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### Beelden van tijd: De rol van historisch tijdsbewustzijn bij het leren van geschiedenis

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# Images of time: the role of a historical consciousness of time in learning history

## Summary

The Introduction positions the present study as a contribution to the academic discipline of teaching and learning history: a hybrid study which is related to educational science on the one hand and to history and theory of history on the other hand. The discipline of teaching and learning history should not be taken as an affiliate, neither of educational science, nor of history, but it should be allowed an autonomous position relative to each of these two. A third determinant factor is politics and society, because history is taught as a consequence of decisions taken by politicians and is therefore expected to meet the anticipations of society. The present study is composed of combined research performed from each of these three perspectives: from the perspective of politics and society in chapter 1, from the perspective of theory of history and philosophy in chapter 2, and from the perspective of educational science in chapters 3 and 4. The subject of this study is the role of a (historical) consciousness of time, because the dimension of time is probably the element which distinguishes history most clearly from other academic disciplines. The question to what extent learning history is a feature of learning to think in terms of (historical) time is the focus of this study. Chapter 1 examines the question by discussing the role that a historical consciousness of time has played so far in history education. Chapter 2 works out a practicable definition of historical consciousness of time on the basis of theoretical and philosophical studies. Chapter 3 reviews the research that has been done so far with respect to teaching and learning about (historical) time and surveys questions that have been answered partially or completely, and questions that remain as yet unanswered, based on the definition of historical time that has been developed in chapter 2. In this way, a research agenda for the study of teaching and learning history is developed. Chapter 4 makes a start with the execution of empirical research based on this agenda by means of an investigation into the tools that learners use to be able to orient in historical time.

Chapter 1 presents a compendious survey of developments in teaching and learning history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany, England and the Netherlands. A comparative approach has been chosen to clarify which developments have been specific to a certain country and which occurred on a more general scale in history education. The survey focuses on the question: what has been the role of a historical consciousness of time in teaching and learning history so far?

Until the nineteen sixties ethical goals, goals of political and civic education and nationalist goals have dominated history education. These aims were formulated with the functioning of students in present society in mind: the (national) past was used to jus-

tify certain behaviour in the present. Historical consciousness was not the primary aim in this respect. It wasn't the difference between the past and the present which was focussed on, but the alleged similarities between past and present and alleged continuities were emphasized.

During the nineteen sixties crisis struck history education because, for a number of reasons specific to that period, traditional political, civic and nationalist goals were no longer experienced as legitimate. Politics and society turned their backs on the subject. As a result history was in danger of being marginalized or even of disappearing completely from the curriculum. A renewal of methods and approaches in history teaching followed corollarily. On the one hand history educators tried to draw attention to the usefulness and topicality of their trade by presenting it as a social science dealing critically with information. Careful evaluation of evidence would allow students to compose their own images of reality, in this case the reality of the past. This was considered to be a key to better history teaching. A historical consciousness of time did not feature here as a priority, because the critical questioning of evidence was given a more prominent role than positioning the evidence in the correct historical context. On the other hand, there was a reaction which figured particularly in Germany, which concentrated on the contribution history could provide to an open democratic society, exactly because authentic historical thinking can only flourish in such a society. History shows that today's reality is not a matter of course, but the result of a historical development which could have taken a very different course. History shows that different worlds were driven by fundamentally different values and interests than those of the present and incites the development of understanding for these fundamental differences. Such notions are valuable contributions to the open disposition of present society. They take the point of view of a historical consciousness of time, because they are based on an understanding of the fundamental differences between diverse historical times. The present existence of a nation, for example, cannot just be taken as the obvious result of a historical development, in the way it was preached in the previous period by a politically and nationally inspired history education.

The innovative wave which originated during the nineteen sixties culminated during the nineteen seventies and eighties. During the nineteen eighties and particularly the nineteen nineties, however, politics and society resumed their traditional roles with respect to history education. For a number of societal reasons, the moulding of nationally disposed citizens once more became an important political aim which was assigned to history education. In England, and somewhat later in the Netherlands, this ignited fierce debates between the innovators from the nineteen seventies and those who cherished the view that history education should return to its good old ways dating back to the period before the nineteen sixties. The formulation of nationally inspired agendas for history teaching implied that the development of a historical consciousness of time became once more liable to be pushed aside in England and in the Netherlands. In Germany this kind of development has not as yet been clearly visible.

