

Multiperspectivity as a basic foundation of historical thinking¹

By now, it is almost regarded as a magic word: multiperspectivity. In the most varied contexts, one hears and reads of the necessity of taking in and evaluating diverse or even contrary perspectives and not lastly, to be able to negotiate ones way in a pluralistic social order. For the coalescing Europe, this term seems to consequently carry a central meaning, to better understand Europe and its various nations who are looking for mutual goals and pathways in their interests and motives.

Therefore, it is obvious that from the onset of its work the EuroCoMi project group must place this term on the agenda as a basic “didactic strategy” alongside “discovery learning”, “problem orientation” and “energizing students in addition to classic teacher-centered methods².”

The composition alone of the participants from four nations (Poland, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany) brought several perspectives to the table. Multiperspectivity was already in practice during the working process. At this point, Klaus Bergmann would speak of controversiality and plurality, which will be later explained³.

A second reason to consider multiperspectivity as a central category lay in the project group’s subject: Migration as a formative constituent of European history. Migration concerns not only the motives and interests of the migrants themselves, it concerns rather much more its perception by the so-called “natives” of the target countries and “those who remain” in the abandoned countries. Here, Bergmann speaks about multiperspectivity in a narrower sense, understood as the experiences and perceptions of the different contemporary witnesses/peers⁴. The deciding cause for the rise of this expression remains a technical didactical one. From the outset, it was important to all project partners, to provide the student teachers instruction help, to consider the various perspectives to one and the same themes and lastly, also to allow the actual target group, the students, through appropriate instruction, their own historically founded judgment, positions and opinions.

This article tries to introduce the most important approach theses in four steps:

Firstly, a basic principle of historical theory will demonstrate that the experts’ doings already bear the essential traits of multiperspectivity. Subsequently, conclusions are drawn for didactics, in which as a digression, the tight relationship to the expression “narrative competence” is marked. Finally, getting to work on the concrete implementation proposals for instruction, also including the results, which a student teacher team developed and presented within the EuroCoMi project.

1. The basic historical theory of multiperspectivity

“The idea of multiperspectivity is deducible from historical theory, from the reflection of historians’ doings⁵.”

So Klaus Bergmann opens his basic theoretical history approach and formulates as a point of origin the premise that “reports (...) are always perspective refractions (...) and not the objective mirroring of a past reality.”⁶

¹ This article especially addresses multiperspectivity as a sub-aspect of historical thinking. A general introduction in the basic principles of history didactics and specifically, in the expression “historical thinking” takes place elsewhere.

² Compare here to the work results of the meeting in Tübingen, Nov. 23 – 25, 2006.

³ Bergmann, K. *Multiperspektivität. Geschichte selber denken*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2000. p. 29/30.

⁴ Bergmann, 2000, p. 29.

⁵ Bergmann, 2000, p. 25.

⁶ Bergmann, 2000, p. 26.

Hence the further doing of historians are plausibly conveyed. In the heuristic phase, the initial point is preferably to find all pertinent reports. The term multiperspectivity already appears here. The point being there is to take into view the most varied “directions” to the issue, to the question posed, etc. In 1983, Bodo von Borries advocated in this context for a **narrow concept of multiperspectivity**, which Bergmann assumes here and specifies it as that which “emerges from direct experience with the **contemporaries’ perception**.”⁷

The heuristic phase is followed by the process of a critical analysis of sources, which challenges the “validity contained in the sources perceptions and statements”⁸, and finally, facilitates a coherent interpretation of the issue (**interpretation phase**). In this context he also refers to a **“narrative construct”** or **“historical construction of meaning”** (Jörn Rüsen).⁹

When this research process is concluded, it does not signify that the respective theme is sufficiently covered. Then what now follows is a continuative process that raises new questions on the respective theme, confirms, criticizes or even rejects existing results to initiate a new research process. In addition, here, it is about perspectivity, this time various perspectives of the historian, or – using Bergmann’s words – about the *“interpretation of historical issues through descendents.”* Bergmann defines this form as **controversiality** and considers the “Fischer Controversy”, the “historians’ dispute” or the “Goldhagen Controversy” as the most important examples for German research in the past years.¹⁰

