

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL THINKING

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Muñoz and Balmaceda begin by reporting that “in “March 2019 a great debate erupted in Chile over the reduction in history coursework for secondary-school students,” decreed by the Ministry of Education, “eliminating the compulsory nature of history and social sciences in the last two years of secondary school,” substituting for these a curriculum model promoting “the development of general skills”<sup>1</sup> Among the questions asked were: “How important, beyond the memorial engagement, were history classes?... How can history classes promote the development of historical thinking? Which psychological processes are at play when we discuss teaching history?”<sup>2</sup>

Muñoz and Balmaceda assert that: “Historical thinking has been researched more thoroughly than thinking in other domains, such as science or philosophy,” supported by the establishment of research centres, including one at the University of British Columbia (UBC).<sup>3</sup> The authors cite the UBC centre’s founding director – Peter Seixas – when reporting “there is no unified vocabulary in research on historical thinking” nor does the area “have a coherent body of knowledge,” and even “the objectives of history teaching are ambiguous,” leaving Muñoz and Balmaceda to conclude that “a more coherent understanding of historical thinking still needs to be reached.”<sup>4</sup> They acknowledge that there are those who “favour the concept of ‘historical reasoning’ over ‘historical thinking,’” the latter justified because the “term ‘historical reasoning’ ‘is broader, i.e. not limiting itself to thinking or reasoning historically,” and “including as well ways to think about history, historical thinking, ... [and] about one’s own historical theories and not merely with them.”<sup>5</sup> Presumably the concept of “historical reasoning overcomes the duality between two opposite ways of thinking about history, including one that emphasizes the objective dimension and another that emphasizes the subjective dimension.”<sup>6</sup> It is not self-evident how broadening the concept – from historical thinking to historical reasoning – unifies vocabulary, the problem posed above.

Muñoz and Balmaceda are undaunted, however, even enthusiastic, as they state: “In the set of skills brought together in the term ‘historical reasoning’, various practices and concerns of history education converge,” including “citizenship and ethical training; the teaching of empirical skills of collecting and analysing information, as historians ... and the teaching of critical reasoning skills linked to a ‘historiographic approach’, in which attention is paid to the subjectivity and point of view of those who construct argued historical narratives.”<sup>7</sup>

Then Muñoz and Balmaceda assert that “most history classes that focus on factual historical knowledge presented in an uncritical way,” although to what database they are referring is not clear. Then they tell us that “developing the ability to think about the past consists of learning to reason like a historian, a critical historian in this case, but a historian nonetheless.”<sup>8</sup> Why, one wonders? Why not a novelist, a painter, or a poet or even from the words of someone who lived then, in the past?<sup>9</sup> Then they “wonder whether there is an area of knowledge of history that can be thought of as everyday concepts, which go beyond the limits of school activity and yet would form an integral part of this domain of human thought.”<sup>10</sup> Even the “development of schooled concepts [scientific concepts] occurs not in a vacuum but in an internal relationship with everyday concepts, as a transformation of the latter,” an assertion from which they conclude: “This implies that history teaching should also pay attention to aspects of the development of historical thinking that take place outside history lessons and even outside school, to be able to exercise its (trans)formative task.”<sup>11</sup> Jocelyn Létourneau does just that.<sup>12</sup>

