



## The sidewalk is a history book: Reflections on linking historical consciousness to uses of history

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### ABSTRACT

The ongoing discussion about what constitutes historical consciousness is intensifying within the growing international community of history-education researchers. What started as an exploration of how life outside schools affects our historical thinking has become a key concept for structuring formal education. This shift has largely been positive; however, there are reasons for caution. If practical adaption means outlining, classifying, and measuring levels of achieved awareness, it also presents a risk of losing the initial reason for considering the wider influence on our perceptions and orientations. My reflection in this article concerns this paradox and how it can affect a complementary concept, *use of history*. Using examples from everyday historical representations in public life, namely song lyrics, the BLM, and Sweden's approach to Covid 19, I demonstrate why history education requires a broad understanding of historical consciousness and a readiness to work with public uses of history.

### KEYWORDS

Historical consciousness, Uses of history, History education, History didactics

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## Introduction

The international discussion about historical consciousness and teaching history is stimulating and intensifying within the growing community of history-education researchers (e.g. Ahonen, 2005; Ammert, Edling, Löfström, & Sharp, 2017; Clark & Peck, 2018; Körber, 2016; Seixas, 2017, 2004; Zanazanian & Nordgren, 2019). The Anglo-Canadian historical-thinking tradition (Lee, 2004; Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Seixas, 2016, 2017) has in several ways inspired the continental tradition of searching for tools that are useful to recontextualising theory into teaching and assessing. This cross-cultural exchange has, along with increasing attention to historical consciousness in curriculum-making, raised legitimate expectations about accessible applications for teachers and researchers (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Hammarlund, 2020; Körber, 2011). However, several scholars have expressed concern that historical consciousness is difficult to operationalise, including recently in this journal, in which Thorp (2020) discussed relations between historical consciousness and the use of history.

Before I go deeper into the question of how to operationalise and recontextualise these two conceptual cousins, I will describe the linkage between them in context: in the Scandinavian countries, historical consciousness and, more recently, the use of history have been incorporated into the history syllabus.<sup>1</sup> As a concept, *use-of-history* refers to historical narratives, artefacts and symbols, and how they can be employed in all areas of public life for nearly any purpose. This concept directs our attention to specific activities and motives (Karlsson, 2011). Consequently, in addition to offering theoretical perspectives, the conceptual integration of historical consciousness and use-of-history in the syllabus also generates goals and objectives for learning to which teachers are expected to relate their teachings (Nordgren, 2016). The process of recontextualising these concepts from the intended curriculum to the implemented curriculum has faced challenges (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2015; Alvéen, 2017). Such challenges are also Thorp's (2020) point of departure. In short, he argues that both concepts are vaguely defined and that the connections between them are blurred and, thus, difficult to use in education. He claims that the Swedish syllabus and Swedish scholars in general, despite this vagueness, stipulate that only uses of history can be employed to develop historical consciousness (p. 51). To resolve this ambiguity, he suggests another view of historical consciousness as more specifically equated with the modern ability of reflective genetic thinking (*historicity*) while proposing that the concept *use-of-history* be reserved as a device to analyse the extent to which historical accounts – such as textbooks – live up to the desired genetic form of understanding history. Thorp (2020) overinterprets the syllabus (see note 1) and rather oddly characterises the fairly diverse field of history-education research in Sweden; however, he rightly emphasises the need to better aid teachers in recontextualising disciplinary and educational concepts. Unfortunately, Thorp's suggested remedy is misplaced because he – in his ambition to reconcile these concepts with one another – loses sight of the phenomena they denote.

