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Is Classroom Boredom Hidden Guilt? A Comparison between Teaching Aboriginal History in Australia and Post-Holocaust History in Germany

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Abstract: History contributes in an essential way to the formation of a nation's self-perception and identity and the education system is a key mechanism by which this knowledge is dispersed. It is therefore of great concern that students in both Australia and Germany consistently report being bored when learning of their respective nation's fraught history. This essay analyses the shortcomings of Australia's Indigenous history education in comparison with Germany's Holocaust education, examining via psychoanalytic theory how the phenomenon of boredom often acts to suppress difficult feelings such as guilt.

Keywords: Aboriginal history; genocide studies; history wars

Introduction

History is a key pillar of how a society constructs its identity through collective memory. The education system is the mechanism of how knowledge is passed down in societies (Ashton & Hamilton 2007, p. 46). Both in Australia and Germany, the classroom and the history curriculum play an important role in that construction and are subject to a lot of controversial discussion. The heated public discourse surrounding how and what to teach shows that the issue is considered of the highest importance. However, students report being bored in history classes and have insufficient knowledge, as Anna Clark's (2007) study shows. How do you teach a genocidal past? How do you link the atrocities and injustices of the past to the current situation and create a more compassionate and educated youth? This essay will look at the issues arising when Aboriginal history is taught in Australia. It will then link this case to German history education about the Holocaust and discuss the debate over whether these two cases are comparable. The framework that is adapted here to link the two cases is borrowed from psychoanalysis and this essay discusses the hypothesis that students are bored when learning about their country's blood-drenched history because they are suppressing emotions they cannot, or find it difficult to, deal with: for example, inherited guilt. We will look at how guilt, as addressed by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, fits into the history



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curriculum. It will then conclude with an outlook on the future of teaching Aboriginal History. The essay will rely heavily on Aboriginal scholars and educationalists and give room for their voices because it is them who know best, especially when discussing the outlook into the future and what can be done.

Analysis of Indigenous History in Australian Schools

Henry Reynolds describes his history education in the 1940s and 50s as highly inadequate:

I was certainly not taught about any of those things which now seem so important - matters relating to race, ethnicity, Indigenous Australia, land rights, self-determination, multiculturalism. (Reynolds 2000)

It is shocking how his criticism of the state of history education in Australia almost seventy years ago is still relevant today. If, how Reynolds says, these things seem so important now, why do students leave school with little to no knowledge or awareness of the history of their own country and especially of the interconnected history of Aboriginal peoples and British Imperialism (Foley & Howell 2017, p. 51)?

One crucial factor that plays into this dilemma needs to be analysed with scrutiny: the curriculum. The history curriculum has sparked a great 'history war' in Australian public debate, and scholars and politicians have not yet ceased to debate over Australia's history and how it should be taught (Clark 2007 and Ashton & Hamilton 2007). This debate is part of a bigger picture of 'social engineering' (Habgood 2017, p. 50) and of upholding a national identity or disrupting a dominant exclusionist national identity. How history is taught has an effect on the public's opinion on issues like race, tolerance and the position of Aboriginal Australians in society. Kate Habgood even argues that the current state of Aboriginal history classes at school has deepened prejudice and is failing to provide a perspective that links what happened in Australia to a global imperialism, thus depicting the Indigenous peoples as a unique group of victims (Habgood 2017, p. 51). An additional example that fits this criticism is that the emphasis is still on the white Australian history, with even the Indigenous Australian history being taught from a white viewpoint. Is it too difficult and confronting to do what right-wing politicians would call 'smudging' the white Australian history by, for example, giving the historical Indigenous peoples agency? Often the part in history class about Indigenous peoples does not describe their warriors or their political struggle, as a student describes in an interview with Anna Clark: "...we studied white Australian history a lot more in depth than Aboriginal history. With Aboriginal we just looked at Dreamtime stories, and that's all" (Clark 2007, p. 67). This focus on the Dreamtime is highly colonial and marginalises and dehumanises the traditional custodians of Australian land by not acknowledging the historical agency the Indigenous peoples undoubtedly had and have.

