

Is there something that connects the diversity of historical narratives?

Kenneth Nordgren* 

Interviewed by Sebastian Barsch



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About Kenneth Nordgren

Kenneth Nordgren is Professor of Social Science Education at Karlstad University in Sweden. His research focuses on the significance of our views of the past in the present and how history is used to convey understanding, identity and influence. In particular, he has studied the role of history in a multicultural society and the implications for history education.

Keywords

historical consciousness, intercultural learning, Anthropocene, history education, digitalization

Interview

Sebastian Barsch: Kenneth, thank you very much for taking part in this interview. Let's start with the first question. We want to talk about the challenges of transcultural dialogue and the value of historical thinking and learning. Have these changed fundamentally in teaching and research practice in your national context in recent years?

Kenneth Nordgren: Yes, they have quite a bit actually. It depends, of course, on what we mean by recent years. When I started as a PhD student, that's more than 20 years ago now, I was pretty much alone in the field. I wasn't the only one doing research connected to history didactics in Sweden, but there weren't many others. However the discussion goes back to the 1980s, where historians interested in educational aspects came into contact with Jörn Rüsen and the German tradition. In the 1990s, there was a Nordic community, very much influenced by historical consciousness and those ideas. It was a discussion quite far from education and teacher education and schools. However, it nevertheless had an influence on educational reforms. In 1994, there was a big curriculum reform in Sweden, and the concept of historical consciousness was explicitly incorporated in the Swedish curriculum from the early years up to the upper secondary school. It was not very clear for teachers what it meant, but it affected the discussion about the meaning of the subject among teachers and in teacher education.

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There was a sort of a transcultural influence, mainly from Germany but also from Denmark that also was quite in the forefront at that time.

The research schools for teachers that the government initiated around 2008 have had an important impact on both the scope and direction of Swedish history didactic research. As teachers got involved the research questions became more practice-oriented. That also meant that we started to search for inspiration beyond the German and Danish tradition and invited people like Stéphane Lévesque from Canada, and Christine Counsell from Britain and several others. So there was a broader transcultural meeting opening up in Sweden. This became evident in the curriculum reform in 2011, where second-order concepts was incorporated alongside with the notion of historical consciousness. So, you can see that there was a trans-cultural influence, mixing different theoretical traditions, but there was also a more distinct Nordic tradition growing from this influx. Around 2011 the concept Use-of-history came into the curriculum. The research community in Sweden has grewed quite fast. I would say now that there are now several universities in Sweden that has a research community around history didactics, and all of them with international networks. There is also another kind of trans-cultural influence. As I mentioned, teachers came into the academic discussion through these research schools. This has really affected the discussion in Sweden.

Based on your experiences: How can we promote a transcultural academic dialogue on concepts of history education that are embedded in different educational contexts and linked to state policies, societal values, and norms?

It is a difficult question in a way. I believe there is a fairly strong international community in history educational research. We are learning a lot from each other. But it's also about how we can influence policy at the national level. The possibilities differ from country to country. And as I mentioned before, in Sweden we have been quite successful in influencing the curriculum, and the nationalistic or patriotic side of history is not very visible in curriculum. However, the far-right party is becoming stronger and nationalistic rhetoric is becoming normalised in the public discourse. The present government is just now investigating the possibility to establish a national canon in schools. We can see similar trends in many other countries as well. I believe that as resarchers we should participate in the public discussion more, we don't do that very much, at least not in Sweden.

How can we ensure that the academic discussion is not dominated only by those with economic or social power, and how can we bring to the fore relevant perspectives that are often overlooked? We must also keep in mind that we, who are conducting this interview, belong to the group with economic and social power.

As you frame the question, the academics are part of the economic and social power in a society. And to some extent we are, I agree with that. But I also think that one should acknowledge some differences within this group. The universities and the academia have to fight for the academic privilege of being independent from the government, and other financiers. We are familiar with what is happening in USA, of course, and we also see parallels in Denmark, and we have the same discussion in Sweden. There is a trend where the government is trying to control and even restrict specific research and teaching. So there are many layers to this question. The academic freedom is quite important for enabling a transcultural dialogue. Because the very dialogue that some governments wants to oppress is about postcolonialism, gender, queer theory, migration, etc.

Educational research needs to fulfil two criteria: It has to be both academically and externally relevant. The latter means that we have to have a dialogue outside of academia. And for us, the relation to teacher education and the practice of teaching is important. Your question, I guess is also about going beyond eurocentrism and outside the norm. Our national and international research community should be better in broadening the horizons. This has also to do with the concept of transcultural. I think that we need several terms, to capture the variety. Terms like multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural. I do not agree with definitions that sets transcultural to a more nuanced and floating understanding of culture. While there is historical relevance to such a development in thinking about culture, I don't think it is this distinction that explains the differences between the concepts today. We need multicultural, intercultural and transcultural as they conceptualizes different aspects or dimension of interaction and change. To put it shortly, multicultural is also a descriptive term of a de-facto situation, intercultural is a

normative idea of interrelations, while transcultural has to do with processes of change. So we also need an intercultural dialogue, I think we need to recognise the boundaries of positions within our different disciplinary, culturally and national environments and how they affect, and from there explore how we can transcend them.

