

## HISTORY EDUCATION IN A WORLD OF NATIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONALISM, ETHNICITY, AND RACISM

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**Abstract** This paper argues that the way history is taught and transmitted in the modern world, with its focus on the nation-state, has the unintended consequence of promoting ethnocentric and racist thinking.

The author begins by observing that the modern world is ambivalent in its attitude towards nation-states. On the one hand, people increasingly view themselves as citizens of the world, while on the other hand, they remain bound to their nation-states. Nation-states are historical entities, and in order to legitimize themselves, they require a history of their own. This history is used to create a sense of national identity and to justify the actions of the nation-state.

The author then argues that this way of thinking about history has the unintended consequence of promoting ethnocentric and racist thinking. This is because history is typically taught from a national perspective, and this perspective privileges the nation-state and its people over other groups. This can lead to a sense of superiority and a lack of understanding and respect for other cultures.

The author concludes by arguing that it is important to be aware of the potential negative consequences of teaching history from a national perspective. He suggests that we should teach history in a way that is more critical and reflective, and that takes into account the perspectives of different groups.

**Keywords:** nation-state, history education, ethnocentrism, racism, critical thinking

### Nationalism, Ethnicity and Racism? An Outside View of Learning and Thinking about History

The (post)modern world is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is characterized by a global structure that enables people to view themselves as citizens of the world. On the other, it is organized in the form of nation states that bind citizens to their nation. Nations are historical entities and, in order to have the necessary legitimization as such, each of them requires a history of its own. The task of this history is to commit the members of the nation to itself by means of a historical identity. At the same time it provides a framework orientation by means of which the members of a nation can substantiate their actions empirically.

Taking NiklasLuhmann’s systems theory as a basis, the present study formulates and discusses the thesis that this way of thinking, which is apparently selfevident in the present-day world, entails very serious and undesirable secondary effects. History oriented towards a nation state thus has an interest in moulding the historical consciousness of the members of the nation both by means of institutionalized learning about history and through the articulations within the historical culture. However, the resulting dominant culture produces in its shadow ethnocentric and also racist thinking. This seems to be “necessary” in order not to fall into the trap of value relativism.

Accordingly nationalist, ethnocentric and racist thinking are not symptoms of a lack of education and the inability to reflect. Rather, they can be seen as the consequence of a certain way of thinking about history.

### **Prologue**

Errors can be recognized by the fact that they are shared by everyone (Giraudoux, 2012). Is as Jean Giraudoux, the French writer, once put it.

Thus errors may be concealed in things that are generally taken for granted. If you want to track them down, it is obviously worthwhile discovering and questioning what is apparently self-evident in one’s own way of thinking. The subject of this study – the approach that is taken for granted – is the chronological teaching of history, which seems to be a generally accepted principle for dealing with history. You begin at the beginning and end with the present. Where could there be any possibility of error?

This study views a familiar way of thinking with new eyes, from the outside. The line of reasoning proposed here is structured in such a way that the evidence of the error – should there be one – is marked as a meaningful activity in people’s lives. The aim is to place the genetic-chronological teaching of history in the overall context of an attempt to resolve the following turn of events: in an increasingly disintegrating social order people have adopted new perspectives which they use to redefine and reassure their place in society.

The first step in this reasoning points out the need to create a new order on the basis of system-theoretical considerations. Then familiar and accepted basic concepts of learning about history are assigned to this frame of reference. At the same time these concepts are discussed critically against the background of the functionality that they acquire socially as an order-generating element.

The resulting effects are meaningful within the frame of reference, but in a democratic and egalitarian society they turn out to be problematical.

The aim of this study is to encourage a discourse about whether we should continue to view the chronological approach as meaningful.

### **1. The Need to Reestablish the “Viewing Order”**

After the collapse of the old orders during the European revolutionary movements in the 18th and 19th centuries, the modern state developed in part from the necessity to adjust the power relationships between people and to

ensure the functional differentiation of society by providing a legal system (Cf. Schulze, 2004). Modern nation states are egalitarian systems that are no longer characterized by personal ties or stratification (Division on the basis of social strata or class.) but primarily by functional differentiation. Society is further differentiated into various subsystems, each of which is self-contained and provides an environment for other systems.

Thus the legal system, for example, is exclusively responsible for the law, the economic system for the flow of goods and money and the political system for the regulation of power relationships (Baraldi, 1997a). It is important that these social subsystems are not interrelated hierarchically, but that each subsystem performs its function in society autonomously from its own particular perspective (Baraldi, 1997b, 68). In addition, every single person in such a social order has, as a matter of principle, access to every system; in functionally differentiated societies all stratificatory differences between people i.e. regarding social rank, become irrelevant (Corsi, 1997, 79). Participating in a functional system no longer reveals anything about a person's position in society as a whole; this position is limited to the subsystem and in another subsystem may be completely different.