My interest in this article is not to debate Thorp; however, his reasoning touches on the undercurrents of applicability and measurability in the broader international discussion. These themes can be connected partly to the influence of discourses on assessment (Yates & Collins, 2010) and partly to the growing methodological interest in using typologies to discern levels of historical consciousness among students. These pursuits of operationalising historical consciousness for teaching and assessing are of course important, but they also warrant caution. If practical adaption means outlining, classifying and measuring levels of achieved awareness, then it jeopardises the initial reason for considering history's complex influence on our perceptions and social orientations. Thus, we face a paradox, one that reduces this phenomenological perspective to a nearly confusing equivalent to the traditions of historical thinking, thereby making this whole recontextualisation project somewhat redundant. Even with an intention to concretise, the cause can get lost in translation. In the following sections, I will nevertheless argue that the bad reputation of vagueness is exaggerated and that historical consciousness, as a complex concept, is neither particularly vague nor especially difficult to detect and explore. To discuss how I understand the phenomenon, I will draw on an example from the lyrics of Joni Mitchell. Further, I will argue that historical consciousness complements the

tradition of historical thinking. Finally, I will exemplify why teaching about the uses of history is an important task in relation to the ongoing anti-racist demonstrations in the United States and to the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Historical consciousness: Balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions**

When we, as scholars, write about historical consciousness, we often repeat – almost like a protective spell – that this is an ambiguous concept, one that is challenging to grasp and difficult to operationalise. Certainly, combining history with consciousness is bound to be a bold endeavour; if it were not, then the exercise of compounding these most multifaceted concepts would be superfluous.

Dealing with the non-paradigmatic is actually the business of the social sciences and humanities, which are primarily concerned with topics that are open to different interpretations and applications (Bernstein, 1999). Consider concepts such as culture, power or progress: They are simultaneously rich and vague – omnipresent and elusive. For researchers, they are challenging to operationalise coherently and congruently, but they are also heuristically fruitful (Goertz, 2006). A preoccupation with a sense of ‘conceptual vagueness’ beyond the ordinary not only seems less fruitful than an approach that readily accepts the non-paradigmatic but also appears to be a categorical mistake since it confuses the phenomenon’s complexity with unclear definitions and a theoretical contradiction (cf. Thorp, 2013). Rather, I suggest that the phenomenon we are trying to frame – historical consciousness – is itself complex and elusive. Historical consciousness is a conceptualisation of ‘something’ ordinary but nevertheless hyper-complex, so it must be approached from different angles. Following Rösen (2017), this consciousness is about the human need to create meaning:

The mental structure of our orientation towards action (and dealing with suffering) is characterized by a surplus of meaning, which extends beyond the given circumstances. ... [This desire for meaning] enables the irritating experiences of contingency and the ensuing push towards interpretation. ( p. 27)

As Jeismann (1979, p. 43) underscores, this meaning-making process “does not only exist in the cognitive space of thought, but must assure itself of its historical and everyday, also emotional, interdependency and at the same time recognize and relativize it.”<sup>2</sup> Let us look into a short empirical example with the help of poetic condensation – not for the sake of demonstrating an educational approach, but instead to catch a glimpse of the phenomenon of historical consciousness. The opening scene in Joni Mitchell’s (1979) lyrics to Charles Mingus’s composition, ‘Goodbye Pork Pie Hat’, introduces Mingus as he recollects the legendary tenor saxophonist Lester Young:

When Charlie speaks of Lester  
You know someone great has gone  
The sweetest swinging music man  
Had a Porkie Pig hat on  
A bright star  
In a dark age.

What we should first look for in this example are patterns of how references to the past, present and future interweave into meaning; then, we should examine how this process refers to both cognitive and emotional dimensions, as well as to both factual and mythological accounts; and, finally, we should consider how this process infuses surplus meaning into the narrative, providing a further sense of direction. Mitchell collects the musicians’ experiences and expresses them in her own terms as a shared tradition of great jazz and dreadful racism. The lyrics continue: “In a dark age, when the bandstands had a thousand ways of refusing a black man admission.” In contrast, Young is given an exemplary quality as someone great – “a bright star.”

The next scene in the second verse could be about change and continuity: Young and his wife, Mary Dale, are thrown out of a hotel because he is black and she is white. Outcasts in the night,

they reflect laconically, “It’s very unlikely we’ll be driven out of town, or be hung in a tree.” Representing their cold anger (perhaps alluding to Abel Meeropol and Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ from 1936), Mitchell critiques the ongoing history of bigotry and racism. In the song, the past is both present and distant. Its legacy is real, and the traces are there for those who can read them, reminding us that things have to change in order to persist. As Mitchell (1979) puts it:

For you and me  
The sidewalk is a history book  
And a circus  
Dangerous clowns  
Balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions  
They have been handed  
Day by day  
Generations on down.