From the developments surveyed in this chapter it can be concluded that it is not at all easy to take a historical consciousness of time, meaning the fundamentally different perspectives of bygone periods as opposed to those of the present, really seriously in

history education. Political and societal imperatives have usually made this almost impossible, with the exception of the episode during the nineteen sixties and seventies when politics and society turned their backs on history education.

Chapter 2 makes a quest towards a definition of the concept of 'historical consciousness of time' which is practicable for teaching and learning history. A start is made by means of a philosophical orientation on the concept of time in general, because historical time can only be understood against the background of general notions about time. On the one hand, time is 'given' as a natural phenomenon linked to the passage of days and years. On the other hand time is something subjective because it takes shape in the way human beings experience time. This experience of time occurs in very diverse ways.

Objective time is less unproblematic and 'given' than it seems at first sight. The existence of a time passing at a mathematically regular pace cannot be proven in a philosophically satisfactory way, for instance. Time is not the same as movement or change, but without change or movement the passage of time is hardly conceivable. The passage of time only finds expression in human experience; this however, makes time into something subjective, while on the other hand it is almost unacceptable to think that there would be no time if there were no people to experience it. In sum, time existing objectively is less self-evident than is usually assumed.

Phenomenological thinkers have therefore renounced attempts to define time as something objective and have taken the point of departure for their thinking about time entirely in the way people experience it. It is apparent, then, that human beings necessarily think in terms of memories from the past, of examination of the present and of expectations for the future. Because human consciousness is structured in this way, time exists as a necessary construction to be able to understand reality. Inherent to the perception of every 'moment of now' is the consciousness of something previous and something following up. Yet a completely subjectivating definition of time cannot be satisfactory. Time sometimes seems to fly and sometimes one has the impression that some episode will never come to an end. Objective measurement of time, however, shows that different paces in the passage of time are absolutely out of the question. In thinking about time, then, subjectivating and objectivating perspectives seem to be each other's hostages.

In a special way this is the case for historical time. On the one hand, the passage of historical time is expressed in images created by human beings (historians), on the other hand, the design of these images is bound to the objective standards of mathematical chronology. The rise of western historical consciousness which occurred – according to most experts – in the period between 1750 and 1850 can cast more light on the characteristics of a historical consciousness of time. The experience of a rupture between past and present as caused by the stormy developments of the democratic (French) and industrial revolutions has been critical to the development of western historical consciousness. The world was changing so rapidly and profoundly, that an orientation on the past as a practical guide for the present and the future (*historia magistra vitae*) was out of the question thenceforth. Past times would be really fundamen-

tally 'different' from then on. This caused an historical interest which strived for an understanding of all these fundamentally different episodes, each and every one in and by itself (historicism). Confusing matters belonging to one period with matters belonging to another, including the present, had to be avoided as 'anachronism'. The study of each period separately in itself, not just as the prehistory of the present, led to the insight that each period has had its unrealised eventualities, so later developments always depended to a certain extent on coincidence (contingency) and the present is not the logical outcome of developments in the past, but could have been altogether different if chance had taken a different course. From this analysis three key concepts of a historical consciousness of time are derived: periodisation (distinguishing of fundamentally diverse periods), anachronism and contingency.

Historicism strived to let the past 'speak for itself' and to minimize the role of the historian in this respect. Later on theorists realised that such a thing is impossible. Every image of the past bears the hallmark of the historian who created it and the time in which he lived. Narrativist philosophy of history has stressed the role of historical narratives which represent the past, but cannot be identified with it. With regard to historical time: historical narratives shape historical time, or in a way create historical time. Historical time in a narrative is related only very indirectly to the succession of events in the way it has occurred in an often chaotic reality. Ricoeur distinguishes three 'reflexive tools' applied by historians to bridge the gap between 'lived time' and 'objective time', resulting in 'historical time': the calendar, successive generations, and traces and documents. Each of these can be said to have 'objective' and 'subjective' features: objective in the sense that they exist as 'given' and subjective because they play a role in the conceptualisation of time. The calendar for instance can be held to exist more or less objectively as long as no events are attached to it, such as is the case with a new and empty agenda purchased at the beginning of a new year. It becomes subjective as soon as it is filled with events. The coexistence of people belonging to different generations is an objective feature of human existence, but it develops subjective aspects when a story about 'then' and 'now' is attached to it. Likewise the existence of remains from the past: the fact that they are there is something objective, but as soon as they are used in order to imagine the past they acquire a subjective connotation. This theorizing on the narrativist 'emplotment' of historical time, taken as mediating between the objective passage of time and the subjective creation of images of time, results into three further key concepts of an historical consciousness of time: chronology (the calendar), generations, and remains.

