

There are clear challenges and is a clear need for action

Johannes Meyer-Hamme* 

Interviewed by Sebastian Barsch



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About Johannes Meyer-Hamme

Johannes Meyer-Hamme is Professor of Theory and Didactics of History at the University of Paderborn in Germany. His research focuses on the empirical study of how history is dealt with, including in migration societies and in the digital transformation. A central question is how historical learning can be conceived under these conditions.

Keywords

competencies in historical thinking, historical consciousness, historical learning, digital transformation, migration society

Interview

Sebastian Barsch: Johannes, I would like to talk to you about the challenges of transcultural dialogue and the value of historical thinking, learning and historical consciousness within it. Has a transcultural history education changed your teaching and research practice in the national context in recent years?

Johannes Meyer-Hamme: Yes, I think a lot has changed, and I would distinguish three levels. Firstly, the level of lived academic discourse; secondly, university teaching; and thirdly, what we actually know about school practice.

In the academic discourse, I see significant changes and efforts to promote networking and exchange, including through digital formats, digital lecture series and so on, which have emerged in recent years. Or projects like this new journal this interview is in, which is also an expression of such efforts. And I see this as a very positive development. Especially because history and the study of history are all too often thought of in national terms. But if I am completely honest, I have to admit that I am essentially located in the German- and English-language discourse. And there are hardly any networks in other language discourses. And there I simply see clear challenges and a clear need for action.

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When I look at teaching, I see a clear interest in such questions. Last semester, for example, I taught a seminar on learning history in a migration society. It was very well attended and the students were very engaged in discussing these issues. And the most impressive example was a case study we discussed in which a young person who does not see himself as German said that in history classes you are offered the 'costume of German history'. And you can put it on, but you can also take it off afterwards. And suddenly students come and say, yes, that's exactly how I see it and that's exactly how I experience it. And I've never had that before, students revealing themselves in this way with their own historical orientations. But this is also where I see a great need for further discussion, and I also wonder a little bit why these students are studying history.

And the third is the level of teaching practice. Given the diversity of the participants, the change should actually be much greater than in the universities. So there should be more diversity. And the question is, how can history education be successful if the stories told are often not relevant to the learners? And here I see a huge need for research that focuses on these current developments and does not neglect the perspective of teachers.

You have already touched on this. Do you see a contradiction between a potentially transculturally oriented history education and the educational contexts that are usually embedded in official guidelines, respective regional values and norms?

I see many contradictions. The teaching of history originated in a national context and is very much steeped in national traditions. At the same time, we have a strong shift to the right and a strong focus on national perspectives and, of course, national histories, including in Western democracies. But we also have freedom for manoeuvre in the curricula in many contexts of Western societies. And as long as there are no strictly comparative works to learn from, teachers have more or less room for manoeuvre. And I think they should use it. But yes, I definitely see contradictions.

You just mentioned Western societies. One of the things we are trying to do with the journal is to establish a transcultural dialogue with the Global South. But we always notice that our discourses are ultimately shaped by the people in the regions who have economic and social power. How do you think we can actually expand the circle of people who can take part in the discussion?

That's a very difficult question. A couple of years ago we did an international conference digitally as part of the "Histories in Motion" project. Neeladri Bhattacharya from India, for example, who once created an alternative textbook, was there. Michael Rothberg from the USA and Kenneth Nordgren from Sweden were also there, as was Aleida Assmann from Germany. But they weren't the marginalised ones, they were always the ones who were established in some way. I find it extremely difficult to make contact at all and then to address different categories of diversity, but it is one of the great tasks we have. And what you can see, I think, especially in postcolonial discourses, is how very quickly fundamental questions arise. And the question of what is history and what is a plausible story and what does historical learning mean, these are highly political questions that come up and that we have to discuss further.

I'm going to go in a slightly different direction: transculturality and networked communities through digitality. Do you think that digitality and the potential for networking knowledge regions has an influence on history education today?

Yes, on the one hand there are opportunities. I already talked about digital conferences and exchange forums and lecture series on the internet, and of course this is a great opportunity that we have and that I think we should take advantage of. But we are also seeing a fundamental shift in what it means to tell a story. A prominent example of this is what we call social media. A lot of stories are being told on YouTube or TikTok or Instagram, including those from marginalised perspectives. Overall, we see a pluralisation of perspectives and that maybe not everyone, but a lot of people have the opportunity to tell their stories from their perspective. And we see some very big differences in perspectives between platforms and that this also creates an educational task in dealing with these different stories. At the same time, however, we are experiencing something quite different. Through AI models such as ChatGPT, we are experiencing a completely different way of dealing with perspectivity, because individual information from very different narratives is collected and packaged into a new narrative without making transparent where this information and these perspectives and interpretations come from. This means that

we have a completely different way of processing perspective, which is completely contrary to the trend we are seeing in social media. This poses a great challenge for transcultural historical education, namely to make these things visible and reflectable.

You used the word “perspectivity” several times. I would like to address another aspect of perspectivity. So far, our questions have always been very much rooted in a discourse on history education. Do you think that transcultural dialogue also requires the crossing of disciplinary boundaries? Or, to put it another way, how important do you think disciplinary knowledge, i.e. historical knowledge, is for the questions of our time?

Yes and no would have to be my answer to the question of whether we should extend the disciplinary field or not. First of all, I would like to emphasize that disciplinary boundaries have grown historically and are therefore cultural products, and they can also look quite different and in other cultural contexts they also look quite different. In this respect it has to be said that, of course, we have to cross them, of course consciously, where we enter other scientific fields and cross our own boundaries, our scientific disciplines. On the other hand, it is only through a theory and a clarified perspective that something can be explored, by clarifying together what our understanding of the terms and concepts behind them is. And that we absolutely need our disciplinary knowledge, because otherwise we will hardly be able to do meaningful research, because then we will remain in an everyday language that is not sufficient for us to have at least partially clarified our terms. And thirdly, if we see that it is about the further development of our subject-specific theories and concepts, then I think we need theories and concepts from other fields of science, certainly sociology, philosophy or psychology would be three very hot candidates here.

Now we come to the last question. Today there is a lot of talk about the polycrisis, the coronavirus pandemic, various wars, climate change. Somehow all this should be included in history lessons. In any case, this is often a normative requirement. Do such phenomena promote or reinforce the need for transcultural exchange in academia and fields of practice?

Yes, because on the one hand we would have to historicise these current crises and use them to make clear that there is not just one answer to them, that not every answer is equally good, but that the question is what range of stories we can actually tell about a historical context, be it the current wars, the Corona pandemic, climate change and so on, and at the same time withstand the controversy of different interpretations. And that’s where transcultural issues come in, because one problem with current conflicts seems to be that many people in this world do not consider the current world order to be just. And the question is how do we actually create one, how do we create narratives that integrate different perspectives and that is an open task that we are facing.

Thank you very much!

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