Muñoz and Balmaceda reiterate Peter Seixas’ postulation of “two major traditions that address thinking about history,” one “which defines historical thinking based on disciplinary knowledge and second-order concepts ... or strategies used by historians in their work,” from which is derived the idea that “the purpose of history teaching is to promote abilities and the learning of second-order concepts so that students face the historical evidence with critical thinking.”<sup>13</sup> The “tradition of historical consciousness,” we are told, “assumes that thinking about history is a mainly experiential and phenomenological process, which allows one to understand the past and to guide future action,” a “tradition” in which “narrative is the unfolding fundamental form of historical consciousness and the realization of historical thinking.”<sup>14</sup> From this tradition derives the idea that the “purpose of history teaching ... is to promote higher levels of historical consciousness that allow the subject to make sense of the past and to guide their actions in the present.”<sup>15</sup> Muñoz and Balmaceda appear to devalue both traditions, asserting instead “that thinking that is conceptualized from a Vygotskian or cultural–historical perspective is a dialectical relationship between psychological aspects, which have individual expression but whose constitution is social.”<sup>16</sup> After reviewing seven models of historical thinking – relegating them to the past, it seems – Muñoz and Balmaceda assert “that it is necessary to regroup the dimensions, competencies or components of the different models.”<sup>17</sup> Regrouping these means distinguishing among “three nuclei/‘macrodimensions’ of historical thinking,” the first of which is “disciplinary knowledge ... which includes [two levels or] dimensions that are typical of the work of history as a discipline.”<sup>18</sup> “On the first level,” the authors explain, “there is sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration that involves working with historical evidence,” and on “second level are those dimensions, components or second-order concepts that establish relationships based on the content

of the evidence: change and historical continuity; causality or historical cause and consequence; and contextualization.”<sup>19</sup>

The “second macro dimension” is “epistemological,” wherein the character of “historical knowledge” is examined, including issues such as “access to the past, the constructive character of history, the value of testimonies and the degrees of truth in historical evidence.”<sup>20</sup> The “third macro-dimension” Muñoz and Balmaceda term “ethical–political,” wherein “a bridge between historical knowledge and (political) action that transcends disciplinary limits” is drawn, emphasizing “the always particular nature of the contents of history classes, never universal or impartial.”<sup>21</sup> In this “macro-dimension” is examined “the (not always explicit) assumption that history teaching revolves around permanently conflicting historical narratives, sometimes latent or sometimes manifest.”<sup>22</sup> Also considered are “the personal uses of history,” which the authors link to “social identity.”<sup>23</sup> Also included in this dimension is the “commemorative and memorial responsibility for history teaching” as well as “the formation of citizenship.”<sup>24</sup> Also included in this “macro-dimension” are “psychological” elements.<sup>25</sup> Muñoz and Balmaceda link this “ethical-political macro-dimension” to “those conceptualizations of historical reasoning that include a sociocultural perspective,” asserting that “historical thinking” is a “psychological phenomenon from a dialectical or historical–cultural epistemic framework,” that is, when “the social is considered to be constitutive of the psychological,”<sup>26</sup> a reductionism that also casts “thinking” or “reasoning” as also a function of “the social.” Given the cultural variability of “the social,” it’s not obvious what the authors mean when they add that “historical thinking” is a “global construct,” an abstract universalism that eviscerates specificities.

After asserting that the “psychological” is a product of the “social,” Muñoz and Balmaceda appear to position the former as fundamental, at least in their understanding of “historical thinking,” which they characterize as “developmental.”<sup>27</sup> Not only developmental in any broad sense but structured by “stages,” which link not with “standards” but with “purposes or horizons to be achieved through history teaching,”<sup>28</sup> although the distinctions among these three concepts is left unspecified. Having established the “psychological” as fundamental, they allow that the “progression of historical thinking is influenced by cultural differences, for example, in the conceptions of time and periodization from Western and non-Western cultures.”<sup>29</sup> The authors tell us that a “quantitative and/or mechanistic approach to development” implies a conception of “historical thinking as a sum of skills linked to the use of historical evidence,” an “approach” they contrast to a “qualitative and organicist” approach that “makes it possible to understand the development of historical thinking in a more integral way.”<sup>30</sup> They then assert that: “It is necessary to review these models through the lens of qualitative transformations as human development rather than progress in an additive sense of skills.”<sup>31</sup>