In this simple and multifaceted way, pieces are brought together: facts, testimonies, mixed feelings, symbols, intertextuality, and judgements merge into meaning. ‘History’ offers a Janus-faced view on life: It can and should serve as a distanced, critical examination of a past that inhabits a foreign land, but it also includes all the mess and banality that we pick up along the way – all that we need and use to balance our perceptions and find orientation in the practical world. Historical consciousness bridges, but does not collapse, the epistemological division between systematic knowledge and everyday life. Mitchell’s lyrics express (at least in my interpretation) what Chinnery (2019, p. 104) calls a “virtue of epistemic humility”. Although we know we cannot fully comprehend the past, we are obligated to try. Mitchell cares about this past and shares her testimony. How we choose to use this difficult inheritance is, as Chinnery points out, “both our moral burden and the possibility of hope” (2019, p. 101). In other words, historical consciousness can be characterised by what Zerubavel (2012) calls a “sociomental topography” – that is, a cognitive process that is fundamentally entangled in social and cultural contexts, which structures experiences into complex landscapes of narratives, memories and oblivion.

How, then, is conceptualising this sociomental process of meaning-making relevant to education? Historical consciousness can be fundamental to a purposeful theory for teachers in at least two distinct ways. Firstly, historical consciousness acknowledges history not only as a disciplinary body of content and skills but also as embodied in students’ experiences – which is in line with the more dynamic discussion in Thorp and Persson (2020). In other words, students are not empty vessels – *no one lacks a historical consciousness*. Consequently, students already have a narrative competence that might be advanced through education but which, nevertheless, will interfere with any learning trajectory. Secondly, as Rösen (2011) points out, we need to learn how to navigate our lives in the ever-changing historical cultures in which we live. This need gives teachers reasons to acknowledge that history is not only about understanding the past but also about wielding a communicative tool to interfere in the present and to affect the future.

## Theoretical links

When we discuss historical consciousness, we need to remember that complex concepts are multi-layered, and to avoid confusion, we must consider which dimension we are talking about (Goertz, 2006). First, there is the ontological dimension, the assumption of an actual phenomenon that we can term *historical consciousness* (here, we can debate whether historical consciousness is a universal ability or a cultural achievement). Then, there is the theoretical dimension, which has two levels: (i) a basic level at which the phenomenon is defined by some aspects that are regarded as more important than others (for example, historical consciousness incorporates the connection between interpretations of the past, understandings of the present and perspectives on the future); (ii) a constitutive level at which the concept is explained and deepened by fundamental attributes, frameworks and models (such as Rösen’s levels of narrative competence or typology of historical narrations). From this dimension, it should be possible to move on to the next dimension, where we specify and operationalise the indicators that can guide the collection of

empirical data (such as indications of a specific learning trajectory or expressions of narrative cohesion). This layer of indicators always has some linguistic, methodological or theoretical limitations, as any operationalisation will illuminate certain dimensions of the phenomenon while obscuring others.

As we also relate to learning, we need to add a normative dimension: The educational goal is to cultivate students' historical consciousness in some specific direction. In educational research, we need to remember not to confuse or equate educational goals with the phenomenon. If one, for instance, equates historical consciousness with specific ideal types of historical meaning and interprets expressions of students' historical understanding as stages or levels of historical consciousness, then distinctions between a phenomenon and its indication collapse. Historical consciousness can be influenced by – but not reduced to – normative aspirations to develop a genetic understanding. Education is but one of several culturally determined influences on this ability to orient.

