



## *Dissertation Abstract*

# **Making the past present: The politics of material-semiotic practices in the history classroom**

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**KEYWORDS:** Memory, Practice Theory, History Education

### **Introduction**

This study explores how students and teachers engage with textbooks, blackboards and other materials in the history classroom and how particular ‘pasts’ are made present through these micro-practices. Based on a two-year ethnography in a school, it draws attention to how seemingly banal and mundane activities during class are participating in enacting a certain symbolical order and are thus highly political.

### **Theoretical framework**

The dissertation is theoretically located at the intersection of the sociology of education and memory studies. On the one hand, it forms part of the sociological research on socio-material practices in the classroom, which has shifted the focus from speech and text, to the role of objects, bodies, and spaces during class (Alkemeyer, 2015a; Kalthoff, 2011; 2014; Röhl, 2013). By taking up questions about the (re)production of symbolic orders and power relations, the study broadens the view towards the hitherto mainly neglected *political* dimension of these practices. Inspired by studies that describe the politics of material objects in schools (Kontopodis, 2009; Sørensen, 2006; Besand, 2004), it focusses on history education as a space where the *doing* of history in the classroom harbours the potential for symbolical boundary making and epistemic violence.

On the other hand, the dissertation contributes to the research on the connections between history education and cultural memory. While previous studies in this field for a long time followed a “language-first” (Zelizer, 1995) mentality, focusing mainly on speech and text (Foster & Crawford, 2006; Alavi, 2004), the thesis expands the view towards memory *practices* (Macgilchrist, Christophe & Binnenkade, 2015; Sturken, 2008) in the classroom by focusing more closely on how mnemonic assemblages (Freeman, Nienass & Daniell, 2016) of things,

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such as humans, language and symbols, co-produce history. By drawing on a rich tradition of practice theories, with a focus on ‘small events’, and the close empirical attention to the performative enacting of sociality, the dissertation proposes a perspective on *performative practices of making the past present*, like the way history is presented through and in the complex but mundane classroom activities. As an analytical focus to approach these complex enactments, four core dimensions are identified: the material; semiotic; symbolic; and sensual dimension.

## Methodological approach

In order to implement the intended research perspective, I entered the field of history education itself and using a set of ethnographic methods accompanied a German high school history class for two years (Breidenstein, et al., 2013, p. 34; O'Reilly, 2005). The field work entailed six weeks of intensive participant observation of the full school day, in the first stage of fieldwork, followed by two years of participant observation in History class (two hours per week) in Grades 9 and 10. This included: building rapport and trust with teachers and students; taking field notes of classroom activities; audio-supported observations for selected cases; the analysis of documents, media and teaching materials; informal chats with staff in staff room, lunch, evenings; informal chats with students in break times, lunch, and other peer-group contexts; audio-recorded individual interviews with teachers and selected students; audio-recorded individual discourse-based interviews with teachers and students on particularly controversial curricular moments; group discussions with students (random class members); friendship group discussions with students; and, participant observation of excursions relevant to the history class.

My aim during fieldwork was to observe the form (rather than the topics) of the classes, to remain open to the practices which unfold (rather than focusing on ready-made assumptions about ‘good’ history education), and to concentrate on the performativity rather than on the possible underlying thoughts, learning processes, or aims of the participants. The written account of my observations is not giving a broad overview of what happened in class but a selection of scenes and representations relevant for the research question. Also, I intended not to smooth the complexity of the field but to allow ambivalences and to tell a story that is enlightening and meaningful on the one hand, and also jars or interrupts (*‘irritiert’*) on the other (Law, 2004; Verran, 2001). The categories used in the text evolved inductively from the field. What particularly caught my attention were questions that came up during talks with the students about the objectiveness of history, the way the past is structured and the material connections that are made in representations of history. This led to three main chapters: Reality, Order and Associations.

