

## A New Approach to the Old Question: What is History?

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### **Abstract**

*History is one of the most controversial areas of knowledge because of the fact that historical knowledge always involves interpretation and there is no historical account that can be entirely objective. It does not mean that history is not important. In contrast, history is important because it powerfully influences our understanding of who we are and where we come from. Therefore, once we switch from individual level to national level, it can be said that each nation-state or each-nationalism creates its own national memory which justifies the existence of the state in the particular territory and contributes to the unity of the nation. History, thus, can be universally considered as a transformer and/or contributor in this regard; and schools, of course, are the best place to use that “transformer” and/or “contributor” to convey the certain beliefs to our students. History as a “contributor” play an important role to make interrelationship between past, present and future brought about by an interpretation of the experience of the past; and brings past, present and future into a meaningful coherence.*

**Keywords:** History, History Education, Living History, Historiography, History Textbooks

## Eski Soruya yeni bir yaklaşım: Tarih nedir?

### **Özet**

*Tarih, yorum içeren bir alan olduğu için ve tamamen objektif bir tarihsel bilgiden bahsetmek pek mümkün olmadığı için en tartışmalı alanlardan biridir. Bu, Tarihin önemli olmadığı anlamına gelmez. Bilakis, Tarih, kim olduğumuzu ve nereden geldiğimizi anlamamız açısından çok önemlidir. Bu nedenle, bireysel düzeyden ulusal düzeye geçildiğinde, her millet milli hafızasını oluşturarak kurulduğu toprakları vatan olgusuyla oluşturmak için , milli birlik ve beraberliğini anlamlı bir şekilde kurmaya çalışmaktadır. Tarih, bu nedenle evrensel olarak bir transformatör rolüne sahiptir. Okullar da öğrencilere belli bilgi ve inanışların “transfer” edilmesine katkıda bulunan en ideal yerler olarak kabul edilebilir. Tarih bu anlamda geçmiş, günümüz ve gelecek arasında anlamlı bağlar kurarak önemli bir rol oynar. Bu nedenle, amacımız “tarih nedir” sorusunun “tarihini” ele almak ve anlamaya çalışmak değildir. Amacımız "tarih nedir" sorusunu bir yorum olarak incelemektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tarih, Tarih Eğitimi, Yaşanan Tarih, Yazılan Tarih, Tarih Ders Kitabı

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*I do not know if there is any other field of knowledge which suffers so badly as history from the sheer blind repetitions that occur year after year and from book to book.*

--Herbert Butterfield

*"Historians can't answer this question. For me the twentieth century is only the ever-renewed effort to understand it".*

Franco Venturi (Historian)

*"You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was."* Leopold von Ranke

The question: "what is history?" has been asked for many years by several scholars and consequently a great deal of discourse has come out (Hughes, 1964; Ranke, 1973; Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1994; Kent, 1986; Vann, 1995; Haskell, 1998; Nash, Crabtree and Dunn, 1997; Marwick, 1995). One of the most common ways to answer the question is to go back to ancient times and start with some famous Greek and Roman historians: Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus since they established historical writing as both a literary genre and intellectual discipline (Nash et. All, 1997).

But the discussion of the past is no longer merely a discussion of what happened when; it is more and more of a reflection on how we live with our own pasts, how we conceptualize the past and how we make sense of it. That is why research on historiography and historical thought is no longer restricted to a small group of specialists; it has become a major concern of the community of professional historians as well as of the interested public (Schneider & Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003).

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I will not take the question to understand what "history of history" is. Instead, I will examine the question "what is history" as an interpretation. Furthermore, I will focus the following questions: "What is history good for?" and "why is history important?" for the purpose of developing a clear understanding about the importance of "history" as a school subject and the role of its textbooks.

### **History as Interpretation**

As Nash et. all (1997) addressed, history is barren chronicle without explanation, without analysis, without pattern. Every individual document is no more than "what the author of the document thought- what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought" (Carr, 1961, p.16). In addition, as Hughes pointed, historians-in contrasts to investigator in almost any other field of knowledge- very seldom confront their data directly. The literary or artistic scholar has the poem or painting before him; the astronomer scans the heavens through a telescope; the geologist tramps the soil he studies...The historian alone is wedded to empirical reality and condemned to view his subject matter at second remove.

He alone must accept the word of others before he even begins to devise his account” (1964, p. 4-5).

“Any work of history is necessarily selective because historians must choose the most relevant evidence in order to make sense of some part of the past” (Nash et. all 1997 p.10). Because of the aforementioned reasons, history has not been considered as a “science” for a long time by many scholars. The argument of whether history is science or not is still an interest to many today but the importance of history as a school subject has been admitted by almost everyone around the world. As a result of this fact, history is one of the compulsory courses taken by students for several years during their school lives. At this point, one needs to ask: why does history take an important place in education? What is so important that people do fight about it for a long time? Or in other words, what is history good for? and Why even teach it in schools? Therefore, in the next part, I will try to answer these questions. To be able to get into what history really means better, we should also take into consideration what it is good for. Focusing on the benefits of knowing history would help us better conceptualize the main components of history.

