Does history education have a future?

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History education has been a recurrent field of debate where different actors have different ideas on what, why and how it should be taught. Currently, other questions are being raised, namely on the purpose of history education, when historical facts are accessible on the Internet, and on omissions of painful, controversial and sensitive issues from history curricula. These questions are overrated in the media, and acutely on social media, which hampers a fruitful debate. In this short paper I try to address both issues and contribute with a number of reflections to a serious debate rather than to amplify presentist discourse.

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Introduction

- Teaching and learning about COVID 19 and looking at the bigger picture of pandemics throughout history has been a concern of history educators across Europe even before confinement measures started. There is abundant source material online, including visual sources¹, many of which were used to understand what COVID 19 pandemic was and why it occurred. Teachers organized social media groups to share sources, lesson plans and concerns, especially when it was internalized that face-to-face lessons were replaced by online lessons for a long period of time.
- This was a bigger challenge for all educators, because online teaching was a new field for the vast majority. This disruption, which history will consider a turning-point, could also be an opportunity to explore other issues with learners. Instead of focusing primarily on the content of history lessons, teachers could use this time to reflect on what is history, what is the learning potential of history and what are the main challenges of learning history.
- Below is an example of how such reflection could be promoted, whether face to face or online.
- 1. History teacher asks students what they think is the most challenging thing about studying history; students write down 2 or 3 challenges.
- 2. Teacher organises a class discussion of such challenges. The discussion helps teachers align their practice with the students' main concerns and contributes to reduce students' levels of anxiety. It also fosters the developing of students' self-efficacy (e.g. writing down what they felt as difficulties) and tolerance of ambiguity (e.g. understanding that colleagues have different challenges).
- 3. Teacher pays attention to the words students use, to understand the emotions behind the words, and whether the words translate positive or negative feelings related to the learning of history.
- 4. Teacher uses such information to improve (regulate) own teaching, and thus develop own competences, e.g. empathy, critical thinking, openness and adaptability.
- 5. The analysis of positive feelings also informs teacher about what triggers students' motivation, which is key during this period for designing well-structured assignments.
- 6. This kind of reflection improves the learning process.
- Teaching about COVID 19 involves history, the pandemics in the past, and other subjects, such as biology and philosophy. Studying what effects pandemics had throughout history has a scope that goes beyond the discipline of history. However, the specificity of history teaching offers educators and learners the opportunity to reflect on the importance of historical knowledge by answering questions that are specific to history this is the focus of this paper.

¹ Infographics that are easy to consult: https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/ (Accessed 22.06.2020)

1. The purpose of history education





History instils a sense of citizenship, and reminds you of questions to ask, especially about evidence.

- Past events happened in the past and will not be repeated. Of many such events there is a historical record, and only some of it is revealed to us by the work of historians. Some work is better, some not so good. History represents a very small part of the past. It is a construct, an ongoing investigation of a selection of evidence; based on the analysis of such selection of available source material, the historian makes an interpretation and presents conclusions. As in Plato's cave, history investigation epitomizes the eternal quest of making sense of the past.
- Humans have the aptitude to think back and forth in time. 'Historical consciousness is defined as the understanding of the temporality of historical experience, that is how past, present and future are thought to be connected for the sake of producing historical knowledge' 2. This ongoing dialogue between all three dimensions of time is shaped using a lot of inputs from a lot of sources, typically, 'it refers both to the ways people

² GLENCROSS, Andrew (20210), Historical Consciousness in International Relations Theory: A Hidden Disciplinary Dialogue, University of Aberdeen, Millennium Conference. https://millenniumjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/glencross-andrew-historical-consciousness-in-ir-theory-a-hidden-disciplinary-dialogue.pdf (Accessed 21.o6.2020)

orient themselves in time, and how they are bound by the historical and cultural contexts which shape their sense of temporality and collective memory' ³.

History education allows for organising different information, process it in a systematic way, preparing students to understand the nature of historical knowledge, how it is a construct, and how such knowledge is transformed by different generations with different dialogues between the three dimensions of time. Students also learn to differentiate what are facts, memories, interpretations, perspectives and, importantly, how detect propaganda. This is one of the contributions of history education to democratic citizenship.