When we further relate to learning, we must distinguish between at least two opposing approaches (see Nordgren, 2019). If we first assume an anthropological understanding, historical consciousness is inherent in the human neurological capacity to create meaningful patterns between events and over time, as well as in our social ability to communicate such meanings. The other approach is to reserve historical consciousness to a modern cultural achievement of thinking historically in a way that is closely connected to Western historicity (Kölbl & Straub, 2001). Thorp chooses this second approach, as he seeks to do away with the embeddedness of historical consciousness in a broader memory culture. He advocates that “history is quite simply the critical methodological reconstruction of the past,” and historical consciousness is the “awareness of historicity” (Thorp, 2020, pp. 55-56). The relation to education becomes a necessary and even mechanical relationship, in which a “certain use of history emanates from a certain historical consciousness” (Thorp, 2014, p. 24). In order to cut the Gordian knot that connects historical consciousness to the contradictions of everyday life, Thorp (2014, 2017, 2020) turns to Jeismann (1979) for support:

By historical consciousness we mean the permanent presence of the awareness that mankind and all social institutions and forms of co-existence created by us exist in time, i.e., they have an origin and a future and represent nothing unchangeably or unconditionally. [...] Besides the mere knowledge of or interest in history a historical consciousness also incorporates the relationship between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present and perspective on the future. Since history cannot be perceived as an image of past realities but can only be made aware through selection and interpretive reconstruction, historical consciousness is the awareness that the past is present in representations and conceptions. “History is the reconstruction, by and for the living, of dead people’s lives. Thus history is born through the contemporary interest that thinking, suffering and acting people have for exploring the past” (Jeismann, 1979, p. 42, as cited in Thorp, 2020).

As Thorp indicates, Jeismann does indeed frame historical consciousness within Western modernity. This is in line with the tradition from Arendt (1993), Gadamer (1975) and Koselleck (2004), who associate the self-reflecting and secular ways of perceiving human existence in time with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This approach was relevant in that profound societal changes did affect collective ideas about how to use history to orientate in the world. At a time when modernity was still breaking free of *l’Ancien régime*, it was important for scholars to understand how a new form of secular historicity was entering the common culture. However, in our time of accelerating globalisation and global warming, there are other processes at work that are changing the regime of historicity. Hence, using historical consciousness to characterise a specific achievement of modernity seems to be a project of less relevance. As Grever and Adriaansen (2019) point out, all cultures have ideas about the past, present and future. If we take this point further, cultures are in motion, open to influences and hybridising several, even contradictory, ideas. Consequently, phenomena such as historical consciousness and historicity can be assumed to be historically and culturally variable and diverse (Bacigalupo, 2013; Holmberg, 2017; Stewart, 2017). Turning to Western historicity for a clear-cut definition might be like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire, in that historicity turns out to be no less complex



(cf. Hartog, 2015; Hirsch & Stewart, 2005; Rüsen, 2002). There are multiple and competing ways to historicise processes such as the digital revolution, migration, pandemics and the Anthropocene, and there are thus multiple ways to use history for orientation. What is at stake is no longer working out the key to modern genetic thinking (as we live in it) but rather understanding the ongoing workings of historical consciousness in the context of the 21st century.

Perhaps because of this persistent entanglement between consciousness and culture, there is also in Jeismann's writing tensions between the idea of cultural achievement and a more anthropological approach. Let me draw attention to the end of the quote above, in which Jeismann (1979, p. 42) uses the French philosopher Raymond Aron to recall that history owes its service to the interest of "thinking, suffering and acting people." Alas, since human existence is a messy venture, our contemplation will hardly concern the critical reconstruction of the past alone. If we truly want to understand historical consciousness, we also have to acknowledge that emotions, norms and traditions are part of people's historical orientation. I shall not embark on scrutinising Jeismann – partly because my German is too poor and partly because scholasticism quickly becomes irrelevant, as the context around scholarly discussions changes. Still, Jeismann's (1977, p. 16) emphasis on the importance of a broad approach is worth noting:

"Didactics of History" has to do with the historical consciousness in society, both in its responsibility, the existing contents and figures of thought, as well as in its change, the constant rebuilding and construction of historical conceptions, the constantly renewing and changing reconstruction of knowledge of the past. It is interested in this historical consciousness at all levels and in all groups of society, both for its own sake and under the question of what significance this historical consciousness gains for the self-understanding of the present; it seeks ways of forming or influencing this historical consciousness in a way that corresponds both to the claim to an adequate knowledge of the past, which corresponds to the demand for correctness, and to the reason of the self-understanding of the present.<sup>3</sup>

In the above quote, Jeismann seems to recommend that we, as educators, take an interest in this sociomental phenomenon and determine what kind of topography of meaning-making structures history teaching should employ. This project requires a broad understanding – again, as educators, we are "interested in this historical consciousness at all levels and in all groups of society" (Jeismann, 1977, p. 16) – even if this broadness makes the boundaries of history a bit unstable. This understanding concerns what is beyond (not what opposes) the disciplinary notions of historicity; it focuses on how we, as social creatures, meet the world through our notions of how the past, present and future interrelate.