In principle everyone can participate in all subsystems: this kind of social order incorporates ideas of freedom and equality that no longer allow personal ascriptions and an unambiguous self-perception or an integration into society as a whole (Nassehi, 1999, 157-158). The functionally differentiated society acts without a spearhead and centre, so society can no longer function as an “ontic” but only as an “operative” entity (Nassehi, 1999, 16). This is accompanied by a perception of indifference, which can be interpreted as lack of clarity and also as arbitrariness, and can be experienced as a loss of meaning. Niklas Luhmann viewed the social consequences of functional differentiation very critically, because in this type of society there is hardly any possibility of binding people so as “to ensure their inclusion, enabling a successful continuation of their life-course in social terms” (Nassehi, 1999, 169-170). Against this background it would seem only logical for people to try and apply new structures to this indifference, providing markers of affiliations and non-affiliations and permitting them to perceive themselves. In modern society the nation has taken over this function and has provided a possibility of allocating inclusions and exclusions in the egalitarian state, once again making it possible for a society to describe itself (Nassehi, 1999, 18;158).

Nations are imagined communities (Anderson, 1996): they are perceived by their members as having evolved over time and as being endowed with certain values. This historical development is experienced as cultural value creation to be protected as a heritage by those belonging to the nation, acting in solidarity and of their own free will, and is to be handed down to further generations (Renan, 1993, 311). Ernest Renan vehemently denies the ethnic basis of nations, but binds them to a daily plebiscite by their members.

Nevertheless, ideas of the historical evolution of the nation and its cultural values, as well as the obligation of solidarity in view of the sacrifices made for the nation, permit questions about the particular people to whom these reflections refer. This is not a banal issue since “no nation (that is, no nation state) has an ethnic basis, i.e.

nationalism cannot be defined as ethnocentrism unless it is in the precise sense of the creation of a *fictitious* ethnicity. (...) However, this imaginary entity must be created *counter to* other possible entities in the real world (and thus over the course of historical time).” (Balibar, 1990a, 63). What Etienne Balibar is referring to here is that the unity, the homogeneity of the nation, has to be established deliberately. If one looks at past societies that have subsequently acquired a political framework in the form of a national state, it immediately becomes clear that these societies were never homogeneous. Nations could almost have taken the heterogeneity of their societies as the starting point for their social order; indeed, the so-called nation states attempted to do this<sup>ii</sup>.

However, if one also includes the phenomenon of the functionally differentiated society with its indifference to the identity of its members, which is inherently problematical in the nation state, it makes good sense to recall what is defined as community culture, and then to make this the point of departure for identity-forming distinctions. In this context, culture is understood as a system of notions, symbols, patterns of behaviour and communication structures, by means of which a collectivity – one could also say a homogenized self – can be constructed that is able to distinguish itself from the otherness of the others. The anonymous members of a culture then form a legitimate political association: the nation (Cf. Gellner, 2002, 6; Rösen, 2002, 209). That is why, in the invariably heterogeneous association of people constituting the nation, people are sought after for whom homogeneous characteristics can be generated. If descent, language, religion, expressions of culture such as literature and art, and also history are defined as such characteristics, the nation has created an ethnic basis (Smith, 2010). On this basis distinctive features can be defined that function as inclusion and exclusion categories and by means of which an “ontic” unity of society can be reestablished. Within the framework of nationalism this society creates its civil religion by codifying freedom and equality for the members of the nation, as well as its mission, namely preserving itself and its values (Cf. Wehler, 2007).

Ernest Gellner defines nationalism as “a form of political thinking based on the assumption that social cohesion depends on cultural congruity.” (Gellner, 1999, 17)<sup>iii</sup> There is a renewed engagement with reflections on one’s own roots in the historical culture of the community inhabiting the territory of the nation as its home country (Smith, 2010, 9; 37).

For the sociologist Armin Nassehi ethnicity and nationality therefore represent self-stabilizing elements in the pan-societal communication of functionally differentiated societies; they are, as it were, one of the consequences of differentiation (Nassehi, 1999, 158)<sup>iv</sup>. As neither ethnicity nor nationality are “natural” quantities, these phenomena first of all have to be created. Language, literature and the writing of history have assumed this function in modern society (Cf. Nassehi, 1999, 157).