Another part of the critical analysis must include and criticise the western epistemology. The scope of this essay does not allow a detailed account but it is important to acknowledge that there is an obvious discrepancy between the epistemology system the Australian education system is rooted in and the

epistemology that should be considered and employed when teaching Indigenous history as can be seen in the following quote:

An Aboriginal schoolgirl wrote that her mother and grandmother passed on stories in her family which largely concerned 'our past and our race'. This happened at family gatherings. It was in this context that the respondent felt most connected to the past, since her mother and grandmother 'know more about our history and you feel comfy around them'. In terms of the passing on of meaningful histories, it seems that the family is the site where most people feel at home with the past. (Ashton & Hamilton 2007, p. 56)

This shows how the Australian curriculum still has a substantial potential to expand its adequacy further than the western epistemology that has been employed hitherto. Teachers' ignorance is often part and parcel of the problem: "I'm a white Aboriginal, that's what Mr X [a qualified history teacher] told me what I am," (Habgood 2017, p. 51). Lacking sensibilities and ignorance, often rooted in prejudices gained from their own reading of outdated sources and their own history education, are causing not only a toxic environment for Aboriginal students but also to a history class that is insufficient (Ashton & Hamilton 2007, p. 51).

We now turn to examine the student's reaction to their history classes. Anna Clark's research paints a picture of disengaged, bored students that find the classes about Indigenous history repetitive.

When a teacher announces the topic of Aboriginal history, the reactions are decidedly and loudly negative. Derogatory language like 'Aboriginal stuff' and offensive ideas are not uncommon reactions to this announcement (Habgood 2017, p. 51). Some voices, as Halse et al. write in 1994, blame it on repetition of the same topics and an unengaging syllabus that also causes students to not pursue history further than the mandatory course in high school. These voices even say that they were "continually being forced to be interested in Australian history over and over and over again" (Clark 2006, p. 157). Where does this reluctance come from? Is it just poorly trained teachers, the syllabus and a flawed curriculum? I argue that there is more.

Comparative Analysis with Post-Holocaust Germany

Some scholars, as described by Lipstadt in 1994, argue that comparing the Holocaust (or in this case the education of the Holocaust) to any other atrocity aligns with the argumentation of Holocaust-deniers that "wish to lift the burden of guilt they claim has been imposed on Germans" (Russell 2006, p. 57). For these scholars, the only way of not aligning oneself with the denialists is to single out the Holocaust and make it incomparable. I want to initiate my argumentation for the comparability and the necessity thereof by showing how Indigenous Australians have identified parallels between their struggle and the Holocaust and also have made use of the word genocide that was coined as an outcome of the Holocaust:

The sense on the part of Australian Aborigines of parallels between their fate and that of the Jews under Nazism dates back to the 1930s, when Aborigines demonstrated in sympathy and support for German Jews, and continues into the 1960s and later, when

Aboriginal leaders began to use the phrase “cultural genocide” to describe what had happened to them since colonization. (National Tribal Council 1969)

Based on this, I will now also consult non-Indigenous scholars to amplify the importance of comparing the two cases.

The starting point should be that the Holocaust is omnipresent in history classes as far away from Germany as Australia. The Holocaust dominating the history classes in a country with its own bloody history can be a form of Coloniality, the concept made famous by Anibal Quijano and expanded upon by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007). Coloniality is a framework for legacies of colonialism expanding far into the time where ‘official’ colonialism has long ended (Parkes 2007, p. 392). These legacies can manifest themselves in the aforementioned focus on only the Dreamtime when attempting to teach Indigenous history, or also in an overemphasis upon the Holocaust that takes focus away from Australia’s own history. An example could be that a course at the University of Technology Sydney labelled as ‘Genocide Studies’ leaves out the Australian genocide in its three case studies. A possible way to take this critique further and to explain it would be including the theory of a so-called “‘screen memory’: the claim that the Holocaust is remembered in order to displace, repress or ‘screen’ other, perhaps more traumatic, local events and histories” (Levi 2007, p. 125). It is easier to analyse horrors that are not affiliated with the current political debates and implications of one’s own country that has its own traumatic history. Furthermore, it creates a filled space, where the Holocaust and its commemoration take most of the room, not leaving much more for the local history (Levi 2007, p. 126).

Despite the problems of awarding the Holocaust a prominent place in the national curriculum, the Holocaust can also serve as a tool of recognising wrongdoings in the local context. Holocaust memory was used as a model for the *Bringing Them Home* report because ‘traumatic history’ started with the Eichmann trial. What the Eichmann trial did was foreground “the testimony of victims of previously unspeakable suffering in order to correct historical ignorance and shows the limits of documentary explanatory frameworks of historical understanding” (Levi 2007, p. 144). This was applied as well to the *Bringing Them Home* Report.

