


Ambiguity

Rethinking history education in postcolonial perspectives

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Abstract

This contribution examines the role of ambiguity and the integration of tolerance of ambiguity in history education in response to debates within postcolonial studies. It argues that fostering tolerance of ambiguity holds potential for supporting students in engaging with complex and contested historical narratives, while also cautioning against the risk of slipping into relativism, which may undermine orientation in interpreting the past or present. Dealing with complexity emerges as a central human challenge and appears to be a core concern of history education in our world shaped by plurality, ambiguities, contradictions, and persistent (post-/)colonial power structures. In addressing the challenges involved in cultivating tolerance of ambiguity, the contribution critically reflects on tendencies toward binary thinking in historical narratives. It emphasizes the role of history education in enabling critical dialogue and in questioning (post-/colonial) narratives, advocating a more differentiated approach that takes seriously the complexities of the past, the present, the future, and their entanglements.

Keywords

History education, postcolonial studies, ambiguity, ambiguity tolerance, decolonize

1. Problem outline

“For this is precisely our world: ambiguous.” (Bauer, 2024, p. 14)¹

This diagnosis by the scholar of Islamic studies Thomas Bauer provides both the foundation and the impetus for the contemplations that follow in this text. When we consider our world as being characterized by ambiguity, it follows that also the processes of history education are likewise inherently ambiguous. These processes take place within an ambiguous world and engage with ambiguous pasts, which in turn allow for a wide range of interpretations and narratives. Such inherent ambiguities and the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities are closely linked to the social plurality we experience. In this context, it is unrealistic to expect every individual, regardless of personal backgrounds or affiliation, to engage with historical narratives in an identical manner. Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate variations in narratives about the

¹ All German-language quotations have been translated into English by the author of this contribution.

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past, and indeed that vigorous debates may arise when the narratives presented are perceived as overly controversial or even contradictory. This dynamic is especially visible when historians engage in contentious discussions about historical interpretative possibilities and the resulting claims to interpretation.

At the latest, since a consensus has emerged in history education that historical narratives are interpretations of the past constructed in the present (Völkel, 2014), and that these narratives are bound by time, perspective, and context, it has been recognized that the past itself, as well as historical interpretations of the past, is characterized by plurality and ambiguity. Accordingly, a central aim of history education is to enable students through engagement with processes of historical interpretation, to arrive at a range of historical judgments, an aim reflected in the didactic principle of multiperspectivity (Bergmann, 2016). From the perspective of history education, this point becomes both particularly intriguing and complex: such narratives and forms of historical reasoning do not necessarily have to converge into the consensual or dominant narrative; rather, they may contradict one another. Dealing with these ambiguities therefore also entails dealing with uncertainty, as ambiguity inherently points to openness and indeterminacy. Since learning always involves movement from uncertainty to certainty, while at the same time leading from certainty back into uncertainty (Meyer, 1987, p. 74), it appears essential to engage with uncertainty in the context of history education.

In this regard, it remains valuable for history education to engage with critical societal and cultural discourses, which in recent years have been particularly stimulated by debates within Postcolonial Studies (e.g. Bhabha, 2011; Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2015; Hall, 2021; Spivak, 2020). These discourses critically examine hierarchical global relationships and post-/colonial power structures, as notably illustrated by scholars such as Alisha Heinemann and Maria do Mar Castro Varela (Heinemann & Castro Varela, 2016) and Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, 2016). Building on these power-critical discussions, history education in schools could pay particular attention to processes shaped by such ambiguities. After all, these ambiguities do not stop at the colonial past (or any other past) and its manifold interpretations from a postcolonial perspective. This becomes apparent, for example, when societal debates ignite over colonial traces in historical culture, such as street names or monuments. In recent years, numerous cities f.e. in Germany have witnessed lively and controversial conflicts over how to address problematic street names or monuments (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019). Nearly twenty years ago, Rainer Pöppinghege already explored what street names reveal about German historical consciousness, also considering them from postcolonial perspectives (Pöppinghege, 2007).