### **What is History good for?**

There is a longstanding argument that the desire to avoid controversy leads to one of the most serious weaknesses in the discussion of history (Levstik & Barton, 2001) and it brings the idea that history is so complex, so difficult and not totally secure (Arnold, 2000). If so, why do it? Why does history matter? Why do people would like to learn the past? What kind of benefit can people get by learning their past? I think one simple answer to all these kinds of questions is in its definition: History is an interrelationship between past, present and future brought about by an interpretation of the experience of the past. History, therefore, brings past, present and future into a meaningful coherence (Schneider & Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003).

In history we have a similar relationship between past and present: What has passed away is relevant for the self-esteem and the self-understanding of the people of today, and they have come to terms with themselves by making the absent, their passed-away world, present again (Schneider & Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003). History seems to be a procedure of remembrance but it is conceived of as a gain, as taking over a heritage, as bringing about self-esteem. But if the past of which history speaks has this very relevance for identity, can we even think of its passing away as something, which does not hurt? Does it not leave a hole to be filled by mental activity? I think it is worthwhile considering whether the procedures of historical consciousness are grounded in a mourning-like process.

The familiar past entices us with the promise that we can locate our own place in the stream of time and solidify our identity in the present. By hitching our own stories to the stories of those who went before us, the past becomes a useful resource in our everyday lives, an endless storehouse of raw materials to be shaped for our present needs. Situating

ourselves in time is a basic human need. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of life on the planet without doing so (Wineburg, 1999).

Mentioning about my teaching experience would be very appropriate to have a clear understanding on the explanation above I think. There was an activity I created during my history teaching in a middle school. At the very beginning of every semester, I ask my students to pretend that they loose their memory for a moment. My purpose by doing this activity is to give an idea why they should take history class. For that purpose, I was asking them: who are you? Why are you staying here? How did you come here? Who did bring you? Who is your parent? Where will you go at the end of the class? Acting even just a couple minutes with no memory was like a nightmare for them because they have no answer for all the questions that I asked. Then I was telling them to transfer this information to the national level and wanted them to think about the importance of history and their class they were taking.

This is a process of viewing the past as usable, as something that speaks to us without intermediary or translation; we end up turning it into yet another commodity for our instant consumption. Because we know more or less what we're looking for before we enter this past, our encounter is unlikely to change us or cause us to rethink who we are. The past becomes clay in our hands. We are not called upon to stretch our understanding in order to learn from the past. Instead, we contort the past to fit the predetermined meaning we have already assigned to it (Wineburg, 1999). But there is another aspect of history that leaves us befuddled or, worse, just bored because of several reasons. Therefore, each generation, I believe, must answer for itself anew why the study of the past is important and must remind itself why history can also bring us together or vise a versa.

As England's Lord Christopher said "history has to be rewritten in every generation because, although the past does not change, the present does each generations ask new questions of the past..." (1972 p.13-14 as cited in Nash et all 1997). Last a couple century can be seen to confirm doctrine of national self-determination. The new spirit of nationalism had surfaced, bringing with it a lust for the power and glory of the nation-state<sup>1</sup>. (Keane, 1993; Bukowczyk, 1998).

It was the nation-state that said our young children must learn history and at the back or the front of their minds they had 'they must learn history to be loyal citizens of this nation-state'. And that's the way that history teaching was introduced in a wide sense to the whole of society. It's very often that people argue in terms of the history of the past when what is at stake is really the future. (Budak, 2001)

However, re-thinking of the doctrine, a more complex understanding of the relationship between national identity and nationalism has been brought as a major issue in today's globalization (Keane, 1993; Chatterjee, 1998; Buell, 1998). Globalization is a

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1 The following explanation can be given as an example to the reflection of the doctrine on the textbook "In most Balkan textbooks there are negative stereotypes against Turks because of the common Ottoman past and the process of reaction of nation-states against the Ottoman Empire. In all countries there is an ethno-centric approach; in some countries this is also nationalistic." (Budak, 2001)

process of globalizing the discourse. And globalizing the discourse means re-defining the relationship between universality and particularity in the context of historiography and historical thought (Burgoyne, 2000; Calhoun, 1993). If it is true to say that historiography in the context of the nation state tends more towards stressing the particularity of the nation than on universal aspects of world history, can we assume that historiography in the context of globalization is more inclined towards finding universal aspects of history. Or will globalization lead to a renewed emphasis on the particularity of historical development, albeit no longer within the confines of the nation state? (Schneider & Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003; Burgoyne, 2000).