Now that we have discussed the relevance of the comparison we can turn to an entirely different, more specific, point of comparison: teaching history in Australia and Germany. In Germany, just as in Australia, students are lacking knowledge about the past. Four out of ten do not know what Auschwitz is. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of interest in history in general. A majority (75%) of the students think that their peers are not very interested in history (Survey Hamburger Körber-Stiftung 2017). They feel that their history classes push them not to learn the facts of the Holocaust but to acquire a desired way of thinking and talking about the Holocaust (Tagesspiegel.de 2015). A German student (personal communication, 17.05.2018) disclosed other German students’ sentiment of being “tired of always learning and hearing the same things about the Holocaust”.

Synthesis: Boredom Theory

Taking these two cases into consideration and keeping in mind the discussion regarding the

comparability, we will now turn to apply the concept of boredom from psychoanalytic theory on these curriculums. Wangh and Wurmser link boredom not to external effects like repetitiveness or an unengaged syllabus, but turn their attention inwards: into the psyche of the person – here the students. Wangh (1975, p. 547) explains that he has “demonstrated that the chief cause and aim of boredom is to prevent intrapsychic conflict.” Furthermore, Wangh doubts that monotony or repetitiveness is the cause of a person describing an activity or a state as ‘boring’. He rather explains it as an unwillingness to deal with or express certain emotions. Boredom could be described as a ‘veil’ or ‘fog’ (Wurmser, 1990, p. 308) that rushes to that person’s defence so that they need not be confronted with the emotion. One of the mentioned confronting, uncomfortable emotions is guilt (Wangh 1975, p. 547). If we accept the relevance of the comparison between the two genocidal pasts in education, we must include the factor of guilt, which has been proven to be inheritable and is eloquently discussed by La Capra (2016). In the Australian context, a major difference that influences how the nation deals insufficiently with the past is the absence of the perpetrator (Levi 2007, p. 147), whereas Germany had the perpetrators in the foreground after the end of the war with the Nuremberg trials.

Clark’s work (2007, p. 147) shows the contradiction between bored but uninformed students through interviews. In the context of the history wars and the debate over ‘invasion’ as a word for British settlement, a student in an interview critically touches on the issue of guilt, complaining that “‘invasion’ is a guilt trip teachers pull on their students ... Like we’re meant to feel that our ancestors came and like killed a billion Aborigines ... and took over a country and gave them diseases.” This dismissive statement about history classes gives us insight on why boredom is possibly an easy strategy to deal with the resentment towards a history class that evokes negative emotions in students, who do not want to feel responsible or deal with their ancestors’ involvement in the past’s atrocities. Recognising responsibility would also require them to think closely about the current situation the First Nations people find themselves in and the role white Australia plays in it. The same is true for Germany, where students feel like “the history classes and the big emphasis on and relentless repetition of the Holocaust makes me feel like the German history is only Nazi Germany. It seems like they still want us to feel guilty. But we should not be made feel guilty,” (German student, personal communication, 15.05.2018. Translated from German).

In Australia, the public opinion and political climate aligns with a notion of history as a connector that should inform a strong, proud feeling towards the Australian nation: “Many Australians believe history should be a source of pride, and that kids should have an affirming national story with appropriate heroes and values to aspire to” (Clark 2007, p. 62). An example of a topic the students are not bored by would be Anzac Day and its history because it makes them feel proud of their nation (Clark 2007, p. 62). This expectation on history classes to strengthen the children’s ties to their country contrasts with the German case. Germany deals with the past more thoroughly and the guilt is omnipresent and more deeply ingrained in the public discourse and culture of remembering (Wortmann 2018). This would align with the boredom theory – as long as the student does not have to deal with his or her negative past and heritage and the bloody mass killings their ancestors might have committed, they are happy learning about foreign wars or parts of Australian history they can be proud of. One must ask whether in both these cases there could also be some hidden, still lingering anti-Semitism on one side or the ‘white supremacy’ sentiment on the other that students subconsciously carry. This would then in turn cause students to think that they are oversaturated with the ‘never-ending’ Jew-Holocaust or Aboriginal Australian histories.

Applying the theory of boredom as a veil for guilt amongst students contributes to the understanding of why students are not engaging with history classes and walk away with inadequate knowledge about their own background and their country. It also provokes our thoughts over whether guilt, an inherited guilt even, can be a constructive thing that helps a society deal with the past continuously and encourages the public to find better solutions for the future. Or is it rather a hindrance that keeps nations from moving forward towards justice and equality because it paralyses and only shows in the form of boredom, leaving people inactive and oblivious? Those are questions arising from applying the theory.