Postcolonial perspectives challenge not only the discipline of history but also history education itself, as they demand an engagement with the (colonial) past beyond dominant and Eurocentric questions, narratives, and concepts, as Bernd-Stefan Grewe emphasizes (Grewe, 2016, p. 11–12). As a result, engaging with history is complex: historical meaning is fluid, the past appears ambiguous, and historical interpretations can contradict one another without necessarily being deemed unequivocally wrong. What, then, does it mean for history education if these ambiguities and contradictions are accepted as inherent circumstances of the world? How can students learn to engage with these ambiguities and contradictions without being overwhelmed by the complexity and losing their orientation? It must be assumed that ambiguity and contradiction in history education present challenges for both history teachers and students. These ambiguities and contradictions reveal just how complex and multi-layered both our lived reality and our perspectives on the past are. Accordingly, students could, on the one hand, learn to recognize that interpretations of the past can be multi-faceted and complex. On the other hand, they could also develop the ability to deal constructively with this complexity. This may constitute a crucial competence for navigating an ambiguous world. Consequently, a key task for teachers would be to address the ambiguities and contradictions of the past and historical narratives within history education.

At this point, it should be noted that a desire for clarity and a reduction of complexity is understandable, and, as we will later discuss, can be regarded as a fundamental human need to maintain orientation and the capacity to act. However, a reduction of complexity can be risky and consequential if the desire for clarity leads to the suppression or elimination of ambiguity and contradiction. Such a process may be accompanied by tendencies toward radicalization and rigid interpretations, which, given current societal and political developments, pose a serious threat to democratic and pluralistic societies. In this sense, recognizing ambiguity, uncertainty, or contradiction within historical narratives represent an opportunity for history education. To address the guiding questions outlined above, this chapter explores the role of ambiguity tolerance in the context of (postcolonial) history education and attempts to examine the concept of

ambiguity tolerance from a history education perspective. To do so, the chapter first considers history education within the framework of postcolonial studies, discussing the significance and necessity to incorporate ambiguity and contradictions. Following this, the chapter examines the role that ambiguity tolerance may have in history education and the extent to which applying this concept could influence historical learning in the context of critical postcolonial approaches.

2. History education and postcolonial studies

Discourses of postcolonial studies appear to be highly significant from both historical perspectives when seeking to understand colonialism and to minimize traces and impacts on the present. In the context of power-critical history education, colonial narratives are particularly notable because they often rely on notions of unambiguity and dichotomous attributions, which reduce complexity and ambiguity. “The dichotomies and hierarchies have not been discursively overcome to this day.”² (Grewe, 2016, p. 21) These dichotomous, hierarchical role assignments continue to shape and simplify our thinking today and perpetuate colonial power structures. Narratives that follow colonial patterns of interpretation often present the colonized primarily as victims, exploited, oppressed, etc., but rarely as capable, acting, and autonomous agents. They frequently imply deficient attributions to colonized groups and reproduce concepts such as so-called European achievements, so-called European progressiveness, or the so-called European Enlightenment as driving forces behind societal modernization (Grewe, 2016, p. 25). Such master narratives can still legitimize the domination of one group over another or at least be misused for that purpose. They follow colonial ideas and power structures which, given the associated social inequalities and discriminations, should be critically examined, for example through history education. This highlights that history education, aligned with power-critical postcolonial approaches and attempts to minimize the influence of colonial narratives, also has a decolonizing dimension. In the spirit of decolonization, as Grada Kilomba understands it as “the undoing of colonialism” (Kilomba, 2016, p. 138), simplistic narratives could and should be challenged by broadening perspectives, concepts, and alternative stories. This also implies an increase in complexity due to ambiguity and contradictions. Drawing on Malte Kleinschmidt’s considerations of decolonial political education, a decolonial history education could similarly “aim at the recognition of the postcolonial legacy, at a transformation of the coloniality of the present produced by colonialism and imperialism, and be nurtured by the hope for a future not—or at least not to the same extent—structured by colonial frameworks”³ (Kleinschmidt, 2021, p. 9). To emphasize the ongoing and continuous nature of the colonial legacy, it seems appropriate to speak of colonial *inheriting*, as we all inherit the traces of the colonial past. This idea is already addressed in the 2021 issue of the journal *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, with a central introduction to the complex problem by Bernd-Stefan Grewe (Grewe, 2021). History education, from a postcolonial perspective, is therefore inherently accompanied by ambiguities, contradictions, and negotiation, as also addressed by Philipp Bernhard in his recent research. Drawing on discussions within postcolonial studies, he examines, among other things, narrative contradictions within historical narratives, thereby highlighting the ambiguity present in historical discourses and educational processes (Bernhard, 2024). A thorough exploration seems to be needed regarding what these ambiguities and contradictions concretely mean for history education and how they could be further theoretically and conceptually linked to current theories in order to respond adequately on this challenge. This systematic theoretical-conceptual foundation is a prerequisite for both appropriate empirical research and pragmatic approaches to dealing with ambiguities in history education.