## Key findings

In the chapter *Reality*, I trace the potential of everyday classroom practices to shape the essence of history. Based on the assumption that the question of the reality of history is highly political as it allows for the exclusion of everything that is not regarded as the “real” version, as well as for the determination and essentializing of people and their stories (Spivak 2008; Castro-Varela & Dhawan, 2015; Barricelli, 2009), the chapter foregrounds activities in which the ‘reality’ of history is negotiated and enacted. It demonstrates how in some everyday practices, history is made present as something solid, reliable and unambiguous while in other practices, it presents itself as abstract, flexible and ambivalent. First, the chapter shows how practices of handling, touching and looking at the textbook enacts history as a material other that can be observed and bodily approached. Here, history is made present as an objective and solid block

of knowledge. Second, I describe how the semiotic and symbolic features of the textbook interplay with practices of routine usage, of caring and referencing have the potential to present history as something trustworthy and safe. Third, I analyse how practices of writing on the blackboard as well as students taking notes, signals what is to count as worth knowing, making history visible and observable, and making the past present as something univocal and definite. The analysis also identifies moments in which students appropriate the textbook for tactical goals, such as killing a wasp or teasing a fellow student. In addition, moments in which, for instance, the classroom is interrupted by students questioning the authority of the textbook or reshaping whose perspective counts as they reconfigure the textbook text in their jotters (notebooks/exercise books). And, moments in which the material practices subvert the stated goals of teaching, multiple perspectives, and constructivist theories of history.

The chapter *Order* inquiries into the ways in which classifications, systems, structures, and orderings tidy up the messiness of references to the past into neat simplifications. In this section, I ask what kind of epistemic work these orderings are doing, how they categorize and become more complex, and how they create coherence and non-coherence. The analysis suggests that in practices of taking notes from the textbook and of creating posters for classroom presentations the material-semiotic-symbolic-semiotic orders of text, layout, pages, tables or lists enact epistemic borders, and produce a theory of history in which the past is structured, orderly and straightforward. At the same time, I also describe practices of blurring these borders and of generating disorder. The political implications of these practices of (dis)ordering lay in the potential of symbolic boundary making and the negation of the ambivalent and the unfitting. Ordering systems homogenise its parts, create differences and exclude everything that cannot be classified (Bowker & Star, 1999; Law & Mol, 2002). I argue that the everyday practice of structuring, categorising and ordering in the classroom thus has the potential to foster approaches to past and present realities that exclude certain perspectives and stories.

In *Associations*, I turn towards the temporal logic of history education and explore the enacting of a linear narrativity in class. The analysis focusses on segmentations and connections in daily school life (between subjects, classes, or class levels), as well as on mundane practices of turning the page or of drawing lines and arrows. Drawing on theoretical work highlighting multiple possible understandings of time (Le Goff, 1999; Luhmann, 1988; Nassehi, 1993), the section illustrates the impact of these practices to enact chronology, linearity and causality as common sense. I argue that this has political implications since the enacted linearity, which often slides into a teleology, reproduces western/global North imaginations and narratives of modernity, of progress, of colonial distinctions and enduring global hierarchies (Chakrabarty, 2000; Barricelli, 2013). However, I also consider potential moves away from modernity by considering the flexible and nonlinear associations enabled by pinboards, digital databases, and hypertext.

## Conclusions

On an empirical level, the study provides a perspective to the long-standing calls to examine how textbooks are used in practice and to what extent the ideologies, forms of knowledge, and distribution of the sensible produced in these books are reproduced or subverted in classroom practice.

On a theoretical level, the thesis proposes a conceptualisation of memory practices, shifting the focus from humans or things to complex enactments of the past. Also, it demonstrates that the way we look at the past is not only, as even recent works in memory studies continue to argue, influenced by ‘ruling groups’, but that inadvertent and apparently banal practices have a strong effect on how power relations in cultural memory unfold.

Overall, one central outcome of the study is to suggest that social inequality and exclusion are reproduced not only in large scale, but through the everyday, apparently mundane, material-semiotic practices of symbolic boundary making. The thesis demonstrates how particular theories of history, and certain perspectives on global hierarchies and social differences which are encoded into the curriculum and textbooks are creatively reproduced in everyday practices of the classroom. It draws attention to the *incidental/in-advertent* enacting of unequal (global) power relations and modernist theories of history. Despite good intentions, and occasional fissures and creative reinterpretations, overall the material, sensual, symbolical and semiotic dimensions of practices involving the textbook, the blackboard, the jotters and desks, and other entangled classroom things are intimately implicated in symbolical boundary-making. The thesis is also a plea to consider the relevance of the apparently banal in history education and to include the political dimension into research on school practices.

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## About the Author

Johanna Ahlrichs studied European Studies and Intercultural Communication in Bremen and Frankfurt(Oder) and was a research fellow at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Brunswick. She completed her doctorate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Mainz. Currently she works in the textbook publishing sector.