The third form of perspectivity is defined as **plurality**. Here, it concerns *“orientations (= settings) of those who deal with the contemporaries’ perceptions and the descendents’ interpretations.”*¹¹ This regards therefore all who engage themselves with historical themes, irrespective of how, who and to which purpose, because plurality takes into view the respective opinion, the respective position, that results from this engagement with “history”. At this point, a main objection is commonly sounded: is history then arbitrary, only dependent on the personal view; is virtually everything relative? That no way signifies the above explanations. The point is in fact, to question every portrayal from history in regard to its **“narrative soundness”**¹² thus, about preventing an unthinking acceptance of the respective position – in fact a demanding objective in a society tending towards rapid consumption. Bergmann here quotes Rüsen, who talks about a constant “expansion of perspectives through viewpoint reflection”¹³ and adds that the point should always be [to] abolish a “naïve, scientific faith.”¹⁴

That this applies all the more to the depth of historical representations in the various media and the hardly still manageable historical novels marketplace is obvious. Even here, often more than dubious historical concepts are conveyed. At this point, to object and to empower critical perceptions and evaluations demonstrates a key task of modern history instruction.

2. Conclusions of history didactics

*“History ‘itself’ doesn’t exist; it is always perceived and conveyed from a certain perspective. (...) Accordingly, students must also learn to always question sources in view of the location/position to which they are bound.”*¹⁵

Melanie Salewski’s statement builds a bridge between the basic historical theory of multiperspectivity and the resulting demands of history didactics. There in her article, it stands out that above all she emphasizes the interpretation of sources; which only appears meaningful,

⁷ Bergmann, 2000, p. 29.

⁸ Bergmann, 2000, p. 26.

⁹ Bergmann, 2000, p. 27.

¹⁰ Bergmann, 2000, p. 28/29. An introduction in these controversies is waived here but well covered in the bibliography.

¹¹ Bergmann, 2000, p. 28/29.

¹² Compare here to Michele Barricelli’s model/presentation in: Barricelli, M. *Schüler erzählen Geschichte. Narrative Kompetenz im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2005, p. 76ff. Barricelli’s theses of the narrow “relationship” between multiperspectivity and narrative competence are enlarged upon in digression.

¹³ Bergmann, 2000, p. 29.

¹⁴ Bergmann, 2000, p. 41.

¹⁵ Salewski, M.. *Multiperspektivität*. Edited by Ulrich Mayer a.o. *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2006. p. 128.

when more perspectives factor into them. The teaching of history has met this demand for a long time. It appears problematic there that for many historical people and groups no corresponding source inventory exists, whether it is the illiterate, lower strata of various epochs or the scarcely passed-down political opponents of certain eras, - to refer to only two examples. Here the article exhausts itself of multiperspectivity and points to operational patterns from the realm of narrative competence.¹⁶

For Klaus Bergmann however, it is more important to show student as many mindsets, ideals, interests, mentalities, etc., of as many sources as possible to enable each one to learn from the perspectives of the parties involved, 'to see', 'to think'.¹⁷

The goal is at the same time, to be able to "*capture the perspective of the suspect as the victim*"¹⁸, so "*to place themselves in foreign times*" and [to] learn how to "*hypothetically argue from these perspectives*."¹⁹

It does not concern there a by rote acquaintance with foreign times, groups and individuals, but rather concerns a **judgment of the respective behavior**. And currently the critics start here by showing the danger that students could potentially be encouraged towards unhistorical, anachronistic results, findings and judgments. The danger exists in fact by not sufficiently reflecting on the various students' positions and outcomes and trying to evaluate them from their respective time and question them with respect to its historical plausibility. Again, it concerns that which was already introduced above as narrative soundness and, once again, refers to key sentences of narrative competence.