It is nevertheless important to see the limits of such a theory. Psychoanalysis in such a context can help spark those questions relevant for political change. The concept should not take attention away from other important factors that can be more specifically altered and contribute greatly to the boredom dilemma in Aboriginal history classes like teacher trainings, sensibilities, the political atmosphere, media and the curriculum. For the change to be set in motion we need people that deal with those questions and then revise the curriculum accordingly with scrutiny and engage in political debate, proposing specific action and innovation for teaching Aboriginal history.

Outlook

We need to look at history from the present. What are we facing today and how can we conquer existing inequality through a history lens and through teaching history with the necessary and required sensibilities? Now more than ever we have to be diligent and persistent in our history teaching in schools with the continuing injustices towards Indigenous Australians and a rising populism in Germany.

Indigenous history should be anchored in the mandatory school curriculum to make sure that Australia is working towards equality and justice. This starts with education and getting children engaged with the present wrongdoings through learning about the past. This supports Henry Reynolds' (1994) statement that Aboriginal history in Australian schools can contribute to reconciliation (Land 1994, p. 10). To move forward towards a more inclusive, engaging and respectful Aboriginal history teaching, it is crucial to prevent teachers that are non-Aboriginal from teaching Indigenous history while lacking understanding of the sensibilities at stake. To say it in Martin Nakata's (2007, p. 8) voice, the Aboriginal experience and therefore also history "cannot simply be re-explained or re-interpreted by informed, educated or expert people outside of our communities. To do so is a negation or denial of our experience and our understanding of our own position as we confront alien — and alienating — practices and knowledge." This point is made by many Indigenous peoples and needs to be taken very seriously when training teachers and coming up with curricula and syllabi. One example of sensibilities would be the sacredness of stories that are an integral part of belonging to land and country for Indigenous peoples. Their sacredness and meaning should by no means be violated by ignorant teaching staff. Terry Janke (2010) describes this issue as follows:

Some Indigenous stories are sacred. Stories are about belonging. They are the title deeds to a culture – clans have particular stories, and a story connects you to that place, or to those people. The right to tell stories and to link into that history, to that land, and that

connection is an Indigenous cultural right. It is one that is fiercely guarded in post colonial societies – where native title rights require Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to show a continuous connection to their land and seas. All we have left is our stories. And that too, is under threat when other people publish and circulate stories without consent, without attribution and where the authenticity of the story has been compromised. (Janke 2010)

Indigenous scholars advise that teachers should go through ‘cultural awareness training’. Habgood (2017) argues that such training contributes to ‘closing the gap’. The benefit of this training for teachers is seen as an amelioration of sensibilities when addressing Aboriginal peoples, representing them or relating to their realities (Foley & Howell 2017, p. 52). Furthermore, Foley and Howell address the issue that even in such training there is a simplistic approach that disconnects the Aboriginal cultural experience from the political part:

We are not only discrete peoples with distinct histories, languages and ‘cultures,’ perhaps better termed epistemologies, but we also share a culture of political analysis and cultural critique that is brought about by our shared experience of colonisation, or at least we used to share such before the travesty of native title. (Foley & Howell 2017, p. 52)

To progress, we need a constant revision of bias, outdated school material (Habgood 2017, p. 51) and links to other colonised experiences and the current political climate.

Conclusion

Considering the fact that history contributes in an essential way to a nation’s self-perception and identity, the way history is being taught in school is of this essence. While Australia must deal with its difficult past concerning its interaction with and treatment of the Aboriginal peoples, Germany has to deal with its interaction with and treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust. An astonishing fact is that in both countries, history lessons are perceived by the students as boring, especially when dealing either with the Holocaust (in Germany) or Aboriginal Peoples (in Australia). Psychoanalytic theory postulates that the phenomenon of boredom often acts as an unconscious ‘screen-mechanism’ to suppress or displace difficult feelings such as guilt. As long as this mechanism is in action, a conscious, interesting and insight-oriented education about ‘the other’ is not possible, and thus constructive change for both sides is prevented and new forms of creating a mutual common ground of living together stagnates. To bring about change, teachers must be made aware of that process and find new forms of teaching that complex and conflict-prone part of Australian or German history.

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