The writing of history in particular would seem to be especially suited to introducing to society, through the idea of the nation and the ethnicity linked to that nation, new distinctive features that create meaning; it can trace these features back to their historical roots and the associated cultural achievements. History has thus created a

fundamental possibility of complete inclusion in a functionally differentiated and egalitarian society which does not consider heterogeneity as problematical. It has the potential to provide the frame of reference that permits a certain group in a nation – which is also inhabited by others – to become rooted in history.

A system of distinctions can then be introduced into the nation state by means of a historicized structural separation of state and nation. The state acts in an egalitarian way, but the nation distinguishes between an indigenous “we” and “immigrants” on the basis of ethnic-cultural criteria of distinction. Thus in principle the functionally differentiated society can once again be arranged as a hierarchy, though not in the political sense. Rather, this hierarchical categorization is reintroduced on the cultural level: a nationalist discourse “proclaims the indivisible unity of the population group which historically has come together in one and the same state” (Balibar, 1990b, 266). The term “immigrant” describes those belonging to the state but not to the nation (Balibar, 1990b). In this way a “viewing order” (Reich, 1998) can subsequently be reintroduced into society making people visible by means of specific communication acts. These people would otherwise remain invisible in a functionally differentiated society.

In this context nationalism and ethnicity can be regarded as retroactive categories of order in a world fashioned on an egalitarian model. So as to stabilize this viewing order and to familiarize the members of the nation with their roots, an educational system among other things is required that can convey and legitimize these ideas institutionally. Here, the teaching of history assumes an important function. The following line of thought, which seeks and discusses evidence of this, proposes that the frame of reference in which learning about history and also the historical culture of the nation takes place, corresponds to this concern for reintroducing – though perhaps unintentionally – inclusion and exclusion into what to all intents and purposes is an egalitarian (post)modern society. In this connection new light is shed on long-cherished notions such as the family tree for introducing the phenomenon of history and also on agreed paradigms, such as historical consciousness, historical culture and the genetic construction of meaning.

## **2. Historical Education as Orientation Knowledge from Ancient Times to the Present Day**

The question of what students should learn in history lessons is becoming increasingly fraught with problems in view of the constantly growing amount of content and the unchanging to decreasing amount of time available for teaching history in school.

What makes the situation even worse is that, in view of the paradigm shift in educational policy towards competences within the subjects, the debate about content has paradoxically become more antagonistic. So far there has been no consensus regarding the relationship between content and competences. The ministerial-level exertions concerning educational policy with the aim of ensuring comparability between the *Länder* by means of standardization, can in certain subjects – one of which is history – all too easily lead to a conception of canonized

content. If knowledge of content is equated with education, worrying secondary effects emerge, above all in thinking about history.

In a controversial debate in 2010 about educational standards in Hessen in the subject of history, the German Federation of Historians (*Verband der Historikerinnen and Historiker Deutschlands*) defined the current task of teaching history: “The teaching of orientational historical knowledge from ancient times to the present day in history lessons furnishes both historical education and basic general education” (Stellungnahme des Verbandes der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands [VHD]). The Federation does not go into detail about content; however, it can be concluded that this general historical education substantively relates to the history of Europe and its regions. The Federation of History Teachers, which has close links with the Federation of Historians, has published a curriculum going into greater detail. Historical general education is understood as integrating the “historical images, terms and concepts” that “form part of common cultural and linguistic knowledge, without an understanding of which problem-free communication is no longer assured” (Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands [VGD], 2007a, 11) The logical conclusion then is content based on the European classification of epochs, beginning in early history and progressively concentrating on the history of Germany and its position in the international community (VGD, 2012b).

In the present study the genetic-chronological journey through history proposed by the Federation of History Teachers, with an increasing focus on German history, is still seen as a widely accepted pragmatic approach to teaching history in Germany. This form of learning is buttressed by the design of the schoolbooks, which follow the chronological principle. Even though the syllabuses of the *Länder* now have a strong focus on standards and competences, as regards content they still broadly follow the genetic-chronological principle of European-German history. The impression that may be conveyed in genetic-chronological history lessons is that the nation appears to be an organizational form which has prevailed over time (Cf. Beer, 2007, 8). This is confirmed by looking at the world around us. Wherever, after the end of the Cold War, multinational states broke up, the need for national states was awakened and in many cases asserted in ethnic conflicts. When the United Nations was established in 1945, the treaties were signed by 50 states; by the beginning of 2013, there were 193 member nations of the UN (Cf. UN, 2013). Thus there seems to be no truth in the idea that the nation state has become obsolete .<sup>v</sup>

General education and/or access to problem-free communication in our society implies a specific historical orientation knowledge –tailor-made for a certain nation and a certain culture-area – that began in ancient times and takes us back to the beginnings, one could also say the roots, of our own present.