On the topic of these temporal dimensions, I would also like to point out that Thorp (2020) makes an important remark. When historical consciousness has been recontextualised to educational practice, at least in Sweden, it has sometimes been reduced to a specific ability to identify and combine temporal positions. This reduction is, as Thorp highlights, trivial. The unfortunate concept of 'multi-chronology' sometimes involves the idea that historical consciousness is found in the ability to relate something historical to these three tenses simultaneously. Similar theoretical reductions or inconsistencies tend to occur in attempts to target, measure and assess degrees of achieved historical consciousness. Such approaches tend to encounter a validity problem – for example, when specific indicators (of historical thinking) are taken as evidence for the complex whole (historical consciousness), or when constructs designed for a meta-level (such as Rüsen's well-known typology of historical narration) are applied to measure performance at an individual level (for example, student accounts and textbook excerpts).

One problem with measuring the degrees of historical consciousness is that the phenomenon is active on several levels of mental awareness (Jensen, 1997). This kind of activity means that the levels of awareness are both entangled and shifting (Nordgren, 2011). Reflecting critically is not an either-or ability. To realise this fact, one need only consider that it is easier to reason rationally and objectively about something in which one is not emotionally or otherwise deeply engaged (cf. Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2013; Lind, Erlandsson, Västfjäll, & Tinghög, 2018). The reduction of historical consciousness to expressions of 'multichronology' and the ambition to

classify levels of consciousness are counterproductive. They do not add to the toolbox of teaching practices but, rather, neglect the tools that are useful to examining historical orientations.

### Use of history: The sidewalk as a history book

Artefacts, historical narratives and symbols are open to use for anyone with access to them, to satisfy a great variety of needs and intentions. Unsurprisingly, a wide and multidisciplinary interest has focused on how historical representations have been used in public life (see, for example, Black, 2005; Ferro, 1984; Habermas, 1988; Lowenthal, 1996; MacMillan, 2010; Stewart, 2013). The starting point must be Nietzsche (1873/2008), who identified three basic ways in which humans use (and are mastered by) history: a monumental use (hortatory and inspirational), an antiquarian use (preservation and reverence) and a critical use (judgemental and moralising). For our discussion, Rösen (1987, 2012) is also important because his ontogenetic typology might be understood as a schema of different uses (which, as we shall see, aligns with Nietzsche). Seixas and Clark (2004) use Nietzsche and Rösen to analyse Canadian students' understanding of a mural from 1932. In the Nordic context, Karlsson (2011) has assembled a number of uses in a matrix that categorises different societal agents and their intentions (inspired by Nietzsche and Rösen). His aim was originally to analyse public debate during the last years of the Soviet Union, but he has also vastly influenced curricular development in the Nordic countries. As for myself, I have suggested a communicative perspective to investigate how uses of history can be brought to bear on several meanings and intentions, depending on the contextual situation (Nordgren, 2016).

Thorp (2020), however, has another quest: Instead of seeking a connection to public uses, he suggests a scale to measure the attainment of the desired level of genetic, historical self-awareness. For this measurement, he borrows Rösen's (1987, 2012) ontogenetic typology of historical narrations and calls it 'use of history'. However, while Rösen's categories describe a historical process using entangled modes to make sense of the past, Thorp redefines three of these categories into fixed, ahistorical levels: first, the *traditional* level, which is fact-based; second, the *critical* level, which critiques historical explanations; and third, the *genetic* level, which is based on historical interpretation. Thorp demonstrates how this device works analytically on an excerpt from a textbook for students of 13–15 years of age, written by a Swedish historian:

The Cold War started in Eastern Europe. When World War II ended the Russian army controlled the whole area between the border of the Soviet Union and Berlin. Stalin knew to take advantage of this situation. He wanted to create a belt of friendly nations along the Soviet border, and during the following years he made sure that Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria were given communist governments. They made treaties with the Soviet Union, and they all had to accommodate Russian troops within their borders. In reality they became servant states to the Soviet Union (Öhman, 1996, as cited in Thorp, 2020).