A comparison between western historical consciousness of time and consciousness of time in non-western cultures accentuates the specific character of the former. Anthropological research shows that three types of consciousness of time figure frequently in various cultures: a cyclic consciousness of time connected with the rhythm of seasons and the constantly returning activities in hunting and agriculture that coincide with it; a social consciousness of time connected with the coexistence of older and younger generations, the older ones bridging the gap with the past; and a mythical consciousness of a primeval age which is at the same time an eternity, because it is associated with the creation of the world and the eternal principles which gods and spirits

have established by that, and which consequently have to be constantly re-enacted by rituals. These three types of time consciousness probably also feature in western society, next to and opposed to an historical consciousness of time. A hypothesis which has still to be tested would be that they are present in the background with students in history lessons: a consciousness of a daily cyclic time (with returning weekly and annual rhythms), a social consciousness of time created by the coexistence of different generations and a more or less 'mythical' consciousness of an (undifferentiated) 'back then', from which, based on easy assumptions, a sense of eternal truths is unconsciously derived, for example that things in 'the past' (whatever past) naturally were a lot worse than they are now. Perhaps the characteristics of a historical consciousness of time, as expressed in the six key concepts that have been arrived at before, can be positioned opposite the three types of alternative consciousness of time:

- chronology and periodisation versus the consciousness of a cyclic daily time: long lines of development and diverse different periods versus the ever again returning of similar phenomena in the short term.
- historical reasoning about generations and remains, taken as bridges towards fundamentally different periods (older generations featuring as a 'they-group' and remains taken as fundamentally alien and unfamiliar) versus the social consciousness of time in which older generations belong to the 'we-group' and older objects are seen as belonging to the present world which is familiar.
- dealing with anachronism (different times have different values and truths) and contingency (there is coincidence and discontinuity in historical developments) in a historical way versus a mythical consciousness of eternal values and eternal truths, and undifferentiated ideas about 'back then'.

If this hypothesis is valid and if the acquiring of an historical consciousness of time is considered to be an important aim of history education, it follows that educational objectives focussing on the replacement of spontaneously existing daily-cyclic, social and mythical types of consciousness of time with the key concepts of an historical consciousness of time – which do not develop spontaneously, but only as a result of a determined effort to study the past - are in order. In the last part of chapter 2, therefore, eighteen educational objectives are formulated, derived from the six key concepts of an historical consciousness of time. Based on these educational objectives, sixteen research questions are worked out, which could form an agenda for academic research into teaching and learning history in the future.

Chapter 3 presents a review of existing research which could be related to the six key concepts of an historical consciousness of time.

First there is psychological research casting light on the way human beings create images of their own pasts (autobiographical memory). In this research theories of time distance and theories of location appear to be significant. Theories of time distance are based on the assumption that memory automatically becomes weaker when events are longer ago, when the time distance becomes longer. In this way, humans are supposed to be able to imagine how certain events are positioned in time relative to each other.

Theories of location stress the importance of the contexts in which events take place and the associations which are connected to them. Contexts are remembered as locations in memory, by means of which different moments in time can be distinguished from each other. It is more difficult to remember the exact measurable distance in time between events and exact dates. A mathematical approach of time is not something that human beings easily deal with; an associative one is much more natural. Whether this feature of autobiographical memory is also relevant for remembering historical information (which is usually not autobiographical, so the impact on memory is probably different), is a question which will be dealt with in chapter 4. Theories of time distance can have no significance for remembering historical information anyway, because they would deal with the distance in time between the moment at which historical information has been stored in memory (studied) and the moment at which it has to be reproduced (e.g. on a test) – not with the passage of time which is described within the historical information.