The way in which people then position themselves with regard to interpretation of the past, experience of the present and hopes for the future, moulds their historical consciousness and also their historical identity (Rüsen, 2008, 186).

### **3. Historical Consciousness – Critical Comments on a Central Category in History Education**

In the didactics of history as an academic discipline the term “historical consciousness” has been widely accepted as a fundamental, central category in the learning process. This was not least related to the “narrative turn” in the theory of history: as a specific feature of historical thinking this emphasized its narrative structure and bound historical consciousness to experiences of time that create meaning. In this way it became possible to ask “about the lifeworld rootedness” (Rüsen, 2001, 2) of people in the context of historical processes that create meaning. Historical consciousness renders understanding of past time relevant to a person’s “lifeworld” and therefore optionally significant for the future. Historical consciousness signifies a person's ability to translate the past, present and future into a sustainable continuum through the “practice of narrating“ (Rüsen, 2001, 9). History became the regulative idea of historical identity formation (Rüsen, 2008, 186); as a result the functionally differentiated society acquired a category with which the individual could, in the course of time, once again become part of a social continuum. Moving through time by means of reflection can be described as a complex thought pattern of “recollection and expectation” (Rüsen, 2001, 6), which is manifested in specific actions. In the context of historical consciousness, narration is understood as “intelligent action” (Rüsen, 2001, 9). Interpreted experiences are normatively oriented towards specific action both during the course of historical events and in culturally functional contexts (Rüsen, 2001, 9). Consequently, history becomes a special kind of thinking – it can no longer lay claim to be “real” and enters the sphere of responsibility for the present. Finally, the basic functions of historical consciousness are realized in this thinking activity.

These functions are: “creation of a community, formation of identity, discovering the world, creating meaning in the form of time-specific patterns of interpretation” (Rüsen, 2001, 10).

The ability to create “meaning” therefore acquires a central significance in this interpretative framework. Rüsen defines “meaning” with reference to history as “a coherence of historical knowledge and historical representation in the life-context of its subjects. (...) It has a content-related, a formal and a functional component. History is meaningful if a) it organizes the experiences of temporal change in the past with an overarching conception of elapsed time, making history for the present from the events of the past; b) if it represents this progression of time in narrative form; and finally c) if this narratively presented historical knowledge culturally *orients* present-day life-practice with respect to its temporal dimension” (Rüsen, 2002, 11). Thus historical consciousness and culture are interdependent. They interact recursively, are coupled with one another by narrating history and they are matched functionally and normatively. History therefore does the groundwork, provides legitimization and creates meaning in connection with the present. It is made “narratable” so as to empirically ensure present action. At the same time, however, the individual is culturally integrated in a collectivity by means of this function of creating meaning through historical narrative; a historical identity can develop both individually and collectively in this framework. As a result, individuals are rooted in their collectivity by the historical narrative.

The question that arises at this point is: Towards what is Rösen's overarching understanding of elapsed time oriented; after all, there must be a *link* between the individual and the collectivity. In an increasingly demystified and secularized world Rösen diagnoses the nation as an interface between them (Rösen, 2002, 37). The concept of the nation was capable, in the form of a historical narrative, of constructing a quasi-religious meaning (Where do I come from? Where am I going?) and of giving this a political turn (Cf. Rösen, 2002, 37; Völkel, 2012a, 23-37). This form of historical master narrative was discredited in the nationalist turmoil unleashed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, it was one of the causes of unchecked nationalism with all its devastating consequences. Nonetheless, if you take a closer look at the current pragmatics of learning history, there is definitely an experience of *déjà vu*. This results from the coupling of historical consciousness both to the narrativity paradigm and the associated overarching genetic-chronological conception of elapsed time.

#### **4. The Ethnicity of the Genetic-Chronological Historical Narrative**

By definition, the historical creation of meaning provides a firm anchor for its cultural orientation function. History and culture have become Siamese twins and they require a certain structure in order to perform this function. In connection with history, culture is bound on the one hand to historical recollection and on the other to the cultural memory of a certain society (Rösen, 2002, 45). Historical culture comprises all the memories of a community that understands itself as a historical continuum and which ritualizes its historical experiences and memories in historical culture by way of remembrance (Cf. Ricoeur, 2004, 54).

Invisibly embedded in this idea of a community that has evolved over long periods of time is the question of the related overarching understanding of elapsed time and thus also of its narrative structure. In order to develop a conception of history that culturally creates meaning, forms identity and provides orientation for the relevant present, there is a need for genetic-chronological narration. This is based on historicism as a historical method, but today it manifests itself as a "New Historicism" (Rösen, 2002, 43), which can perhaps also be called a reflected historicism.