Thorp's (2020) own interpretation holds that this passage expresses a *traditional use* of history since "the content is given a factual character and we are given no indications of history's contingency on interpretation, perspective and meaning-making" (p. 58). At first glance, the excerpt does seem to reproduce a fact-orientated and closed narrative. However, a closer look reveals that the text is also bristling with sub-textual perspectives and meanings, such as a clear idea of guilt, individualised and intentionalist explanations, and a nation-centred narrative. All of these revelations can, of course, be labelled as a *traditional* narrative – but only within the frames of a genetic historical culture. Finding less that is critically useful in textbooks for young people is not entirely surprising.

This way of analysing use-of-history in textbooks illustrates a reoccurring methodological problem when applying ideal-typical categories in history-education research. If overused, such schemas (whether Rösen's or Karlsson's) tend to artificially square what is compounded. What in practice is characterised by its ability to amalgamate and bridge logic, opinions and intentions is split into fixed categories and unidirectional trajectories. Consequently, we risk misinterpreting our data. Instead of detecting patterns, we find fragmented behaviours; instead of connections,

we disconnect details in texts, test results or interviews. Ideal types are general, which can make us insensitive to historical and cultural contingencies and – just as easily – compel us to label an ordinary textbook from the 21st century, as well as a pre-modern eschatology, as traditional. In the same vein, creationism and ecocriticism can be lumped together as critiques of Western modernity. Several empirical attempts have been made to measure levels of historical consciousness among students and in textbooks; these attempts detected high frequencies of both traditional and exemplary modes. This tendency alone should raise concerns about the validity of the analytical devices applied, as perhaps they are not calibrated to measure what is happening in our time of liquid modernity. To become suspicious, we only need to consider Gadamer's (1975, p. 8) observation that there is no shield from the "reflexivity characteristic of the modern spirit."

Of course, it is important to analyse students' historical thinking and how historical events are presented in textbooks. The role that can be ascribed to textbooks as a nation's historicised self-images may be regarded as a kind of societal use of history (see, for example, Repoussi & Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010). However, I suggest that, fundamentally, conceptualising uses of history aims to direct attention to activities and discourses that take place outside textbooks and classrooms. In everyday public life, references to history are everywhere, and we all use such references when we try to grasp what is happening, who we want to be, and what we want to accomplish (Karlsson, 2011). This everyday use is largely neglected; however, it is not absent within history-education practice and research (Knutsen & Knutsen, 2019; Nordgren, 2016; Seixas & Clark, 2004). Why, then, is such everyday use of history important for history education?

This article was written during the strange summer of 2020, which was greatly characterised by (on the one hand) nation-state-centred struggles against a global virus and (on the other hand) a growing globalised anti-racist movement triggered by police brutality in the United States. The presence of memory cultures is more tangible than usual as discourses on racism, immigration, climate change, pandemics and the other troubled companions of our time, which are literally being renegotiated in the streets. It is too early to say whether these movements will effect lasting change; nevertheless, right now, we cannot avoid noticing the power of using history as a tool to communicate belongings, antipathies and desires for change. This course of events underlines Assmann's (1995) observation that statues can simultaneously be both an 'archive' of projected knowledge and images *and* a mode of actuality "whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivised meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance" (p. 130). Even statues do not stand still.

Statues of historical figures embody three different lifespans: the historical time to which they refer, the time of their erection, and all the contemporary contexts that follow. In this present, the statue of Christopher Columbus in Richmond, Virginia, has been toppled by Black Lives Matter protesters and dumped in a lake – just one of many similar events that have followed the killing of George Floyd by police during an intervention in May 2020. The initiative to erect the Columbus statue began in 1925 among the city's Italian community. It met with strong opposition from, among others, the Ku Klux Klan. Raising memorials and introducing Columbus Day were part of a wider strategy to counteract the xenophobia facing many Italians. The statue's inauguration in Richmond took place in 1927 and served as a sort of statement – *immigrants belong here*. The statue depicts Columbus from 1492 as the discoverer of the American continents. However, Columbus also symbolises, of course, the colonial nexus of greed, violence, slavery, famine and disease that killed millions of Indigenous people and forced millions of Africans to relocate to the continents. Since the 1970s, groups of Native Americans have campaigned to remove these statues and change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day (Ruberto & Sciorra, 2020).

