

HISTORY AND MEMORY. ASKING THE CHILDREN

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Teaching

Being a school teacher is just another role to perform: pretending to be sure of everything, imposing to the children somebodyelse's unconvincing opinions, pressing them to memorize a certain quantity of information and, of course, urging the kids to behave themselves.

Most of the accepted human knowledge had to endure this de-forming and de-valuing mode of transmission called "teaching". As a result, teachers, parents, supervisors and even students expect to meet creative, autonomous and well educated persons.

Instead all the efforts of the schooling system, students persist thinking by themselves and, sometimes, even their teachers do it, too. Usually, they choose the simplest and surest way of thinking: putting questions. It could be emberassing, especially questioning the evidences and trying to forget to pay respect to the established authorities.

Asking myself of the very meanings of History and Memory and of some plausible relations between them, I found an easy answer: ask the kids about it! First, my students were surprised and afraid of giving wrong answers, because I asked them for something I didn't "teach" before. They were aware they couldn't get the "right definitions". They didn't want to sign their papers, so they remained just time anonymous students in the last secondary grade in an average Romanian school.

Having their answers I became an opportunistic co-author, by selecting, rearranging and translating it. It was a double translation, from their language into mine and then from *our* common language into English. The reader will probably continue it, for his own use.

What Children Say about History and Memory

HISTORY is all *the years* and *the sufferings*.

HISTORY is *a story* about *our ancestors*.

HISTORY *teaches* us about how *different* had been living other people from us.

HISTORY is *the science which teaches* us about the origin of the human beings and about their lives until nowadays.

HISTORY is *something* about the years that passed.

MEMORY is to keep something in mind, although you will take a bad grade (!)

MEMORY is *to understand* something, in order to remember it for a long time.

MEMORY is *to learn*.

MEMORY is *a gift from GOD* for all the people. We have to *use it* in order *to know that we have it*.

MEMORY is to remember *the past*.

MEMORY is *a science* by which *one could think*.

MEMORY: *without it, I can't improve it*.

What Children Couldn't Say

The truth is simple but it needs complicated minds to describe it. So, anyone can practice his / her own abilities to try it, confronted with the previous sentences. There are samples by which students gave back what they really received and not what we believe they learned in school. History has been “delivered” to them in countless disassembled packages called “lessons”. They had to figure out by themselves some meanings for it, and they managed to reproduce many of the adult’s obsessions, emotions, biases, contradictions, errors and stories.

At first glance, history is a box of years, “all the years,” never managing to fulfill the temporal dimensions. So many years that don’t make *the time*, although history’s primary claiming is to establish when something had happened. Without its precious chronological arrangements, history banishes itself to myth, to literature or simple fables. This concern for *when* is still so obvious in teaching history and evaluating the students’ knowledge that the rest (what, why, how, what for, what if and so on) is usually too much.

Among the events most persisting in history lessons, there are all sort of “ordinary” catastrophes: wars, epidemics, conquests, riots, massacres, fires etc. The normal life is still insignificant for normal people. History is destined to be a land of pain and sorrow and kids remarked it well.

The emplotment of the events and the selection of the “actors” are also perceivable for the children. They know it’s only a story among many others that it could be. It’s a necessary fiction and when we need it most, we call it “tradition”.

Most of the time, every normal person speak about his (her) self, no matter of the present or past tense chosen. When is about the past, we prefer our past and *our ancestors*. We never find enough about us, so we need history to meet ourselves and get a convenient identity. The stories are mainly about “our ancestors,” whatever we pretend to be about. Even when we are interested about the others (“how different lived other people from us”), we’ve just making a better mirror for ourselves.

The 19th century proclaimed that history is a rigorous science. Kids show us how difficult is for the adults to leave that century back. The academic authorities still need history to be a science and, if possible, the most honored one: the science about the human lives, from the origins till nowadays. The historians are eager to include in their field all sorts of knowledge, ranging from biology to aesthetics, so to justify a unique and broad vision of humanity. Being a science, it must have something to teach, it must prove its utility. For someone which is not a historian, history does exist only if it is taught.

There are no satisfactory definitions of history. So, a kid may conclude that history is just “something,” somehow related to the years that passed. It’s simple not the present, nor the future. It’s a fluid, indeterminate and still needed past.

History is a quite familiar subject. But memory is so familiar that we usually don’t even remember it. So, how about the memory?

First thing the children feel about memory is that we (the adults) *impose* it to them (“although you will take a bad grade”). They felt the presence of a rough social command. What children don’t know yet is that “the oppressors” must obey it, too. We need to remember what to ask *them* to remember.

We ask students so often to remember that they actually replaced learning by memorizing. Having so imperative confrontation with it, students find out that keeping something in mind imply judging, relating, using references etc. So, memory *is* “to understand”. Memory is a kind of survival and help surviving.

Unexpectedly, instead of all the rationalist and scientific lessons, one kid remembered God: “memory is a gift from God”. It’s definitely one of the things that a “regular” teacher would not teach it. God is an old fashion, but with His help, the kid could figure that memory has a natural, *given* characteristic. He also understand that being natural is not enough to say about memory. The consciousness about memory makes us human beings (“we *know* that we have it”).

Another student stated that “memory is to remember the past”. It’s the simplest way of saying that memory *is* all the past that we can get it, no matter how.

To put that memory is a *science* and also a kind of thinking could look too childish. It also could be seen as an instinctive perception of what ancient rhetors known as *ars memoria*: techniques of memorizing, remembering, making associations etc. Also, speaking of memory as “thinking”, we need the support of the modern psihologists which can demonstrate that memory is a primary and unreplaceble set of mental operations. Without it, human mind can’t elaborate further analysis and creations.

The final reflection about memory could look like a paradox that a student can't afford it: "without it, I can't improve it". Memory is an existence generated by itself. It works like a first impulse, *causa prima*. But the question of the "first impulse" is also an old fashion. It's a problem of Aristotel or other dead persons and no one argues any more about it. Greeks would name it ARCHÉ, Latins would translate it PRINCIPIUM and they would probably prefer LOGOS or VERBA instead of Memory. But the contemporary thinking about thinking subtilities are constructed in a different cultural code – we must use it or be rejected by it.

History and Memory. How to Relate Them

History and memory are not obviously related for the students and probably nor for the public opinion. Still, putting them together one can find that they share somehow the past. They also share *us*, because *we* make, tell and remember the stories of the past. These partners, history / memory, are not felt in the same way. History (especially the one we teach it) is a dead and sad time, but memory is something that keeps us alive. Both are *facts of authority*, shouted with different voices. Both are so definitely subjective that common people never need to pretend that there are concernings about the "reality" or the "truth". Still, we can name it "sciences," not in a proper modern acceptation but in a pre-modern one, closer related to "wisdom," "knowledge," "experience" or "tradition".

The solution for a very postmodern challenge could be a pre-modern one, as long as we remember to question for it.