Rösen defines historicism as a concretization of the disciplinary matrix of history, because ultimately only thus can historical meaning be formed narratively (Rösen, 2002, 53). He sees this form of historical representation both as a continuation of the Enlightenment, and as a criticism of it, with the aim of politically asserting civic benefits and claims to participation. Since ultimately, according to this theory, the changes created and still create meaning for the relevant present, within the historicist tradition the evolutionary changes in society are marked as constitutive. For Rösen historicism translates history methodologically (not representationally) according to definite rules into a form that mediates human action as a constitutively changing world by means of a self-contained narrative. Rösen sees the deconstruction of the universal claims of historicist narration in the 19th century as the achievement of postmodernism.

At the same time, however, he espouses this form of enlightened (Cf. Rüsen, 2002, 51) historiographical representation, but reminds us always to address the issue of its not being elaborated satisfactorily: the aim is to make “reciprocal recognition of cultural differences” (Rüsen, 2002, 152) historically narratable as a normative principle in the present.

Accordingly, for the currently accepted theoretical conception of the narrative structure of history as an overarching understanding of elapsed time, historicism has up till now paradigmatically represented the basic structure of the academic discipline.

With reference to learning about history at school it appears only logical, and academically appropriate, that the teaching of history begins with prehistory or early history, and then proceeds step by step (today it is more like big “hops” from island to island) up to the present.

Even if the theoretical principles of the orientational function of history may seem eminently plausible, for modern democracies they involve very serious, partly concealed problems. Rüsen addresses and reflects on these self-critically. The content directed towards the categories historical consciousness and historical culture define “affiliation and distinction”, they set “the collective self against the otherness of others” and thus specify “systems of relationships of differently acting subjects” (Rüsen, 2002, 209).

By definition, there are elements of fundamental ethnocentric convictions that basically “bind affiliation to apparently objective natural criteria both in the category ‘historical consciousness’ and in the category ‘historical culture’ ” (Rüsen, 2002, 210).

By ethnocentrism Rüsen understands “the widespread cultural strategy of attaining collective identity by distinguishing one’s own group from others, so that one’s own social life space is experienced as more shared and more familiar, and substantially differentiated from the life space of the others. This difference is charged with values that define the self-relationship positively and the otherness of the others negatively. (...) This division takes place both spatially and temporally at one and the same time” (Rüsen, 2002, 211)<sup>vi</sup>. Belonging to a certain and definable historical culture makes possible what we call historical identity, which is still mediated through a “master narrative” (Rüsen, 2002, 217) oriented towards the historical content of a certain collectivity that defines the historical culture.

Thus “culture” can also be described as an ideological concept which expresses power relationships. In the historical culture the dominant culture of a society expresses itself in such a way that the public culture is historicized almost as a matter of course; without repressive measures, differentiation features are introduced into cultural articulations that distinguish between “our” culture and the culture “of the others”.<sup>vii</sup> Institutional sites for conveying this master narrative are school on the one hand and the sites of historical culture on the other. It is therefore logical for the Federation of Historians to call for historical orientation knowledge and the Federation of History Teachers to set the teaching of history in the context of implementing “problem-free communication”

within a culture and language community. Seen in this way, the concept of “basic narratives” (Mayer, Gautschi & Bernhardt, 2012, 382; 385) becomes plausible in the teaching of history.

The way history is taught thus explicitly acquires a social differentiation function that makes the “other” visible.

##### 5. History and the Metaphor of “Roots”

When history lessons begin the students learn that each person has a history, each person is woven into the fabric of history. A common image with which this idea can be imagined is the genealogical tree. Children work out their family tree and in doing so learn that they are integrated in a long chain of forebears, their ancestors. In this way history is presented as a sequence of generations; the student is the last link in the chain – for the time being. The family tree is linked, in analogy, to the metaphor of a tree firmly rooted in the ground. The possible “aha” effect here is that, in the genealogy, these ancestors represent the students’ own roots.

This widely used introduction to the learning of history results in the idea that history is something that joins people together. Working out one’s own personal family tree leads on to the idea that one is linked to one’s ancestors through blood ties. If the family tree is then enlisted as an analogy for the phenomenon of history, ideas can be imagined that bind history to a sequence of generations: the immediate associations are genealogical. Here, however, it is problematical that a biological phenomenon – family ties can be established unequivocally by means of DNA structures – becomes transferable to a cultural phenomenon, namely history, which can therefore be “biologized”.