Let's move on to a slightly different topic. How do you see the role of the digital age and networked communities in the teaching of history and historical thinking?

There are several layers to that question. I think that there's a positive, interesting movement going on where minority groups, that often are not included in the curriculum or the informal canon, have developed spaces for their history and ideas from where they can make their voices heard. In Sweden we can see, for instance, the Sámi people who are doing this.

The digital resources are also underpinning an ongoing fragmentation of historical meaning and one can ask oneself, if there is something that holds the stories together within the national or European or whatever space of belonging you want to talk about? Is there something that connects the different histories to each other? This brings me back to the far-right and their push for a sort nationalistic narrative. We as historians, and educationalists have for so long focused on deconstructing national narratives and for good reasons, but we don't have a counter-narrative to offer. So now when the far-right is saying "Okay, let's go back to what we feel is safe and secure and what we all as Swedes or Germans or Finns or whatever feel is the real us, let's go back to that": That is a vision that is possible to imagine, while the critical perspective cannot offer an alternative vision of that kind.

Then of course there is the aspects of disinformation and alternative facts and all that, which indicates the limits of historical thinking. It has been argued that the digital age further emphasises the need to teach students about evidence and sourcing. One example used to advocate the need to think like historians is from when Bush after 9/11 lied about chemical weapons in order to legitimize the attack on Iraq. The argument was: We cannot even trust the government and therefore need to learn critical thinking and evidence aspects.

I agree that those are important skills, however what the Bush-example shows is that it is quite impossible for a single individual to fact check the news. This brings me back to the importance to learn historical content and about uses of history, in order to develop what Paul Ricoeur calls hermeneutic suspicion. We need to be suspicious to stories that are too simple, too one dimensional. Such stories should make us suspicious. This is even more important than traditional historical evidence. I'm not saying it's not important, but it is no cure against the disinformation on social media. Weinberg's later research has showed that even professional historians are actually no more critical than others when it comes to everyday news.

We talked a lot about history didactics. Should a transcultural dialogue also take into account the crossing of professional boundaries? What is the importance of domain-specific knowledge in history?

Yes and no. I'm a firm believer in disciplinary borders. But that doesn't mean that I'm against transdisciplinary aspects. I think that disciplinary borders are a sort of a precondition for transcultural and transdisciplinary approaches. We need to understand what disciplinary borders are and why they develop. Disciplines are historical constructs, but they are not arbitrary. When building knowledge, we form concepts and methods and communities that understand these concepts and methods. Hence, epistemic communities are becoming specialized. That is how we knowledge advance. At the same time, it is of course as Bourdieu, Foucault and others have showed us: When we form borders, we also form gatekeepers. This is a battle that we constantly need to have. We need borders to dig deeper, but we don't want these borders to get fossilized and rigid.

Disciplines change and evolve if there is a sort of a healthy community. Sometimes they dissolve or transform in to other orders. Hence, we need disciplines. We need them for to organizing our knowledge. In actual research, we can see that the best research or is often transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. When transcending the borders, we need to know why we are doing that. We are not doing it to dissolve the disciplines, but to use the strength from different sources of knowledge. We should also strive to be open-minded because when we are working within specialized communities, we are trained to detect some things, and consequently sort out other things. That is also why we need this transdisciplinary dialogue. But I don't think that we should have a vision where we dissolve the disciplines.

And now, the last question, which is already some kind of an epilogue. How do you think we can integrate today's challenges, such as the Corona pandemic, wars, and the consequences of climate change, into historical education? Do these phenomena reinforce the need for transcultural exchange in academia and practice?

I think it's not just the climate, it's the whole environment and biodiversity that are in crisis. This should remind us of how interconnected we are. The coronavirus is obvious. And I think we can also see from the war in Ukraine how the world is interconnected. We are very much interconnected, and this interconnectedness makes people afraid. And that's why I think the far-right is growing right now. So, we need this transcultural and intercultural dialogues. I like Chakrabarty's idea of thinking on a planetary and global and perhaps local level, recognizing both a world where human is decentered and a world where human activity in all its inequality is central. There is a quote of Seyla Benhabib who says that, our fate as late-modern individuals, is to live caught in the permanent tug of war between the vision of the universal and the attachments to the particular. And that captures the situation that we are in. There are universal aspects that we need to approach, which doesn't mean that they have a universal effect. We can see that on all these examples, the Coronavirus, the war and the climate, they have global consequences but don't affect people in the same way. We need a transcultural dialogue to deal with these questions. And I think that as historians and history didacticians, we need to support students and teachers to get in this transcultural dialogue in a broader way. History, at least in Sweden, is still eurocentric and antropocentric. We could do a lot more to help students and teachers to see how historical content can connect in different ways: that migration and culture/nature are inter- and transcultural processes. The ability to detect how history is used for different purposes and works as a tool for communication within and across cultures is also important to develop. The fears we have are universal, but how we approach them and how we are affected by them is particular. Therefore we need this transcultural exchange, and initiatives like for instance the HTCE journal and the Erasmus LETHE project.

Kenneth, thank you very much!

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