Furthermore, psychological research shows the following:

- Space is perceived more easily than time. That is caused by the fact that space can be observed in reality, and time cannot. Time and space can be confused because people use spatial metaphors when talking about time.
- Thinking in terms of time requires *temporal decentering*: moving from one's own position in time towards another. This is not easily achieved, because the most natural experience of time is the one that takes one's own position in time as a point of departure.
- Temporal information is stored in memory contextually and associatively, not with a preconceived intention to remember the passage of time. Therefore it often takes the shape of loose 'islands of time'.
- Thinking in terms of a prolonged linear and continuous passage of time is a cultural phenomenon to which human memory is ill adapted. Human memory is more apt at remembering cyclic phenomena: things that return at relatively short intervals.
- An objectivating, logical and measurable (mathematical) time system does not develop naturally, but can only be acquired by imposing it on more intuitive time experiences by means of explicit learning processes.

Educational research has focussed on primary education for a long time. Learning an historical consciousness of time was for a long time not considered to be a category separate from learning to deal with time in general. It was assumed that children should have a well developed consciousness of time first, in terms of the ability to read clock time and perform calculations with it and the ability to deal with the sequence of months, years, decades and centuries. This was presumed to be a requirement to be able to imagine historical time. It resulted in the pessimistic conclusion that an historical consciousness of time could only come about at the end of primary school age. A mathematical consciousness of time, the type of consciousness that psychological research has shown to be an intractable one, was taken as a standard. The much more easily accessible associative time consciousness was virtually ignored. Research by

Levstik and Barton in the nineteen nineties changed this situation. They demonstrated that young children were capable of relating associative images to historical periods, albeit that connecting them with exact correct dates remained a very difficult matter. This was the first research which dealt with historical time independent of clock time or mathematical chronology. The results of this research suggested that location theories of memory were not only valid for autobiographical memory, but also in case of remembering historical information.

When applying the six key concepts of an historical consciousness of time which have been defined in chapter 2 on existing educational research in teaching and learning history, it appears that particularly the following questions out of the range that has been formulated at the end of chapter 2 are barely answered by existing research:

- To what extent do students have a cyclic daily consciousness of time, a social consciousness of time and a 'mythical' consciousness of time, and to what extent is orienting on a prolonged linear image of time at odds with this in their experience?
- Is it more difficult to learn indications of time which use the calendar and chronology than indications of time which use a substantive qualification of a moment in time?
- To what extent are students inclined to take periods as something that really exists and corresponds with reality in the past?
- Can imaginative-associative indications of time (time of knights, time of steam engines) be remembered more easily than colourless indications (1100-1500, nineteenth century). If so, can imaginative-associative indications of time be supportive to the construction of a historical frame of reference?
- To what extent are students inclined to underestimate time distances within periods and overestimate time distances between periods? To what extent are students inclined to overestimate differences between periods and underestimate similarities between periods?
- To what extent do students distinguish an historical past from and a social past?

These questions from the research agenda take a top priority. The next chapter discusses the results of an empirical inquiry into some of them.

Chapter 4 describes an empirical inquiry by means of an experiment conducted in four secondary schools to test the following hypothesis: *Indications of time using dates and centuries are more difficult to learn and to remember than indications of time using associative-imaginative contexts; associative-imaginative context have a favourable influence on the development of an historical frame of reference.*

Parallel classes were selected at the four schools from the second and third year in secondary education. In this way two groups of students with a comparable composition and size were formed, 132 and 135 students respectively. A guest teacher taught a lesson to the parallel groups about the history of Aruba. This topic was chosen because there would be probably no prior knowledge about it in the groups, an assumption which was confirmed by means of a pre-test. Another reason to choose this topic was that it is a relatively compact amount of subject matter which can be dealt with reasonably in a

short time (one lesson) while nevertheless paying attention to a prolonged period of historical time. One group of six classes was taught using a chronological method, splitting up the time into six numbered centuries (fifteenth to twentieth centuries); events were discussed using dates. The other group of six classes was taught using an associative-imaginative method, splitting up the time into named eras (era of indians, era of the useless island, era of horses and pirates, era of gold, era of oil, era of tourism); no dates were used to position events in time. The historical content of the lessons using each of the two methods was the same, apart from imaginative-associative contexts to characterize the eras on the one hand and dates and centuries (and chronological order of events) on the other hand. After the lesson a handout was provided, containing events with dates classified by centuries in the chronological setting, and small images and text blocks illustrating the characteristics of the diverse eras in the other setting. The lessons in parallel groups were taught by the same guest teacher in order not to create a difference which could be contributed to the personality of the person in front of the classroom.