1.2. Learning that enables historical and critical understanding of democracy

- At the heart of democratic societies is the requirement for individuals to make choices based upon reasoned and informed judgement. History education, in its subject matter, in the disciplinary skills it demands, and in its pedagogy, is well placed to make a significant contribution to preparing young people for democratic decision making.
- History is one of the traditional subjects taught in schools, its primary purpose was to produce good and patriotic citizens, that memorised the national story which also provided a moral education. This concept was questioned after World War II in Europe, leading to substantial changes in the way history education was approached and, as in other spheres of life, major changes were felt in the 60's and 70's. Though national history was still dominant, curricula avoided any moral point of view. Textbooks contained mainly narrative, with sources appearing largely as illustrations. In the 70's, textbooks began to present more sources and less narrative, while students had to learn by doing, i.e. working with sources; the approach continued to eschew moral education.
- Today, students study history in order to learn about and understand the world they live in and the forces, movements, and events that have shaped it. They do this by working with sources as historians would, and by doing history they develop specific skills of the historian, which increases the development of, inter alia, students' analytical and critical thinking skills. Curricula again have an ethic purpose; the 21st century saw most European education systems adopting competence-based teaching and learning approaches, the ethical dimension is present across the spectrum of disciplines in the curricula and, inherently, in history education.
- History is a specific subject as it provides the answers to critically understand the present, by teaching that any feature of the past must be interpreted in its historical context and by raising awareness that historical interpretation is a matter of debate. The thinking processes and skills acquired through the study of history constitute a standard of judgement that is transferable to any subject. Hence, historical critical

³ SEIXAS,Peter (2006) "What Is Historical Consciousness?", Into the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada, edited by Ruth Sandwell, 11–22. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.15

knowledge and understanding of political, social cultural and economic systems intersects with the democratic culture necessary for active citizenship.

- Such historical knowledge overlaps with democratic knowledge necessary for active citizenship, hence mastering the knowledge of history, and ultimately the practice of history itself, allows students to more effectively engage in a democratic society.
- The critical understanding of historical phenomena allows students to make sense of the world they live in and facilitates the process of developing students' competences for democratic culture [CDC], the connection of school history and citizenship education is clear. In addition, history education gains from including and adapting the CDC pedagogical approaches to create a classroom climate where young people can actively explore and debate historical questions to experience and learn *about*, *through* and *for* democratic culture ⁴.
- This connection furthers the development of the abilities young people need to become active participants of a democratic culture, acquiring a set of behaviours that emphasise dialogue and co-operation, solving conflicts by peaceful means and active participation in public spaces ⁵.
- Despite the fact that history and citizenship education are subjects closely related, they are not interchangeable. Whereas school history can contribute to citizenship education, education for citizenship does not necessarily support or rely on the standards, procedures, and rationale of history ⁶.

1.3. What history education offers learners that is unique?

History offers a key subject that, if resourced and supported, can start to address the challenge of "who we are", and indeed who "the others" are. "What" to teach and "how" to teach it are separate but interrelated questions. Indeed, the definition of what is History is a study in itself.⁷

- The objective of historical study, is the investigation of:
 - what happened,
 - when and where it happened,
 - why it happened and,
 - what consequences it had.

⁴ Council of Europe (2018) Quality history education in the 21st century. Principles and guidelines. https://www.coe.int/en/web/history-teaching/culture-of-cooperation (Accessed 19.062020)

⁵ Council of Europe (2018) Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture [RFCDC]. https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/rfcdc-volumes (Accessed 19.06.2020)

⁶ LEVESQUE, Stéphane.(2008) Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the 21st Century (p. 28-29). University of Toronto Press. Kindle edition

⁷ KEAVENEY, Cecilia, History teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas, Doc. 11919.25 May 2009, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe.