Next Muñoz and Balmaceda offer a history of “historical thinking” in the scholarly literature, focusing first on “progression models,” which they summarize as having “coincided in a pattern of changes from less complex ways to more complex forms of thinking about history, from history as the addition of events or a reflection of reality, to more sophisticated ways of thinking based on epistemological assumptions typical of historical knowledge and more complex cognitive processes, such as contextualization or perspective-taking.”<sup>32</sup> Muñoz and Balmaceda conclude that these “models mainly account for how those dimensions or components that we have grouped into the epistemological macro-dimensions and disciplinary knowledge change,” but that: “Progression in the ethical–political macro-dimension is less explained.”<sup>33</sup> Actually, it turns out that all “models of progression are descriptive rather than explanatory.”<sup>34</sup> The authors remind us that “the development of historical thinking needs to be guided or promoted by someone with greater knowledge.”<sup>35</sup>

After that repetition of what we knew already, Muñoz and Balmaceda announce that “the teaching methodologies that would promote historical thinking [are] argumentative writing and the use of multiple sources,” methodologies that are “at the heart of the disciplinary work of history.”<sup>36</sup> Referencing Ricœur, the authors add that “narratives ... allow the realization of identities that are historicized,” concluding that the “deployment of both written genres accounts for multi-perspectivism, the epistemological character of history as a discipline.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, “epistemological beliefs are crucial in historical reasoning, especially to understand that historical knowledge is not a reflection of reality but results from a process of evaluation and construction,”<sup>38</sup> an assertion that seems to come down on the side of Hayden White and, in education, the constructivists. The authors add identity politics to the mix when they assert that “development within the ethical–political macro-dimension” is related “to its relationship with the identities of social groups,” an idea that implies that “ideology is a constitutive part of these historical narratives.”<sup>39</sup> How large a part? Always and everywhere constitutive?

Ideology is not confined to identity, however, as it “is also expressed through the rhetoric of narratives, of conflict and disputes about how the person who tells the history is positioned, and through the effects that the history generates.”<sup>40</sup> Still speculating, Muñoz and Balmaceda assert that: “Conflict is at the centre of the historical narratives, which permeate its dimensions, but also because social identities are not easily transformed through educational practices,”<sup>41</sup> an apparent non-sequitur that seems strange even given the authors’ panoramic perspective. Conflict is not always at the centre of every historical narrative and many teachers, in a discouraged moment, might lament that nothing is “easily transformed through educational practices.” And why should social identities – all social identities – be “transformed”?

Muñoz and Balmaceda propose what they term “an integrative explanation for historical thinking development,” a “Vygotskian explanation of psychological development to understand how historical thinking changes in its three macro-

dimensions.”<sup>42</sup> Such an explanation “implies assuming the general principle of sociogenesis or the cultural law of development,” in fact the “three macro-dimensions develop from the internalization of cultural tools,” and the “activity of the subject in their context” constitutes “a basic motor of development,” enabling one to “interpret reality from a constructive point of view,” including “critically evaluating those controversial issues that directly allude to the identity of the subject or the group and the activity in history as an agent.”<sup>43</sup> Whew!

The authors assert that “a Vygotskian conceptualization of historical thinking leads us to understand its development from a systematic approach.”<sup>44</sup> Why systematicity is always welcome I’m unsure, as it reduces the infinity of human thinking to patterns; it can also obscure the contextualization in which our thinking occurs. Such contextualization seems implied when Muñoz and Balmaceda invoke Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” to emphasize the interrelatedness of “the subject who learns and the others, including the teacher of the history class, the tools available in the environment, and the historical evolution and social relationships in a broader sense.”<sup>45</sup> The patterning effect is evident when the authors write: “The subject in their relationship with different intersecting spheres, first accesses the available cultural tools and then, with the help of these tools, begins to move in the environment with higher levels of autonomy and consciousness when they think historically.”<sup>46</sup> Unacknowledged is that such “development” hardly always occurs in a linear fashion, i.e. from simple to complex. Nor is it self-evident how such patterning – “higher levels of autonomy and consciousness” (self-determined or assessed by others?) – follows from thinking “historically.” Despite these lapses Muñoz and Balmaceda are confident: “This perspective allows researchers to conceptualize the spaces in which one learns to think historically in a more sophisticated way, going beyond the limits of the schooled practices that develop schooled concepts,”<sup>47</sup> and what lies “beyond” is left unspecified. Turns out linearity is not an issue, as their explanation of “the complex and dialectical interaction between macrodimensions allows researchers to conceive of development, not in a linear, progressive, or cumulative sense, but with different temporalities and differentiated rhythms,” another expansive claim without “micro” examples. Reassuring to read that the individuality of students is acknowledged: “The development of historical thinking follows idiosyncratic paths, albeit not alien to learning spaces and social relationships.”<sup>48</sup>