A test was used which contained twenty-five events from Aruban history which had to be attributed to the correct era or century. Nine of these were mentioned during the lessons, sixteen were not mentioned and had to be connected to the right era or century by means of contextualisation. In this last category there were six of which the description contained a word which also appeared in the name of an era (e.g. 'horses', or 'oil') and ten of which the description contained no such words. By means of a pre-test, containing the same twenty-five events, it was checked whether the students were capable of positioning the events in time correctly prior to the lesson. This appeared to be the case to a very small extent: on average, 4.3 out of the 25 events were positioned correctly. The group which was to be taught using the chronological method appeared to score significantly higher on the pre-test than the group which was to be taught using the associative-imaginative method. This higher score can be explained in no other way than that students of one group incidentally had a somewhat higher level than students of the other group.

On the post-test students on average positioned 11.2 out of 25 events correctly. The difference between the groups was now the reverse of the difference which appeared at the pre-test. The students who had been taught using the associative-imaginative method scored significantly higher than those who had been taught using the chronological method: 49.6% correct answers versus 40.1% respectively. After omitting the events of which the description contained a keyword such as 'oil' or 'horses', the difference remained significant: 47.9% versus 40.2% correct answers. So recognizing the keywords played some role in the better result of the associative-imaginative group, but by no means a decisive one. When counting only the events which were not mentioned during the lessons the percentages of the two groups were 49.8% versus 43.0% correct answers. The conclusion is that the group presented with the associative-imaginative method scored a better result in all respects than the group presented with the chronological method, even while the results of the pre-test showed the opposite situation. Another result was that studying or not studying the handout after the lesson had decisive influence on the result.

It can be concluded that the hypothesis which was formulated at the beginning of this chapter was confirmed in both of its aspects: both the remembering of information and the use of information to contextualise unknown events proved better in the groups which had been taught using the associative-imaginative method. Centuries and dates therefore seem to be much less important to be able to picture the passage of time in history education than is often assumed. This research seems to provide the evidence for the use of similar eras in the Dutch history curriculum as have been used in this experiment for the history of Aruba. Such eras were introduced in 2001 by the Commission for Historical and Social Education ('De Rooy'), however, at that time without any base in evidence. This evidence now seems to be provided as a result of this research.

Chapter 5 summarises the results of this study and examines its educational and societal significance. The summary of the contributions that this study has made to the study of teaching and learning history is as follows:

- A practicable definition for history education of an historical consciousness of time has been developed using six key concepts.
- Historical consciousness of time has been positioned next to and opposite its alternatives, viz. daily-cyclic, social and mythical types of consciousness of time. This opposition might be significant for teaching and learning history because students may bring daily-cyclic, social and mythical types of consciousness of time into the history classroom as spontaneous intuitions.
- A relation has been made plausible between the results of psychological research into autobiographical memory and educational research into the teaching and learning of an historical consciousness of time. Based on existing educational research, but also on the empirical inquiry which has been described in chapter 4 it has been made plausible that the location theory of memory according to which human beings use associative 'islands of time', is also valid in history education.
- Empirical research has shown that dates and centuries are not so important for dealing with the chronology of an unknown topic of history and that the use of associative contexts is to be preferred in this respect. In this way, an evidence base has been created for the use of the ten era curriculum such as has been introduced into Dutch history education via the proposals of the Commission for Historical and Social Education in 2001.

Based on the results of this study some advice is formulated in chapter 5 for the practice of history education. The significance for society of an historical consciousness of time is discussed. History and history education based on an historical consciousness of time such as described in this book cannot only exist solely in open democratic societies, but they are also one of the foundations of such a society. History cannot provide such a foundation by conveying a national heritage and the construction of a national identity rooted in common unchangeable norms and values. An historical consciousness of time provides such a foundation in a much more profound and significant manner.