

Nicole Schwabe

De-Centering History Education

Creating Knowledge of Global Entanglements

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Creating Knowledge
of Global Entanglements

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Creating Knowledge of Global Entanglements /**

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Preamble

The project 'Knowledge of Global Entanglements' is an attempt to make a contribution to educational practice from the standpoint of science, more precisely from the perspective of interAmerican studies. In order to provide concrete examples of how the findings from theoretical and empirical discussions of the Americas as Space of Entanglements and current discussions from the social and cultural sciences can be conveyed in schools. In the course of reorienting regional studies, the interAmerican perspectives are focusing on transregional dynamics. The approach of investigating the Americas as an interAmerican area of entanglements makes it possible to show cross-border dynamics, processes of deterritorialization and the intertwining of local, national, regional and transregional exchange processes and reference levels (Kaltmeier 2014, 178).

The aim of this theory-practice transfer is not to put our own research emphases additively on the already too full curricula. Rather, the focus is to contrast the production of knowledge in schools with alternative approaches, and to formulate impulses that question the exclusive national narrative, as well as, imparting closed cultural concepts in the classroom. The project focuses on the production of teaching materials for school, whose geographical starting point is – according to the regional focus of our research work – the Americas (from Canada and the USA via Mexico, the Caribbean to Central and South America). Here, phenomena of global significance manifest themselves, such as migration, social inequalities, resource conflicts, the effects of climate change and environmental changes, dealing with ethnic diversity or the presence of colonialism. The series was significantly funded from 2014 to 2019 by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research as a transfer project within the interdisciplinary research project 'The Americas as Space of Entanglements'.

Numerous members of the Center for InterAmerican Studies, including didactic specialists at the University of Bielefeld were very enthusiastic about this project idea, and their commitment is to

be thanked for the versatility of the resulting materials. The conceptual development of the teaching units was discussed in interdisciplinary working groups. Tandems from specialist scientists and didactic specialists have proved to be particularly effective in this respect. While some contributed results and ideas from their own research work, others made implementation work possible thanks to their wealth of experience in teaching the subject and, last but not least, their knowledge of the framework conditions of schools. Interdisciplinarity is a fundamental feature of the project. This becomes very clear in the composition of the working group, but also in the materials produced. A central objective of the project was to identify niches, which allow the connection to the parameters of formal education and the use of the materials in school teaching. The task of finding the right balance between familiar topics and new impulses generated by the scientific debate, has continuously accompanied the development of the project.

1. Introductory Remarks

Every production of knowledge is based on the – usually only implicitly visible – understanding of the world. These assumptions shape our perception of the past and our narratives about it. Historiography must, therefore, always be regarded as a situated and context-dependent narrative about the past. Materials for history education also precede the authors' assumptions, which too often remain unreflected. The same applies to curricula whose authors are usually not even made public. A transparent discussion about socially situated premises and worldviews, which are reflected in our narratives of history, is a prerequisite for a democratic negotiation of them. This is not only about the question of what content is taught and learned in schools, but even more significant is a reflection of basic attitudes and perspectives on the world that are inherent to the scholar or what has been learned.

What view on other countries, other regions of the world or other people is taught in history education in Germany? And when we start from Edward Said's thesis, which is fundamental for post-colonial theory, that the construction of the *Other* has a fundamental function for the construction of one's *Own*, this question about the view of the avoidably foreign is accompanied by the question about the avoidably own (Said 2010 [1978]).

When we deal with people or societies in the past, they are all foreign to us first and foremost. We have never met them and will never have the opportunity to do so. Life was different then, than it is now. In order to understand why people at some point in the past acted a certain way and not differently, or to understand what was imaginable at all, a step-by-step and reflected approach is needed. Learning to deal with this difference is a major task of history education. In contrast, however, in a history education oriented towards German national history, the unquestioned notion dominates that we deal with *our* history which is certainly justified, but that could lead to great misunderstandings and false conclusions about the past, as well as the present. As history didacticians and teachers, we must

ask ourselves what social self-image is conveyed in the classroom this way. This knowledge production is most likely to become tangible in teaching materials or textbooks. This state-authorized information is considered socially correct and objective; moreover, the knowledge imparted in school is significant. The knowledge conveyed in schools is an expression of a cultural knowledge order and at the same time constructs social order (Müller-Matthis and Wohnig 2017, 5).

The identity-forming function of history means that the teaching of history has a special role to play here. Criticism of the enormous deficits of history teaching in Germany with regard to the imparted knowledge of the world has been around for years. For example, as early as the 1990s Michael Riekenberg and the history didactician Bodo von Borries took a critical look at the knowledge conveyed by textbooks about Latin America and identified massive gaps in knowledge and significant errors in textbooks (Riekenberg and Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research 1990). Even beyond the level of textbook analysis, history didactics has been criticizing curricula frameworks and the structuring of school knowledge production for years. In history education, social, national and cultural events of other countries and regions, as well as transregional entanglements, are often ignored (Völkel 2013; Grewe 2016). This comes from a 19th-century traditional way of thinking. The traditional chronology of "the" history is limited to a Western-European context of tradition from Greek antiquity via the Roman Empire to the "modern world." At the center of this world is the German nation. Therefore, curricula and textbooks have a consistent national internal perspective (Popp 2005, 498-499).

However, if history teaching does not want to lose touch with the present and future challenges, including the students' living worlds, it must face social change and not remain in a historical nostalgia that contributes neither to an understanding of the past nor an orientation to the present. Globally, acting protagonists, transnational exchange relations or the circulation of ideas, goods and people are not new phenomena and a discussion of historical entanglements