To conclude, Muñoz and Balmaceda reiterate that “the development of historical thinking is a complex process with different genetic roots,” development that “does not depend solely on school education but on the different spaces in which the subject participates,” with that verb “depend” inadvertently undermining their earlier affirmation of “autonomy.” Again, the authors appear to reduce cognition to psychology when they write that “historical thinking ... emerges only in the articulation of different, more basic psychological processes that under certain social conditions constitute a new phenomenon of thinking.”<sup>49</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

In mapping the field, Muñoz and Balmaceda presume to see it all, emboldening them to conclude that historical thinking (or reasoning – see above) is fundamentally psychological, albeit encouraged – they say even dependent upon – the social, curiously excluding the historical from their list of determinants. Aside from one affirmation of “consciousness” and “autonomy,” this is a world of nomological laws, unsurprising given their intellectual debt to Vygotsky and his discipline’s self-conferred scientific status. The research assistant who read the article in its entirety – Allan Michel Jales Coutinho – makes a similar point in his commentary, noting that the article “approaches ‘learning’ through a Vygotskian perspective in which the development of thought as a social process is conditioned by language,” adding that “critical scholars may also question the claim that historical thinking needs to be guided by someone with greater knowledge, which they might assimilate with a ‘banking account model’ of education.” Jales Coutinho is right on both points. In contrast to “critical scholars,” I don’t doubt the centrality of teachers to students’ understanding and development of “historical thinking,” but why assume that guidance is equivalent to depositing facts in passive cognitive bank (brain) accounts?

## REFERENCES

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- Clark, Penney and Sears, Alan. 2020. *The Arts and Teaching History. Historical F(r)ictions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Muñoz, Natalia Albornoz and Balmaceda, Christian Sebastián. (2022). Between school and ethical–political everyday action: A comprehensive framework of the development of historical thinking. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(4), 445–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.2018502>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 2022, 445.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>3</sup> For the UBC Centre see: <https://ce.educ.ubc.ca/http/> I confess to be skeptical of the author's claim that "thinking" in history has been researched more than thinking in "science or philosophy." Perhaps in Chile but this is hardly the case in North America.

<sup>4</sup> 2022, 446.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. For a detailed treatment of these dimensions, see Carr 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For an examination of relationship between the arts and history, see Clark and Sears 2020.

<sup>10</sup> 2022, 446-447. Here they are drawing on Vygotsky

<sup>11</sup> 2022, 447. Muñoz and Balmaceda note that "scientific concepts" – as well as "everyday concepts" are both drawn from Vygotsky. This is also a phenomenological insight: again, see Carr 2014.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hg1CKkhggc&t=16s>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Note the use of the verb "assume," a patronizing move by the authors that shows their skepticism. Concerning the role of narrative in the composition of history, see Carr 2014.

<sup>16</sup> 2022, 448.

<sup>17</sup> 2022, 452.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> 2022, 453.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 2022, 454.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> 2022, 454, 456.

<sup>32</sup> 2022, 457.

<sup>33</sup> 2022, 458.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> 2022, 459.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 2022, 460.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> 2022, 461.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>49</sup> 2022, 462.