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Educator

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Introduction

Even as we look forward, it is important to understand that our current situation is always the result of preceding events, and that we are shaped by the circumstances, choices and actions of the past. Therefore, we cannot understand our present situation without knowing history, much as we have been reminded that progress cannot be made by constantly looking at the rear mirror.

- Tan Tai Yong, 2020, p. 170-171

The necessity of studying history grafts in the verity that if we do not know about the past, we then do not know how we got here, from which we would not know where to go; true albeit terribly clichéd. What then counts as historical study done correctly, or at least properly? Is there a definitive narrative, ought there be one, and does it always belong to the Churchillian victor?

In his sixth and final public lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies S R Nathan fellow, Professor Tan Tai Yong (president of Yale-NUS College and eminent historian) appealed for the cultivation of historical literacy, historical consciousness, and historical imagination to enable reasonable understanding of history and "how it affects our personal and public lives" (Tan, 2020, p. 171).

Historical literacy is having a historical knowledge of events, stringing together the chronology, and making sense of the ensued consequences in the form of a coherent narrative. However, beyond high-stake examinations (and dare we say propaganda), how might this knowledge be made relevant and meaningful to us? Tan argues that such a relevance requires historical consciousness.

Historical consciousness rests on collective memories. Collective memories are shared memories and knowledge of a social group. These memories are used by the group to interpret a past that would resonate with the way they identify themselves (Tan, 2020, p. 172).

Do we have our own narratives to contribute to the constantly revising and expanding collective memories and shared consciousness? Are we able to use the threads provided by *what happened* and add to the tapestry of *why it happened*? Thereby, perhaps, proffering a lens that attempts to look forward from the point of view of the historical actors rather than conclude from the perspective of a chronologically removed commentator who has the benefit of 20/20 hindsight? This requires historical imagination.

Is *The Oxford handbook of the history of education* an exercise in historical literacy, consciousness, or imagination?

Emergence of the field

Professionally situated both within education as a distinctive arena of teaching, research, and writing and history as a disciplinary realm, historians of education have strived to address a variety of audiences (p. 12).

History of education is inevitably inter-disciplinary given that the tentacles of education writhe their way into the economy, politics, culture, and pretty much life in general. Hence, the study of the history of education cannot be walled off from the disciplines of history, sociology, policy studies, economics, and of course education and pedagogical traditions. These are primarily national considerations thus it is no coincidence that the emergence of the field coincides with the rise of formal education and national education systems. The editors of *The Oxford handbook of the history of education* write:

... historians of education... have addressed an array of topics that have proven quite critical both to educational practice and the social and political lives of societies around the world. In the wake of global social change, questions of cultural diversity, social harmony, and economic inequality have grown ever more important, and education systems are implicated to one degree or another in all of them (p. 12).

The twentieth century experimentation with nineteenth century philosophies, especially post-war, proved to be a “decisive turn for the field” (p. 4). In the midst of social and political turmoil, accessibility to education (often the lack thereof) and the concomitant social mobility (often the lack thereof) came into sharp focus. Along with this critical turn was the emergence of social theory which had caused it to “become quite impossible to think of the history of education without considering a larger theoretical frame of social and economic conflict and change” (p. 5). The social and economic themes extend into the emergence of much of East Asia from colonisation and the transformation (or hybridisation) of colonial education systems into national ones. Rury and Tamura report a change of the direction in the field, departing from a predominantly leftist treatment of institutional questions to focusing on the experiences of the recipients of education; a turn towards historical consciousness and historical imagination?

Following trends in the larger field of historical research and writing, historians of education have subtly shifted much of their attention from focusing on schools and other educational institutions to the experiences of children, youth, and adults who spent considerable portions of their lives in them. In many respects it represented a newly sensitised sociocultural turn in scholarly interests (p. 10).

Rury and Tamura appear to follow the same trajectory in their organisation of *The Handbook* - beginning with the interpretive frames in Part One followed by tracing the rise of national education systems from premodern roots right through to the emergence of modern higher education in Parts Two to Four. The shift from institutional study towards narratives of (and by?) the people takes place in Parts Five and Six.

Interpretive frames in educational history

The interpretive frames that form Part One of the handbook attempt to provide the context within which theory is conceived.

There was broad agreement with the assertion expressed by the British social historian Asa Briggs in 1972 that the history of education should be approached as “part of the wider study of the history of society, social history broadly interpreted with the politics, the economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in.”

- McCulloch, 2019, p. 26

The history of education, as we are able to know, is a tapestry that has been woven across time and space with threads of emerging literacies and evolving culture, society, and politics. However, it becomes quickly evident that the colours of one thread bleed into the others. Whilst essays at isolating the threads of the tapestry offer useful insights into the constituent fibres, the necessity of the whole means that they can't stand alone; colours from the adjacent threads

are apparent.