The logical conclusion is that ancestral descent can be elucidated by means of history: people who have the same history belong together. In the present world we can easily define these associations of people who have the same history. It is the nation (state) that gives its name to the association of people. Germans have a German history, the French a French history and so on. This idea is sustained by teaching with content that *de facto* increasingly focuses on one’s own nation. In history lessons we learn how it came about that today we are Germans and what obligations and responsibilities resulting from German history have to be dealt with in the world today. So history, analogous to family history, means privileges and obligations based on an imagined close relationship. At the level of the nation, which etymologically means a (biological) descent community, the family with the long history represents the ethnicity. The conclusion is that this ethnicity is firmly rooted in the soil, the territory of the nation (state), and also in the history that provides a narrative of the descent community. Through the “roots” metaphor communities are homogenized inwards as a coherent association (Gellner, 1999, 120).

Roots endow people with “power and authenticity” (Gellner, 1999, 122). History becomes the source of identity-forming authenticity, roots are established in the person’s lifeworld, as Rüsen puts it (Rüsen, 2001, 8). At the same time the metaphor of the family tree permits an underlying positivistic tendency. Just as my family is “real”, the “super-family” (Cf. Horowitz, 1996, 6-7) – the ethnic community of a nation – is also a “real” nation and ethnicity; these are culturally created, and can therefore be historicized. Only imaginable communities (Anderson,

1999) are made “real” in this way because they are populated with living people who are integrated by a clear commitment to their ancestors. History binds people together when it is linked to the metaphor of roots, by means of an overarching conception of time creating identity, just as blood ties bind family members to one another. History as an overarching conception of time embracing the past, present and future, becomes the “lifeblood” of an association of people, the nation – and also, if desired, of the Europeans (Orgovanyi-Hanstein, 2005). And this historical life-blood is “thicker” than the weaker ties that bind one to the immigrants who likewise inhabit the territory of one’s own nation. In nations, which are all organized as nation states, these citizens enjoy the same protection and rights as all the other inhabitants of the territory.

However, under certain circumstances they do not belong to the nation – and these circumstances can be defined. If, for example, there are crises, the members of the nation united by their common history stand closer to one another (statements made, for example, by Federal Minister of the Interior Friedrich, 2011; or by CDU parliamentary party leader Kauder, 2012).

Immigrants, because of their own long history, cannot be integrated `without problems` into the historical-cultural space of the majority; as a minority immigrants only have a genealogy as a “solitary figure” (Bhabha, 2011, 207). Within the dominant culture they are “people without history” (Wolf, 2010) because their history is not dealt with as a topic in the majority society and so they are also people without roots. However, in a notional world where it is the roots that endow a person with identity and authenticity, the citizen without history is a citizen without roots and ultimately a person without a clearly definable identity. And not only that: the idea of civilization is also bound to the metaphor of roots. Anyone who is rooted in a nation is also civilized, so the reverse conclusion can be drawn that cosmopolitans – people who are “at home in the world” – have something uncivilized about them (Balibar, 1990a, 78). The notion of civilization is a marker of Europeans’ self-description of their putative cultural superiority (Banton, 1996a, 256), so the question arises as to how helpful the “roots” metaphor is in heterogeneous societies. It is also important to note here that the term “rootlessness” was central to Nazi propaganda: the “intellectual” was marked as an absolutely “un-German” type. “He was: ‘abstract’, ‘insensitive’, ‘cold’, ‘anaemic’, ‘sick’, ‘rootless’, ‘perverted’, always hiding behind spectacles, ‘Jewish’, ‘corrosive’, without ‘common sense’, a ‘naysayer’ (...).” (Bering, 2010, 6) The historical references alone make the “roots” metaphor highly questionable because it may suggest anti-Semitic attitudes. Also, even today the idea of an uprooted person has a negative connotation and can easily (but does not have to) be associated with moral degeneration (Gellner, 1999, 122).

In history lessons, the stories of the immigrant students’ origins as orientational overarching conceptions of elapsed time do not provide the same opportunities for creating meaning as the history of the German children. Thus immigrant children are not able to put down roots in their culture on equal terms with the majority society.

In history lessons they tend to experience an apparent hierarchical classification as people in the state. Because they are without history, they can be made visible at any time in acts of communication<sup>viii</sup>.

However, this involves overstepping the boundary with racist thinking, as becomes evident in the following (Smith, 2010, 43-44).

#### **6. Racism – not an Educational Problem but a way of Thinking**

Here the objection can be raised that not addressing the topic of immigrants' histories does not automatically absolutize the dominant position of one's own ethnic community. After all, all immigrants are welcome as citizens of the nation if they engage with German history so as to integrate it as historical orientation knowledge in their general education because, if they do, they can participate in the communication of the society without any problems.