Bergmann himself sees a further danger: The point is not to justify the goals and motives of the actions and their respective outcomes by understanding the historical action – "*Understanding does not mean consent!*"²⁰

The further objective should be to learn and compile a "*process sequence of the findings*" with the students. Bergmann distinguishes there the steps as state (virtually a source's components with regard to content), meaning (interpretation level) and merits (evaluations from the present). Not prematurely condemning, but rather first, asking about the value standards of the respective time plays a central role. Expressed differently: The historical action can be condemned only when "*the historical and current judgment collapses*."²¹

Naturally, this no way means that from today's position people simply allow inhumane behavior of earlier epochs to stand. Here, it is offered instead to broach the development of the settings, which brought with it the previous "natural" behavior, for example, today the Witch Trials are generally considered as crimes. There after Bergmann, should one always depart from sweeping condemnations, as it is time itself, which already considered these trials as criminal behavior.

When this train of thought is followed, the **core of multiperspectivity**, its main yield, is quickly clarified: The teaching of history, in this vein, trains **one's own judgments and opinion making**. The students learn about the individual steps of interpretation and judgment and how **to debunk** one's own foreign **stereotypes, to avoid a snap condemnation and conviction** and to **draw** one's own **justified position**. Finally it concerns, the acquisition of "*tolerance to the tolerance worthy*" but in return a "*right of intolerance towards those that this idea*" - an 'idea of societal morality' - is meant to harm.²²

¹⁶ Compared here to Sauer, M.: *Geschichte unterrichten. Eine Einführung in die Didaktik und Methodik*. Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer, 2004. S. 69ff. To his proposal, letting students themselves write sources for such "gaps", for example, expatriate letters, diaries or similar things, referred to here only, there it belongs in the realization area of narrative competence.

¹⁷ Bergmann, 2000, p. 53.

¹⁸ Bergmann, 2000, p. 53.

¹⁹ Bergmann, 2000, p. 61.

²⁰ Bergmann, 2000, p. 62.

²¹ Bergmann, 2000, p. 63ff.

²² Bergmann, 2000, p. 64.

Here the history lesson becomes education for the present, especially in a pluralistic, coalescent Europe of several nations, which inquires after common goals and value standards.

3. Interfaces between multiperspectivity and narrative competence

Meanwhile, the expression “*narrative competence*” earns a key position in the current research debate about the basic principles and objectives of modern history instruction. It is frequently discussed on a methodic level only, although it is not a didactical, but rather a theoretical scientific term. That then describes a fundamental misunderstanding, as Michele Barricelli, one of the top representatives of this research area stresses, “*all historical understanding is (...) narrative understanding and historical knowledge is always narrative knowledge.*”²³ Important interfaces become clear between Bergmann’s article and the core theses of Barricelli’s with a more detailed look. Both emphasize scrutinizing history’s conclusions, in that they refer to history’s character as a construct, therefore an already made interpretation. Barricelli formulates it even clearer as he stresses that only the “*present representation*” can lay claim to reality, not the represented, the past.²⁴

Hence, according to Jörn Rüsen and Hans-Georg Pandel arises the necessity to be always conscious of the problem of the **fictive depiction of history** as well as to make students conscious of it²⁵ - one of Bergmann’s core requirements when the point is to broach historians’ controversial positions with students and to draw one’s own position.

Concretely this means that it is clarified to the students that it concerns not the reported depiction of how something has really been, but how this previous “reality” would alternatively be seen by someone, for instance “Burckhardt’s Picture of the Renaissance” instead of the “Renaissance as it really was”. It is imperative therefore to inquire about the credibility of “**narrative soundness**” as well as the meaning of historical recounting – and its narrators!²⁶

At this point, Josef Memminger speaks of the enormous “*significance of reflective examination and verification of instruction results; that falsification and unhistorical fantasy should be contained.*”²⁷

Here one encounters Bergmann’s central thesis, to enable the student to judge historically, not to convict ahistorically, alternatively anachronistically and all-inclusively – a further important commonality between multiperspectivity and narrative competence.

Also, Barricelli’s concrete implementation proposals clarify very quickly further important contact points of both concepts. He differentiates between four different levels of narrative competence acquisition:

- i. Already the “**retelling as an act of telling**” of a teacher’s own recited account shows the students their own **locational bonds by means of their different outcomes**, focal points and associations. However, Barricelli says this act of telling limitedly fosters “*the education of narrative competence*”.
- ii. Another point is the “**narrative construction procedure.**” It is essential to draw from a continuous text recounted excerpts and prepared sources. In this narration Barricelli recognizes a “**working over of the featured material**”, which would already entail an essential *transformation achievement*.