- No subject other than history addresses these questions. By *doing history* learners gain an understanding of historical phenomena and an appreciation of the importance of the historical dimension in any issue they come to consider through their lives.
- Multiperspectivity, like the analysis of sources, is a vital aspect of understanding that historical dimension. The same historical event can be described and explained in different ways, depending on the standpoint of the historian, politician, journalist, television producer, eyewitness, etc. All historical accounts are provisional, and it is unusual to have a single correct version of a historical event. Multiperspectivity also entails distinguishing facts from opinions and understanding that there is no universal historical truth, rather a number of diverse interpretations of a given event.
- In the context of history education, the notion of multiperspectivity refers to the epistemological idea that history is interpretational and subjective, with multiple coexisting narratives about particular historical events, rather than history being objectively represented by one "closed" narrative. Several researchers have proposed that such an interpretational approach to history education should go beyond relativism by teaching students to judge and compare the validity of different narratives using disciplinary criteria (...) Societies become more ethically and culturally diverse which makes an exploration of different perspectives a valuable and necessary way for students to find mutual understanding of different cultures and become responsible democratic citizens⁸.
- History education explores the links between the past and the present, by doing so and looking at past both by the perspectives of subjects who were contemporaries of the historical object and the perspectives of subjects that did not live simultaneously with the object but that succeeded the object in time⁹, offers learners the space for using creativity to construct a complex view of the past, and by so doing, gain a deeper understanding of their own lives, the lives of their families and of their communities.
- The concepts of change and continuity, specific to historical reasoning, are powerful tools for the analysis and critical understanding of current issue that are acquired in history lessons by comparing situations of today with those of the past. The understanding that interpretations are representations of the past and depend on who makes them (age, gender, generation, ethnic origin, religion, profession, etc.) allows both the development of critical thinking and openness to cultural otherness.

2. When painful, controversial and sensitive pasts are omitted

⁸ Bjorn WANSINK, Sanne AKKERMAN, Itzél ZUIKER & Theo WUBBELS (2018) Where Does Teaching Multiperspectivity in History Education Begin and End? An Analysis of the Uses of Temporality, Theory & Research in Social Education, 46:4, 495-527, DOI: <u>10.1080/00933104.2018.1480439</u> (Accessed 21.06.2020)

⁹ Idem, ibidem.

2.1 Should difficult history be included in the curricula?

- The reason some history topics are considered controversial, and so become sensitive, is that they link past and present and provoke emotional debate, incite disagreement as to what happened and why, as well as to what is the actual the significance of the event. Importantly, historical sensitive issues might not always be controversial, nor reflect divisions in society, but connect to painful, tragic or humiliating events.
- The question of whether such issues should be included in the curricula usually raises heated disputes in all sectors of society. The omission of painful, controversial and sensitive questions in the curriculum is a political decision related to the content of the historical narrative, rooted on the dubious political conviction that the past belongs to those who control the present.
- Whereas these issues may be absent from the curriculum, controversy may arise unexpectedly during any time in a lesson. When students are used to applying historical enquiry as an everyday method, controversy is most welcome as it promotes the ability of the students to approach the past, or any question, objectively. Controversy is engaging and motivating, students learn by actively debating and trying to make meaning for their questions and doubts around the issue that is being debated.
- It has been argued that the inclusion of controversial and sensitive issues in history lessons enhances democratic culture, as the critical understanding of controversy facilitates the respect for different opinions, the acceptance of disagreement promotes tolerance of ambiguity, and the confirmation that heterogeneity is part of the world we live in.
- In fact, how the learning experience of discussing such issues is organised is key in the success of the learning process. Learning in not passive, when students learn they are linking the new information to what is already acquired. The recourse to estrangement methodological approaches to discussion of controversies allow for each individual student to engage in the discussion and collectively reach a new understanding of what was discussed, a complex and holistic process, involving individual and collective meaning making of the discussion, which develops the *cognitive*, *emotional and social* dimensions of learning ¹⁰.
- This is of particular significance in the context of studying the more recent past and relating it to contemporary events and concerns, enabling students to consider their own allegiances, their multiple interests and identities, recognise that it is possible to be both the insider or outsider to something and that own beliefs can be conflicting and change. Being aware of own prejudices and stereotypes, how they can be embedded in thinking patterns, how they pass down through the generations, helps students detect myths and bias and fosters tolerance within the classroom.