Another example from 2020 is the COVID-19 (coronavirus 2019) pandemic, which is ongoing at the time of this writing. Sweden's approach to fighting the disease and its effects has become world news and has, of course, been historicised. One line of argument has suggested that Sweden does not need strict restraints because of a historically well-founded trust between Swedish citizens and the government. We recognise this narrative trope very well: During the rhetoric of national romanticism, trust signified the symbiosis between the people and their king. In the historiography of Swedish social democracy, trust is the unbroken line from free peasants, who had never been subjected to serfdom, and the workers' unions – and on to the modern welfare



state, 'Folkhemmet' (the people's home). Alternatively, if one opposes this strategy, the Swedes' trust can emerge from a long tradition of collectivism and obedience to authority or, quite the opposite, it is just a reminiscence of a once strong state that has been dismantled by neo-liberalism.

This use of history is not about getting the sources right, nor is it about sorting traditional and exemplary types of uses from genetic types. It is about processing something pressing in the present by perceiving the legacy of the past. A key to understanding how the use of history works lies in its amalgamating power: the message, whether a statue or a narrative trope, can embrace and condense diverse and even contradictory facts, symbols and myths (Nordgren, 2016). Drawing on Habermas (1984), we may see how the use of history can work both as strategic rationality, for it is persuasive, and as communicative rationality, for it has a discrete familiarity to which we can relate. We can, thus, observe its power to serve and justify nearly any agenda: for tradition and nationalism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992), as a therapeutic culture (Karlsson & Zander, 2004), to legitimise subordination (Said, 2003), and to strengthen family identities (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

In line with a growing body of research, I argue that the educational challenge in dealing with the public historical culture is how we can support students to detect, analyse and relate to their own and others' uses of history in order to understand its communicative potential and contextualised processes (Bermudez & Epstein, 2020; Chapman, 2020; Endacott, Dingle, & O'Brien, 2020; Reich, 2020; Yoder, 2020). Again, we use history to communicate and, sometimes, when communication breaks down (see also, Zanazanian, 2019). As Reich (personal communication, May 15, 2020) put it:

sometimes battles over historical meaning take on an existential hue. Existential in the sense that people are terrified that if they are unable to substantiate their meaning of the past in shared agreement, they will lose control of the future.

Thus, pasting hierarchical or sententious labels onto different uses is a dead end, as uses of history are embedded in everyday life. A communicative understanding is ultimately useful for achieving a more nuanced historical consciousness in which one understands the ambiguity of connecting a past to the present and for dialectically traversing between doubt and certainty.

## Conclusion

I sympathise with the ambition to adapt theories about historical consciousness and use-of-history to applicable knowledge for teachers to develop and broaden their history teaching. However, in this process of recontextualising theory to teaching practices, we, on the one hand, need to avoid reducing historical consciousness to a measurement of the ability to stack *tempora* on top of one another or to make random analogies between the past and the future. On the other hand, we should not limit the workings of historical consciousness to a specific awareness of historicity that tends to equate historical consciousness with historical thinking. Such an equivocation makes the whole discussion somewhat pointless. What the narrow understanding adds to the already established discourses on how to recontextualise disciplinary knowledge is unconvincing.

Concepts such as *historical consciousness*, *historical culture* and *use-of-history* can add to the tradition of historical thinking. They are complementary concepts – perhaps beyond first- and second-order concepts. However, with our eagerness to align historical consciousness in a flow from the syllabus to classroom activities and on to assessment tools, we risk losing the very nerve of the concept. Critical methodological perception of the past, however important, does not encompass our entire way of being historical – that complex and elusive practice that enables both our “irritating experiences of contingency and our ensuing push towards functional interpretation” (Rüsen, 2017, p. 27).

