field of scientific research in history (teacher) education. Anglo-American research in the field of historical didactics, however, usually prefers the concept of historical thinking (Wineburg 2001, Seixas 2013, 2015, Lévesque/Clark 2018) to historical consciousness. This is mainly due to the fact that Anglo-American research refers primarily to the teaching of history in schools and strongly focuses on quantitative empirical research on learning processes. The concept of historical consciousness poses a problem here because it is comparatively difficult to operationalize for these purposes. At the same time, Anglo-American research also investigates

imaginings and emotions in history learning. This in turn clearly indicates that the meta-concept of 'historical consciousness' that encompasses all psychological forms of the past relationship of individuals has its justification.

As far as the historical sciences are concerned, it can be stated that university history education in Germany, across all historical sub-subjects, has turned much more than in the past to the study of how societies deal with past, history, memory, and heritage. This also manifests itself in the rise of public history at German universities, which – just like didactics of history – do not carry out historical research in the conventional sense, but deal with questions of historical culture and, above all, the mediation of history. In the following, some similarities and differences between the two disciplines are briefly discussed.

3.

The term 'public history' (De Groot 2012, Gardner/Hamilton 2017, Ashton/Trapeznik 2019) – like in history didactics – stands both for an academic discipline and for a field of professional practice outside academia. The still growing interest in public history master's programmes in Germany, which are mainly enrolled by students who neither want to become academic researchers nor school teachers, is clearly related to that above mentioned 'history boom'. In many areas of historical culture there has arisen an increased need for professional communication of historical topics which successfully meets the different expectations and interests of a very broad spectrum of lay target groups.

The current study programmes are less in the tradition of the Public History Movement (Miller 1992, Cauvin 2018) that emerged in the context of the New Social History (Stearns 1976) of the 1970s in the USA and the UK. By promoting the 'history from below' (Bernhard 2019), which was to be jointly run by lay people and experts in so-called 'history workshops', the Public History Movement challenged the academic monopoly of research and interpretation of history in order to establish a democratically 'shared historical responsibility' (Frisch 1990) in society. Rather, today's study programmes are more oriented towards the second tradition of public history that, too, dates from the 1970s. When US universities – in the course of institutional expansion – produced more historians than universities and schools could take, new study programmes were created for academically trained historians. These were to qualify them for specialized professions in the areas of historical culture, cultural heritage and memory work.

Even if the term 'public history' has not been precisely defined by the internal discourse to this day, the following fixed points of the concept can be observed: (a) the connection between academic research in the fields of public history and non-academic practice, whereby academically trained historical expertise is required as a basis qualification (b) the distance to formal teaching processes in schools and other institutions (c) the emphasis in research, teaching and practice on conveying history to a lay public, as well as (d) the value-bound idea of contributing to the common interest by conveying history to the public.⁶

These points of reference show that historical didactics and public didactics have much in common, apart from formal history teaching in schools and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the disciplines cannot be equated. This becomes particularly clear with the concept of historical culture. According to the theory of history didactics, this term encompasses all phenomena that are to be understood as manifestations of activities of historical consciousness and therefore covers both scientific research and all forms of public use of history. In contrast, public history demarcates a line between academic historical sciences and the public. This semantic opposition may be very popular and attractive in the eyes of lay people, since the term 'public' promises them easy access to a sphere that they often find unreachable. Nevertheless, that construct is not convincing, since many academic historians write for the public with great success and take vividly part in public debates. One would therefore like to ask whether the demarcation does not exist less in relation between the public and the academia as a whole, but rather in relation to the research-related and specialized communication of historians, which is explicitly addressed to the scientific community. In any case, however, the comprehensive concept of historical culture seems to be theoretically much clearer.

Similar applies to the second difference between the two concepts of public history and historical culture, namely the handling of public representations and discourses that misuse history (in the broadest sense), as happens with the mass dissemination of nationalist, revisionist, chauvinist and/or racist interpretations of history on the Internet and in social media. The protagonists and audiences involved undoubtedly understand their historical engagement as a valid form of 'public historical discourse', and they even use the idea of 'academia vs. public' by claiming to uncover would-be historical "truths" that are suppressed by allegedly "deceiving" academic historians. While the comprehensive concept of historical culture permits a theoretical differentiation between an empirical and a normative approach, the question arises as to which criteria the discipline of public history could exclude these public forms of historical debates from the concept of the 'public'. The semantic opposition of 'academia vs. public' is not appropriate for this purpose.

These two examples demonstrate sufficiently that the concepts of historical didactics and public history are not identical, especially at the theoretical level. In addition, the two disciplines have different perspectives on the historical culture. While the historical culture – or rather certain parts of it – represents the central object of research, teaching and practice in public history and while the public historians are actively contributing to the shaping of historical culture with their professional practice, the position of historical didactics points in another direction. History culture is here above all an object of analysis that is relevant in terms of historical consciousness and history education and social responsibility. It

is less a matter of professional practice within historical culture than of the skills and competences to critically reflect on the use of history in the everyday life as well as in history studies and history education.

Conclusion

With the presentation of these three concepts – historical consciousness, historical culture, and public history – this contribution only sheds light on a narrowly defined segment of the German university history education. This selection seems justified because the concept of historical culture in particular, with its focus on the analysis of how history is dealt with in society, pursues issues that are now being addressed by many historical sub-disciplines beyond the didactics of history. It is likely that the concepts presented in this article will retain their significance even if, in the future, global perspectives may gain a greater role in German university history education than today. But then another topic, which has been neglected in the German discussion so far, will also gain a great deal of attention: the critical examination of the question regarding the universality or cultural (Western) partiality of the concepts of ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘historical culture’ and the underlying epistemological understanding of history.

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¹ Also, in the school there is no subject 'world history' apart from national history.

² Cf. on the German distance to 'world history' e.g. Sachsenmaier (2010) *passim*.

³ Cf., for example, the newspaper article by the prominent German social historian Jürgen Kocka on the role of history teaching: Kocka 1972.

⁴ See also on this special topic the study on popular history magazines in Europe Popp/Schumann (eds.) 2015.

⁵ See, for example, Grever's proposal for a revised concept of historical culture: Maria Grever 2017, here pp. 77-83.

⁶ See the definition (2017) of the US National Council on Public History (NCPH): 'All [public historians] share an interest and commitment to making history relevant and useful in the public sphere.' URL: <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/> (21.09.2019).