¹⁰ ILLERIS, K. (2002) The three dimensions of learning: Contemporary learning theory in the tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social. NIACE, Leicester.

2.2 Today's controversies

"Pulling down statues has nothing to do with history, and everything to do with memory. Statues are about the present, not the past: they are about the values we want to celebrate through the people we regard as having represented them (...). Politicians have often failed to recognise the distinction between history and memory ¹¹"

- To be relevant, history education should allow for learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students (personal relevance) or that are connected in some way to real world issues, problems and contexts (life relevance). A dialogic interaction between the students and the historical past requires that the students understand themselves by understanding the needs and conditions of those who lived in the past. Empathy is a necessary instrument in the historian's toolkit and enables students to contribute to life in diverse democratic societies.
- What is not taught in schools because it is omitted in the curriculum constitutes what is considered the *null curriculum*. It sends a clear message to students: if it is not in the curriculum it is not important. Thus, the null curriculum is in itself stereotyping who is not included, sending the message that the ones that are not mentioned in the history curriculum are nobody. The existence of a null curriculum, consciously or not, has consequences in the development of young people and in the controversies that arise in society.
- Postcolonial memories are magnified through worldwide migration processes and the coexistence of people with highly diverse backgrounds as well as social and economic standing. This poses huge challenges for schooling in the 21st century. History textbooks have hardly even begun to tackle the questions of European guilt, of the long-lasting consequences of European imperialism, of uneven development deriving from world-wide imbalances, which have their roots in the past yet are as much transformed as they are reinforced through globalisation processes 12.
- History textbooks for the most part have not tackled more recent issues either. Of course it is not only textbooks that have these omissions; critically curricula do not include controversial events of the most recent times. But neither of these facts need prevent teachers from tackling recent issues. Indeed the big issues of the very recent past provide an excellent starting point to teach critical history skills. A good measure of historical understanding can be gained from asking questions which are not about the past, but about the future.

¹¹ Richard J. EVANS, "The History Wars", in *New Statement World Edition*, 17 June 2020 https://www.newstatesman.com/2020/06/history-wars (Accessed 20.062020)

¹² SCHISSLER, Hanna, "Navigating a Globalizing World: Thoughts on Developing a World Consciousness." Unpublished paper presented at the symposium: Globalisation and images of the other in history teaching, Istanbul 2008.

Considering that globalisation is viewed in school curricula mostly for economic results, can explain the emergence of protest movements and the widespread criticism taking place today. Such criticism is addressed directly to the null curriculum, i.e. the fact that those who are protesting are omitted from the history that is taught, are not considered to be part of the community.

"The river that everything drags is known as violent, but nobody calls violent the margins that arrest him. 13"

- Actually, globalisation conflicts with the key elements of official curricula that mirror mainstream society; politicians and the media emphasising national history; heroes, etc.
- Only history can provide insights into how people who lived in the past behaved and interacted and offer clues about people's motivation, their adaptability and, for good or ill, what human beings are capable of doing. It should give examples of how the actions of people in the past, individually or collectively, have made a difference to the world. As today, the masses of people in the past were not merely passive and subject to the tide of historical forces or the actions of the powerful.
- Attention must be paid not to portray particular groups of people and their experiences in terms of what was done to them, as victims rather than actors, largely ignoring what they did for themselves. Instances of this, for example, are in relations to the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women or the extension of the right to vote.
- Including globalisation as a perspective that enables teaching of history in its full complexity leads us away from a history teaching which emphasises a distinction between us and them; we and the other. It points to the fact that we each have multiple identities and acknowledges that *I am also the other*.
- History teaching should acknowledge diversity within as well as between groups; not
 to deconstruct all traditions or forms of collective identity but aiming at a curriculum
 and pedagogy that strike a balance between the histories of the individual and the
 collective.
- By studying processes of othering, young people understand that othering is a form of stereotyping where we perceive ourselves as part of a united and undifferentiated group of people, as us or we; and those outside the group as fundamentally different, as them or the other, inferior or weaker, possibly dangerous, and hence we as stronger or better [othering for justifying colonialism or enslavement].
- Teaching history in all European countries has been associated with nation building and the development of national identity. However, teaching to develop a national identity pre-supposes that there is a common and accepted view of the signifiers of such an identity. Whereas in practice the more explicit the definition of a national identity is,

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¹³ Bertolt Brecht

the greater the chance that some citizens could feel excluded from it and not subscribe to its values.