However, both Anthony Smith and Etienne Balibar additionally identify nationalist thinking in such an attitude. In civic nations that define themselves *de facto* as voluntary associations of people, the immigrants who want the same rights and obligations as the indigenous population are required to learn the standard language. This includes understanding implicit rules: that they know and internalize the history and literature of the receiving nation, that they accept their customs and also recognize and accept the political symbols and institutions (Cf. Smith, 2010, 43-44;

Balibar, 1990b., 267). The aim is that the immigrants should integrate themselves “without any problems” into the cultural communication of the receiving society. They are expected to assimilate unconditionally; one might even say that only the name should remain as a reminder of their origin in other lands<sup>ix</sup>.

But here again history becomes a problem; once more it is a question of roots. The immigrants should free themselves from their original roots and, as when marrying into a new family, fit into the new culture-area so that they no longer attract attention as foreigners. What is required of them is no more and no less than breaking with their ancestral culture of origin in order to take on a new identity. However, this is considered to be reasonable and therefore achievable. Nevertheless, the “roots” metaphor continues to resonate latently, so the assimilated members of the population can never be quite sure whether, at some point in time, an ethnic nationalism will not sprout up from these roots and be directed against them. There are plenty of historical examples of this. If one looks at the community-forming elements of the nation, it is clear that these include ethnic, religious and linguistic features as well as shared cultural features and common historical memories (Wiegel, 1995, 41).

In any case, immigrants can only borrow these memories for a certain period of time (Georgi, 2003). Ultimately, they remain rootless. This is the point where the inner interconnection between racism and nationalism becomes clear.

Nationalism and racism need to be differentiated formally, yet for Balibar there is still a causal relationship. To the extent that the nation state prevails over other forms of society and imagines a cultural unity by creating of a

fictitious rooted ethnicity, it combines with racism as a “look” directed inwards at the minorities and outwards at the “others”. This look identifies the minorities as “others” and the self can then conceive itself within the ethnic affiliation (Balibar, 1990a, 68). The ethnic self performs an important stabilizing function in people’s lives by representing on a societal level an equivalent to the family, which is why in ethnicity research an *ethnos* is also called a “super-family” (Horowitz 1996, 7). Hence the concept of ethnicity can be a marker for an in-group with an inclusive character. In social anthropology *ethnos* is understood as a designation by which groups define themselves, perceiving themselves as distinguishable from other groups (Eriksen, 1996, 28). However, it is interesting that this inward perspective can fundamentally be linked with a perception directed outwards i.e. that the ethnic self does not automatically match an equivalent ethnic other, which would be possible.

Rather, it enables the ethnically shaped discourse, when it addresses cultural differences, to mark this “other” as a physically defined other. According to Michael Banton’s definition, there is a need here for a different category that distinguishes the ethnic “we” qualitatively from a categorially distinctive “them”. This category of differentiation results, Banton says, from a racist way of thinking (Banton, 1999, 2328). Hence, racism is a way of designating and excluding “others” by making them visible. At the same time there is an upgrading and inclusion of one’s “own essential nature”. This form of racism now articulates biological and also cultural differences of greater incompatibility. In this frame of reference the merging of cultures is understood as the “spiritual death of humankind” (Wiegel, 1995, 65), which must be combated at all costs. The racism appearing in this new guise is also called “neoracism”<sup>x</sup>. Here, the focus is not on the social and historical heterogeneity of the people but on the “essential nature” – nowadays we would say the cultural unity – of a certain group which then becomes, as it were, the primal group of the nation. But since this group cannot be defined formally – how can the cultural identity of the “genuine” citizens be made visible? – the opposite is done.

By defining and making visible the “false citizens”, the “genuine nationals” assure their self-identity<sup>xi</sup>. A form of this visualization is cutting the immigrants off from their (historical and cultural) roots by overemphasizing the (historical and cultural) roots of the dominant culture.

Therefore racism does not result from a lack of education (Balibar, 1990b, 266) but is the consequence of a certain type of historical thinking.

Racist thinking cannot be combated with more (!) education; people must use their education to change their way of thinking and, as a consequence, their acts of communication. However, as a result they would have to resort to concepts other than those of history and the nation to stabilize their identity. For everything that is history (and hence nation) is a construct: those who have a constructed identity must fight tooth and nail to defend this construct in order to avoid losing their self-identity.

## **Epilogue**

History – and this includes teaching and writing about history – has a clearly defined social differentiation function. Viewed historically, the loss of meaning that went hand in hand with the loss of the religious certainties was an extremely grave matter, because the socially stabilizing concepts disintegrated at the same time as the religious ties. It was only logical for people to seek new certainties that would enable them to perceive themselves as authentic. They have transferred this function to the new political order: they historicized this in such a way that authentication processes became possible.