²³ Barricelli, M. “The story we’re going to try and tell”. *Zur andauernden Relevanz der narrativen Kompetenz für das historische Lernen*. Edited by Wolfgang Hasberg. *Zeitschrift für Geschichtsdidaktik. Jahresband 2008*. Schwalbach/ Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2008. P. 140-153; here p. 141

²⁴ Barricelli, 2005, p. 30.

²⁵ Barricelli, 2005, p. 53ff.

²⁶ Barricelli, 2005, p. 76.

²⁷ Memminger, J. *Schüler schreiben Geschichte. Kreatives Schreiben zwischen Funktionalität and Faktizität*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2007, p. 17.

- iii. The most known may be the **“perspectively altered retelling”**, which would be examined most notably in the didactics of instructing German and to which multiple qualities have undisputedly been assigned: **multiperspectivity and experiences about identity and alterity**,²⁸ not lastly, through a role reversal. There the author lays the greatest value on differentiation: *“not ‘thinking as the other’”, not “‘seeing through the eyes of the other,’ but rather seeing different things with the own eyes and learning to see in a different way could be a realistic target perspective”*.
- iv. The author sees the highest level in **“reviewing telling/recount”**, a **“criteria managed deconstruction of a ‘finished’ narrated stories.”** Here, the point is to examine several interpretations (presentations of history) with respect to present information: What does the respective interpreter/historian notably stress? What does he omit? Which source especially gives him a lot of faith, and so forth? This and similar questions lead the students to a deconstruction and review competence, for Barricelli, essential components of a – modern – historical consciousness.²⁹

One swiftly recognizes that Barricelli here focuses to seize student-oriented forms of working, which take up the core matter of concern of multiperspectivity by making perspectives transparent and by the fact that students can adopt and evaluate various perspectives gaining insight into the peculiarity of historical research and presentation process.

4. Concrete transfer onto instruction

In addition to Barricelli’s above listed methodic proposals,³⁰ in closing, some theses are put to the discussion regarding the concrete teaching structure and the present project:

- Multiperspectivity always needs source materials of at least two, better multiple perspectives.
- It provides several research positions, which are put to the discussion for the respective theme.
- Instruction gives the students range to develop and appropriately present their own historically based opinions.
- These opinions and “judgments” (students’ results) must be critically challenged and reflected upon to mutually assess their plausibility (“narrative soundness”).
- Nevertheless, it must be possible to substitute as well as allow various positions to stand provided that they are “narratively sound”.
- The teacher-centered phases of instruction are originated by the teacher; he makes the decisive arguments for his position – for example the evaluative passages in one of the lectures – transparent and allowing the students enough room for questions as well as “skepticism”.
- Multiperspectivity excludes the lecturing teacher who would like to move his students to unquestioningly accept his opinion, his position, his view of history.

The student teachers’ result within the project considered³¹ there as essential requirements of multiperspectivity the inclusion of various interpretations and definitions of the term migration (controversiality), diverse perspectives about various individual destinies and their goals and motives (multiperspective in the narrow sense), and ample room for the students to process these materials and to cultivate their own historically founded and justified opinion on the theme

²⁸ Identity and alterity present two further essential expressions of technical didactics that at this point, cannot be more closely examined. Compare to Schönemann, B. *Identität*. Edited by Ulrich Mayer a.o. *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau-Verlag, 2006. P. 90f.

²⁹ Barricelli, 2005, p. 281ff.

³⁰ For those interested, compare to the already quoted above work of Memminger, 2007, who presents and brings up for discussion a depth of writing and work forms for instructing history.

³¹ Compare in this volume to presented work group results.

of migration (plurality). That popular stereotypes are critically questioned and, if necessary, corrected, and that Europe is understood as a continent, which without migration could and cannot exist, is a central objective of the entire project!

5. Bibliography

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