• All national identities have been articulated over time and they are constantly changing to accommodate shifting cultural influences and populations. Living in modern multicultural societies, the boundaries of any national identity are always blurred; so teaching history today inevitably takes account of cultural diversity. This blurring of boundaries, along with the features of globalisation may lead to reorganisation of the methods of history teaching with less reliance on national histories as the basis.

Why it's so hard for white people to talk about Racism? 14

- The complex process of identity finding faces issues that go far beyond the need to change nomenclature or the lack of revised historiography. Jonathan D. Jansen, who was the first black Dean of Education in the University of Pretoria, after the fall of apartheid and is now the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State in South Africa, wrote a book that has a suggestive title *Knowledge in the Blood, confronting race and the apartheid past* published by Stanford University in 2011. The book tells the story of white South African students, young Afrikaners, born at the time Mandela was released from prison, who hold firm views about a past they never lived and rigid ideas about black people. Jonathan D. Jansen refers to the memory of multiplied traumas, the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, and the contrast between the lived history of the parents and the available history of the children and how memories carry emotions (fear, anxiety, pride, hurt) and constitute a very specific construct, referred to as the knowledge in the blood ¹⁵.
- "Knowledge so conceived implies culpability. To know or not to know about an atrocity, whether one committed it or not, has legal consequences and, importantly, personal and familial consequences (...) knowledge of a terrible or glorious past is of course not only transmitted in words" 16.
- The mono-cultural curriculum in history education was part of the cultural dominant model that viewed difference as dangerous and divisive. History education should not overlook the existing diversity, nor be limited to the national narrative coinciding with the history of the largest or dominant linguistic and cultural community. History teaching should be inclusive by recognizing that 'all cultures are involved with one another; none is single nor pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and un-monolithic' 17.

2.3 History turning points - L'événement est ce qu'il devient

¹⁴ From a #BlackLivesMatter poster

¹⁵ Black, Luisa, Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines, Council of Europe (2014), p.685

¹⁶ Jansen J D. (2009), Knowledge in the Blood, Stanford University Press, Stanford California, p.80-81.

¹⁷ Said, E. (1995), *The politics of dispossession.* London. Virgin.

- A curriculum reflecting only the history and culture of the dominant group in society constrains students outside the majority to engage with it. They may perceive it to be personally meaningless, irrelevant and at times offensive. Both the hidden practices and messages of the curriculum and the null curriculum need to be addressed.
- A curriculum reflecting only the history and culture of the dominant group in society also denies the majority group from learning about others.
- Inclusion is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. Is involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies.
- Identifying overt stereotyping in history teaching materials should be a relatively straightforward exercise. Conversely, covert stereotyping based on gender, ethnicity, language, social status, or as a consequence of being a recent arrival in the group presents problems that teachers and students should be able to reflect about through dialogue.
- Keeping in mind that historical events do not exist until they are created by historians, the way Michel de Certau formulated *L'événement est ce qu'il devient* ¹⁸ [The event is what it becomes]. The historical event is what causes a disruption, visible in the *before* and *after* approaches. In history education those events are considered turning points.
- it is important to understand and distinguish which events are/are not turning points. Societies are dynamic, media outlets and social media make a lot of noise. There is no moral clarity that can be glued to history. It is full of difficult curves, contradictions, villains who were heroes and heroes who were villains. Today, the argument is not who the good guys and the bad guys were. It's not even the judgment of the past. It's the place everyone can have in the present.
- Michel Foucault's method of writing a history of the present differing from conventional historiography establishes a shift from a style of historical research and analysis conceived as archaeology to one understood as genealogy and shows how the history of the present deploys genealogical inquiry and the uncovering of hidden conflicts and contexts as a means of re-valuing the value of contemporary phenomena¹⁹. Such approach can be used in the history class when events of the present come up, to verify whether the event is but an ephemeral phenomenon the media inflated, or could it become a turning point.