As the nations developed and the societies differentiated functionally, they “invented” “the science of history” as a new possibility for individual and collective self-reassurance.<sup>xii</sup> By writing history it became possible to transfer a well-known principle, namely that of social differentiation, from the “old times” to the new – as a characteristic feature of differentiation. However, this was clothed in a new garb: that of culture, by means of which the social differentiation could once again become socially relevant as a guarantor of stability.

In this frame of reference history is revealed as a special form of thinking. Associations of people are privileged by the concept of origin; they can then perceive themselves as an ethnic self.

As a side effect, history can also result in racist thinking if, namely, the core ethnicity seeks to differentiate itself from “the other” as a category. This necessity for categorial differentiation is linked to the concept of culture. If people don’t want to lapse into cultural relativism, their values have to be defined in such a way that the self is regarded more highly than the other.<sup>xiii</sup> A society that emphatically wishes to reject nationalist, ethnically discriminatory and racist thinking, should therefore rethink their understanding of self as “historically evolved”. For if history is a special kind of thinking, one can change it at will (Völkel, 2011). This would seem to imply a changed attitude to history: the main focus should no longer be on the orientational overarching conception of elapsed time. As has been shown, this incorporates the error of ethnic exclusivity, concealed in the concept of historical identity.

But even without the mediation of an overarching conception of time, history can be extremely helpful in the formation of authentic personalities. If it is opened up as a space for secondary experience, people can empirically secure their actions in the present by observing – with understanding – people’s experiences in the past, in order to derive options for their own action (Völkel, 2012b, 37-39). A person’s origin would therefore no longer appear to be important. Sharing the present and participating in a contingent shared future is of far greater significance.

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<sup>i</sup>This operational cohesion of the subsystems means that each of these subsystems no longer determines its identity by means of a difference in rank with regard to other subsystems, but develops an identity of its own. Consequently all subsystems in society are of equal value, so differences in rank can no longer be derived from them either. (Cf. Nassehi, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup>However, nation states such as France, which is frequently cited as a European example, also introduce distinguishing features in their egalitarian societies. (Cf. Rommelspacher, 1997).

<sup>iii</sup> In this sense the ethnocentrism diagnosed by Rösen in the master narrative of an association of people can also be described as nationalism.

<sup>iv</sup>Here it should be pointed out in criticism of Nassehi that nationality and ethnicity are not automatically connected. Nationality relates more to the concept of national citizenship whereas ethnicity finds reassurance in its nationalism, thus permitting the connection back to its cultural roots (Nassehi, 1999).

<sup>v</sup>According to Michael Mann it is mainly the Europeans who propagate the end of the nation state because they are quite willing to cede some of their national rights to the European Union. However, he does not see this as a worldwide development, rather a special case that permits the Europeans to assert themselves better in the global marketplace. Mann explains that today we are living in an age of nation states because the nation state plays a key role in the process of globalization. (Cf. Mann, 2006, 23-24) <sup>vi</sup> This definition by Rösen (2002), corresponding to those in ethnicity research, is dealt in greater detail in the further course of this study. <sup>vii</sup>On the term “dominant culture” Cf. Rommelspacher, 1998. <sup>viii</sup>Luhmann’s remarks on the asymmetry of seeing concerning the phenomenon of making people visible in communication acts. The question here is: who is accredited with a greater continuity back to the origin. This person is then given primacy in the communication.

(Luhmann, 2003)

<sup>ix</sup>However, in ethnicity and racism research a conception of assimilation that is based on increasing cultural-national homogeneity is described as an “oversimplification”. According to this, a minority adapts to a majority and merges with it, the minority having to change. Viewed sociologically, however, assimilation processes are significantly more complex and result in changes on both sides. (Cf. Sarrazin, 2010; Banton, 1996b, 43-45) <sup>x</sup> Biological distinctions are also embedded in this frame of reference, however they are subordinated to the cultural differences. Here, Etienne Balibar speaks of “racism without races”. The result is an absolutization of cultural identity and an insistence on differences (Cf.

Wiegel, 1995). <sup>xi</sup>Balibar (1990a) sees the terms “immigrants” or “migrants” as substitutions for the people who were previously marginalized under the heading of “race”.

<sup>xii</sup>In systems theory science is described as a separate functional system within modern society (Cf. Luhmann, 1992).

<sup>xiii</sup>Cf. also the debates about the European system of values which, basically, are oriented towards the limits that have to be established in order to protect these values. (Schiffauer, 2008, 11).