Revisionism in the history of education is essentially the problematisation of prior orthodoxy, reconsideration of supposedly benign, perhaps even benevolent, school systems. Education's role in society, more accurately social change, were brought into a radical and Marxist focus (McCulloch, 2019). Indeed, revisionist accounts of educational history were playing catch up with the wider historical revisionism that was gaining traction in the twentieth century, concerning itself “... less with the rise of modern schooling and much more with educational processes as they have occurred in many different kinds of institutions and milieux, pervading individual lives and collective social experiences” (p. 23).

This endeavour of collecting the voices of the people is incidentally ancient and of the oral tradition; a method of historical practice that was usurped by the emergence of the written word that afforded literacy which gave rise to education and mass schooling in the first place, ironically. Subsequent industrialisation of society and the role of education in service to it is what we end up studying and knowing as history of education. As Richardson writes in the handbook:

If there has been a central dynamic propelling it, this seems to have been the evolution into nation-states of societies managed by literate elites. Accompanying this, historiography has been increasingly influenced by the cultural force of political, social, and economic development based on or acquiescent to empirical science and its technical applications such that the worldviews and oral histories of nonliterate societies are pushed inexorably even further to the margins.

Education has been integral to this dynamic. The rise of science and its technologies is predicated on intellectual curiosity and evidential validation by peers (pp. 52-53).

This history is thus firmly planted within the urban context though not always obvious to historians and readers. Given that Singapore is decidedly urban and nation building post-independence was a relentless industrialisation drive, the urban setting of my own study of Singapore's history of education did escape me. As Gottesman writes in the volume:

Tyack's essay offers a classic and startlingly clear example and line of reasoning for why it is important for historians to think about theory in relationship to their work: when one looks at the world, it is with a lens. This guides how and what evidence is collected, the identification of meaning in the evidence, and ultimately the construction of narrative and its contribution to the historical conversation. Theory always matters in historical inquiry. The question is whether we are conscious of and intentional about the interpretive frames brought to our scholarship and the values, beliefs, and assumptions that underpin them (p. 65)

Gottesman surveyed David Tyack's 1976 essay "Ways of seeing: An essay on the history of compulsory schooling" en route to proffering eight theoretical frameworks that historians of education commonly draw upon:

1. Marxist political economy
2. theories of human and social capital
3. new institutionalism
4. feminist theory
5. critical theories of race
6. theories of colonialism and empire
7. indigenous studies
8. transnationalism

The eventual exercise in distilling wisdom then rests on the respective explanatory model deployed, the choice of "lens" raising questions concerning methods and politics. Furthermore, students of history are well warned by Gottesman to take heed of the inevitable "ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of history" (p. 67). It is no coincidence that the same positionality concerns plague researchers with regard to the validity of claims of objectivity.

Though many historians discuss history as if it is reliably concrete ("We know X happened because we have evidence"), especially when talking to nonhistorian audiences, they are also keenly aware that history is reliant on abstract thought, conceptualisations of the social world that frame all aspects of the inquiry process and the historical narratives created (pp. 67-68).

Case in point is my understanding of *social capital* vis-a-vis that of Coleman and Putnam; something Gottesman pointed out as well in his notes section.

The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of *collective history*, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85, emphasis not in original).

According to Bourdieu, a dominated culture can only be defined in relation to and by contrast with the dominant culture and vice versa (Swartz, 1997). This is important to Bourdieu as he sees intrinsic characteristics as unwarranted

attributions that are used to perpetuate discriminatory practices. For example the lack of success is due to laziness rather than oppression.

This dialectical relation between the dominant and dominated is always competitive (rather than cooperative), unconscious and hierarchical. However, the competition is unfair because there is no equal opportunity given that "the social world is *accumulated history*" (Bourdieu, 1997, p.46, emphasis not in original). Instead, the dominant is able to inherit then continuously accumulated capital because capital has the innate capacity to expand and reproduce itself. Thus, Bourdieu sees the forms of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic and social) as resources that are "objects of struggle" (Swartz, 1997, p. 74).

In particular, social capital is collectively-held capital, in the form of credentials of the group, that is accorded based on "membership in a group" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). However, the volume of capital accorded is hardly in equal portions and it is dependent on the extensiveness of the agent's connectivity within the group. This will be evidenced by the member's ability to mobilise others in the network, which is in turn dependent on the volume of his/her other forms of capital (economic, cultural and symbolic).

Whilst Coleman and Putnam also refer to the benefits of connectedness as social capital, they theorised that it is good to seek after a network so as to leverage upon it. Perhaps this perspective might formulate a critique of and antithesis to Bourdieu's pessimistic underestimation of the dominated culture's degree of autonomy from the dominant and their capabilities of reforming social identity through imitation and cooperation.

Conclusion

The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history (attributed to George Orwell).

Parts Two to Six are undertakings to create myriad historical narratives (37 to be exact, offered up by 45 scholars) that are exemplars of the field, methods, and theories, resulting in quite a tome. Would threads from this massive work be weaved into new tapestry by would-be historians? Or ought this be an instructional manual on how to weave one's own future reality from the past and present? We shall find out in the second edition, whose necessity and urgency is compelled by the pandemic.

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