¹⁸ CERTAU, Michel de (1980), *L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire,* referring to Paris May 1968 [The event is what it becomes]

¹⁹ GARLAND, David (2014), What is a "history of the present"? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions. Punishment & Society 2014, Vol. 16(4) 365–384 http://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r32759.pdf (Accessed 21.06.20209)

2.4 History and e-information

"The most critical question facing young people today is not how to find information. Google has done a great job with that. We're bombarded by stuff. The real question is whether that information, once found, should be believed. And according to some recent studies young people are not doing so well in that department. (...) The first thing that historical study teaches us is that there is no such thing as free-floating information. Information comes from somewhere." ²⁰

- The fast development of ICT has made information, communication and knowledge more globalised and the rise of social media increased the amount of e-information available. These changes brought opportunities and risks, within educational opportunities lies the possibility to focus on media literacy and history has tools to offer.
- Online media platforms and social media in particular, shape students' perceptions of reality and the way they see the world: young people are one of the most vulnerable groups, being disproportionately affected by the new technologies.
- While the historical impact of rumours and fabricated content have been well documented, we are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these polluted messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers.²¹
- Visuals can be far more persuasive than other forms of communication. There is also a need to educate people on the power of images to manipulate and persuade. The way we understand visuals is fundamentally different to how we think about text. ²²

2.5 History provides analytical tools for unpacking mechanisms of manipulation

- Educators need to be aware that young people's use of social media and visual sources may be very different to the way they operate and need to develop strategies ensuring that students are watchful both of the benefits and the potential dangers of e-media.
- For navigating effectively through digital visual and written materials students make use of the historian's toolbox. By applying analytical and critical thinking skills to interpret and evaluate sources, students must find, comprehend, select and use key historical information, to make well informed judgements:

²⁰ Sam WINEBURG's keynote address to the 2015 AASLH annual meeting in Louisville. For full audio of his talk, go to https://soundcloud.com/aaslh-podcasts/2015-sam-wineburg-keynote-address (Accessed 16 June 2020)

²¹ Claire WARDLE, and Hossein DERAKHSHAN, with support from Anne BURNS and Nic DIAS (2017) Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking, Strasbourg, Council of Europe.

²² Idem, ibidem.

- 1. Being able to assess and judge motive, utility, reliability, trustworthiness is an important step in building resilience and preventing manipulation when accessing historical sources and interpretations.
- 2. The use of diverse and contradictory sources shows that historical interpretations are provisional and liable to reassessment, an essential safeguard against the misuse of history, as it works against too ready an acceptance of accounts seeking to promote intolerant and ultra-nationalistic, xenophobic or racist ideas.
- 3. The greater accessibility of visual sources reinforces the need for students to be able to critically read a photograph, a documentary film or a broadcast video and distinguish between the 'witting' and the 'unwitting' testimony that the source offers what the image(s) depict, and the message that the author of the image wishes to convey.

I conclude these reflections by quoting the rationale of *Shared Histories for Europe without Dividing Lines* ²³, a project developed by the History Unit of the Council of Europe, published in 2014, the year in which the 60th anniversary of the European Cultural Convention was celebrated. It is fit to the purpose of these reflections.

"The approach of shared history takes into consideration all the sides of an historical event, all its interactions, convergences and conflicts, and in this sense, it is the most complex and productive methodological approach. The approach allows the deconstruction of stereotypes, myths of identity and negative visions of the other, and can thus lead to an intercultural dialogue and to the transformation of conflicts (...)

It explores the idea that your history is also our history and likewise our history is also the history of the other (...) shared does not mean the same us.

²³ Shared Histories for a Europe without dividing lines, the project and the e-book: https://www.coe.int/en/web/history-teaching/an-electronic-e-book (Accessed 22.06.2020)