To one last time exemplify this at-once mundane and elusive practice of historical consciousness, I return to the last verse of 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat'. We now meet Mitchell (1979) herself as she (in the present tense) comes up from the subways in New York City and hears music.

She follows the sound and envisions the living legacy of Lester Young in two children dancing in the street:

So the sidewalk leads us with music  
 To two little dancers  
 Dancing outside a black bar  
 There's a sign up on the awning  
 It says "Pork Pie Hat Bar"  
 And there's black babies dancing  
 Tonight

In an interview, Mitchell (1979) recalls that night outside the bar and how this experience enabled her to connect to Mingus's histories about Young: "I had the past and the present, and the two boys represented the future. To me the song then had a life of its own." Thus, Mitchell raises a monument to Lester Young that captures how the power of art, the structures of racism, and hope flow through time in ways we can still recognise – as did the Italian diaspora in the United States during the 1920s by utilising the community's most valuable historical resource to stake a place in their new country. Today, people are asking, 'What shall we do with the colonial heritage that is still manifested in the streets, squares and textbooks? Are they just remains of a long-gone past, or do they also affect the way we think? Shall we tear them down, or are they necessary reminders of a troubled past that still haunts us?'

It is not education's role to answer such questions but, rather, to provide students with a means to detect and understand how uses of history work and how students themselves participate in such active history cultures. Uses of history in the public sphere are not an abstraction; they are an ongoing conversation that shapes the present and the future. To work with this phenomenon, we need a conceptualisation of historical consciousness that does not fear its enigmatic reputation.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Syllabuses for upper secondary schools. Denmark: ‘Through working with history, students will gain a reflected insight into their own and others’ historicity and thus qualify their own historical consciousness . . . will provide tools to critically and reflectively find, select, use and evaluate diverse historical material, including the many forms of communicating and using history inside and outside the school’ (<https://www.uvm.dk/gymnasiale-uddannelser/fag-og-laereplaner/laereplaner-2017/hf-laereplaner-2017>); Finland: ‘Studying history helps the student to become aware of, interpret and evaluate the social and political use of history. Historical consciousness provides the basis for the student’s democratic participation and development of opportunities for influence’ (<https://eperusteet.opintopolku.fi/beta/#/fi/lukiokoulutus/6828810/oppiaine/6832796>). Sweden: ‘The aim for teaching history is for students to broaden, deepen and develop their historical consciousness through knowledge of the past, ability to use historical method and understanding of how history is used’ (<https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laeroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan/gymnasioprogrammen/amne?url=1530314731%2Fsyllabuscw%2Fjsp%2Fsubject.htm%3FsubjectCode%3DHIS%26tos%3Dgy&sv.url=12.5dfce44715d35a5cdfa92a3>).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Sie macht deutlich, das Geschichtsbewusstsein nicht allein im kognitiven Raum des Denkens existiert, sondern sich seiner historischen und lebensweltlichen, auch emotionalen Verflochtenheit vergewissern und sie zu gleichanerkennen und relativieren muss’ (Jeismann, 1979, p. 43).

<sup>3</sup> Translated to English by Christian Mathis: “‘Didaktik der Geschichte’ hat es zu tun mit dem Geschichtsbewußtsein in der Gesellschaft sowohl in seiner Zuständigkeit, den vorhandenen Inhalten und Denkfiguren, wie in seinem Wandel, dem ständigen Um- und Aufbau historischer Vorstellungen, der stets sich erneuernden und verändernden Rekonstruktion des Wissens von der Vergangenheit. Sie interessiert sich für dieses Geschichtsbewußtsein auf allen Ebenen und in allen Gruppen der Gesellschaft sowohl um seiner selbst willen wie unter der Frage, welche Bedeutung dieses Geschichtsbewußtsein für das Selbstverständnis der Gegenwart gewinnt; sie sucht Wege, dieses Geschichtsbewußtsein auf eine Weise zu bilden oder zu beeinflussen, die zugleich dem Anspruch auf adäquate und der Forderung nach Richtigkeit entsprechende Vergangenheitserkenntnis wie auf Vernunft des Selbstverständnisses der Gegenwart entspricht’ (Jeismann, 1977, p. 16).

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