But who is qualified to re-define the relationship between universality and particularity? And who is qualified to define what universality is? Up until today, the historical profession is dominated by the European experience and dominated by historians who more often than not cling to the notion of universality without even being aware of the histories of non-European countries and regions. If this experience forms the basis of what we define universality to be the globalization of the historical discourse will lead to a suppression of alternative understandings of history and hence an impoverishment of historical thought. It will reduce the multitudinous possibilities of writing, conceptualizing and understanding history to a unified conception of world history dominated by norms of European origin (Schneider & Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2003).

Europe still wants to dominate the history by its Union (the European Union) and it is reflected as revising the history textbooks in many European countries. However to make a connection between “history” and its “textbook” seems unavoidable here.

### **Connection to Textbooks**

Teaching materials used in schools have an important role in socializing the next generation (Schissler, 2001) and the textbooks which a society produces exercise their power over an audience that is particularly vulnerable and continuously renewing itself. Because of this, they are seen as important counters in arguments over political, economic, religious, moral, and educational issues, and regularly assume a central role in the conflicts and polemics to which the institutions of schooling is a prey. The textbook can be an instrument of propaganda at the service of political or religious authorities (Choppin, 1992). Therefore, states and governments usually control the content of textbooks used in the compulsory educational system and consequently social and political values are mirrored in textbooks (Schissler, 2001).

History writing is always a selection - it's impossible to know every fact or to put them into a perfect framework. Historians have to decide what to include and what to leave out. And this can never be a neutral process (Budak, 2001; Pingel, 1994) because history is always written for a purpose, the question is what purpose. I would say they are always to some extent ideological (either national or global level) but what we should try to avoid is to put ideology before science. Every scientist follows some ideology and this ideology always has an impact on their work but the really good scientists try to avoid this influence

on their work whereas there are others who believe that their ideology is their main reason for writing history (Papadakis, 1993; Budak, 2001; Pingel, 1994).

In this regard, history textbooks should be written by “really good scientists”, if we really want to raise a democratic citizens who has no stereotypes and prejudices about “others”. Of course having the best textbook (I mean with the best textbook is the one written more scholarly or “scientifically”) is not enough alone. Teacher who is going to use that textbook is another important factor. This brings the importance of pre-service teacher programs to prepare the teachers in accordance with the guidelines mentioned above. But the textbook has played a significant role in the history classroom and teachers use textbooks as the most dominant source of their teaching activities (Shaver, Davis and Helburn, 1979; Armento, 1986; Cassidy and Bognar, 1992; Chen 1997; Rawadieh, 1998; Abaya, 1993). Therefore, the support of the teachers and textbooks development projects should be emphasized in every possible level such as local, national and global.

Textbooks are utilized more often than any other curricular materials. Although the growing exposure of the younger generation to the electronic media undoubtedly reduced the centrality of the textbook as a tool of education, still most scholars in the field of education tend to agree that textbooks have remained crucial (Podeh, 2002); and although we are in an age of computers and satellite communications, still the most powerful and pervasive educational technology is the textbook (Altbach, 1987).

On the other hand, when we look at the role of textbooks from the developing countries perspective, textbooks play a more prominent role in the formal education process because there are only a few instructional materials available. These kinds of developing countries are not lucky enough to think about the influence of technological materials on the classroom settings as developed countries (Podeh, 2002).

This is particularly true in the case of Turkey; in many regions, few instructional materials are available. In addition, educators are left with little opportunity to choose among textbooks or use supplementary materials because curriculum content and textbook production is strictly controlled by the Ministry of Education. The lack of choice and forced reliance on the government textbooks increases the need to examine the history textbooks.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the discussion of the past is no longer simply a discussion of what happened when; it is more and more of a reflection on how we live with our own pasts, how we conceptualize the past and how we make sense of it. That is why research on historiography and historical thought was taken to answer the question: “what is history?” in this study.

History is one of the most controversial areas of knowledge (Levstik & Barton, 2001) because of the fact that historical knowledge always involves interpretation and there is no historical account that can be entirely objective. It does not mean that history is not important. In contrast, history is important because it powerfully influences our understanding of who we are and where we come from (Levstik & Barton, 2001; Stricker, 1992).

Therefore, once we switch from individual level to national level, it can be said that each nation-state or each-nationalism creates its own national memory which justifies the existence of the state in the particular territory and contributes to the unity of the nation (Papadakis, 1993; Budak, 2001; Pingel, 1994). History, thus, can be universally considered as a transformer and/or contributor in this regard; and schools, of course, are the best place to use that “transformer” and/or “contributor” to convey the certain beliefs to our students. History as a “contributor” play an important role to make interrelationship between past, present and future brought about by an interpretation of the experience of the past; and brings past, present and future into a meaningful coherence.

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