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BOOK REVIEW

The Boomerang Effect of (Selectively) Silencing the Past in the Classroom: A Review of

History Can Bite: History Education in Divided and Postwar Societies

Denise Bontrovato, Karina V. Korostelina, and Martina Schulze (Eds.)

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Reviewed by Line Kuppens

Whereas many consider history as a “thing of the past,” the past is a contentious and powerful issue that defines the boundaries of what and whom constitute “the nation.” Which historical narrative is taught in school hence matters, particularly in post-conflict and divided societies. In their quest to overcome past divisions and build sustainable peace, these countries need to decide how to confront their controversial past. The contributors to this edited volume discussed the different strategies hereto during the 2014 Georg Arnholt International Summer School on Education for Sustainable Peace. *History Can Bite* presents their findings.

In the aftermath of violent conflict or democratic struggle, governments have silenced the past in the classroom, while others have imposed *their* version of history in the curriculum. Both strategies are harmful to the establishment of a peaceful society: even though (selectively) silencing the past may seem beneficial in the short term, the failure to address the past returns as a boomerang, plunging society back into conflict. Or in the words of the volume, “history has teeth and can bite” (p. 17). Instead, the contributors advocate for a

history curriculum that presents the past in all its complexity and from multiple perspectives in order to “deconstruct single truths and negative images of the Other and to critically confront and navigate divergent narratives of conflict” (p. 21).

The first part of the volume discusses the use of textbooks and curricula as tools for nation-building. Rather than embracing diversity, the contributions show that curricula in divided and post-conflict societies are often based on a discourse of exclusion. The failure of Kenyan textbooks to differentiate between Somalians and Kenyan ethnic Somali (Chapter 3) is a case in point of how textbooks can narrow down citizenship to ethnic group belonging. The studies on Ghana (Chapter 4) and Croatia (Chapter 5), on the other hand, demonstrate that through time curricula can also become more inclusive. The second part discusses the reasons that have prompted other governments to silence the conflict in the classroom: to avoid resuscitating tensions and trauma (Armenia, Chapter 12); to marginalize groups in society (Uganda, Chapter 9); to preserve the image of a “just” nation (genocide denial in US textbooks, Chapter 11); or because history education is no priority (Sierra Leone, Chapter 8). The third and final section analyzes how teachers, and to a lesser extent pupils, interact with the history curriculum. In their respective chapters on teaching the legacy of the Partition of British India and of the Spanish Civil War, Meenakshi Chabra and Clare Magill show that teachers differ considerably in their handling of the controversial past, ranging from avoiding any discussion to critically engaging with the past. It is the latter approach only, nonetheless, that allows sufficient space for students to learn to critically engage with a complex and multi-perspective past. If these crucial attitudes to building a lasting peace are not taught to students, as is the case in Rwanda (Chapter 13), peace remains fragile.

The case studies are illuminating in their detail on the history of conflict and its representation in the curriculum, and cover an exceptional geographical scope (15 case studies over 4 continents), not forsaking to delve into less researched areas. Moreover, as

testimonies of the important implications of historical contexts on nurturing, or inversely attenuating, an “us against them” mentality – reportedly a characterizing feature of current times (Amnesty International, 2017), the case studies should be of interest to many prospective readers. These range from government officials and teachers in divided and postwar societies, to practitioners and those teaching courses or carrying out research related to a variety of areas including (among others) history teaching, transitional justice, and peace education, as well as peace psychology and peace studies in general.

The current volume comes in the aftermath, however, of the widely read 2007 edited volume *Teaching the Violent Past* by Elizabeth A. Cole, which resuscitated great interest in the topic. As many articles and books have been written ever since, *History Can Bite* is to some extent more of the same: neither do the contributions apply a new theoretical angle – partially made up for by the closing chapter, nor do they use innovative methodologies (restricted to curriculum analysis and qualitative interviewing). The third section on teachers’ and pupils’ experiences is an exception though, opening up an interesting area for future research. Although the theoretical contribution of *History Can Bite* may be limited to readers with experience in the field, it is guaranteed that everyone will learn something new from the wide scope of case studies.

References

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