In terms of a critical understanding of power within history education that moves beyond homogenizing master narratives and pursues the decolonization of education, it seems productive to consider history as inherently open and fundamentally unfinished, with their outcomes and processes bound by space, time, and perspective. Of course, being open and unfinished does not imply that interpretations are arbitrary: historical analyses must always satisfy criteria of plausibility and coherence. Yet, just as the exploration of the past is inexhaustible, so too are the interpretations and interpretive possibilities, alongside the stories still waiting to be told. This is especially pertinent when for example examining (Germany’s) colonial past, its continu-

² Translated quotation.

³ Translated quotation.

ing impacts, and the narratives arising from here. Not only do discourses in history education engage with the role that ambiguities might play in learning, but scholars in related fields also recognize the educational potential of ambiguous situations. In the context of ambiguity in art, Ansgar Schnurr and colleagues argue that complexity is worth preserving from an educational perspective, allowing ambiguous situations to be approached with openness and maintaining their open-ended character (Schnurr et al., 2021, p. 12). “These,” Schnurr et al. continue, “become the starting point and key moment for education. [...] It is precisely unresolved, ambiguous situations that, in their controversial nature, have the potential to be educational”⁴ (Schnurr et al., 2021, p. 13).

These discussions regarding the relationship between postcolonial studies and history education touch on a core question: what the concept of history education actually encompasses, and which moments might, from a historical perspective, count as central to *education*. Reflecting on this, it becomes evident that the concept of history education has so far been only marginally explored and discussed within the field. There has been little systematic clarification of what is specifically meant by history education. Since the 1970s, history education has often been operationalized as historical learning by focusing on the central category of “historical consciousness”⁵ (Heuer, 2022). While the term is often addressed in the academic discourses, so far there is no consistent, systematic engagement with what education means. This is likely due to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the concept of education (Sattler, 2023, p. 59). In light of the focus of this contribution, the aim here is not to trace the historical development of the concept of education, but rather to consider what might be understood today by education and, consequently, what could be specific to history education. While it is impossible to fully encompass current discourses, certain strands of discussion appear particularly for shaping the concept of history education. According to Elisabeth Sattler, education is a “multifaceted concept”⁶ that fundamentally concerns the relationship between humans and the world. A critical component is the development of the concept of education in the tradition of critical theory, as comprehensively illustrated by Wolfgang Klafki (Klafki, 2007). Understood in this way, education does not aim to uncritically affirm existing conditions. Rather it assumes that existing structures should and can be continuously reflected upon and scrutinized (Sattler, 2023, p. 61). As Ludwig Duncker emphasizes, “Only when children and adolescents are enabled to surpass familiar perspectives and expand their own horizons of world knowledge and understanding through the acquisition of new insights and perspectives can limitations in perception and thinking be overcome and intellectual agility in interpreting and understanding reality be achieved.”⁷ (Duncker, 2018, p. 144) In this way, Duncker highlights the potential of challenging one’s own, perhaps previously unquestioned habits as both a productive and educational moment. To underscore the inherent transformative nature of education, it seems also useful to incorporate phenomenological perspectives. According to Hans-Christoph Koller, education from a phenomenological view implies crisis-like experiences that unsettle previous relationships with oneself and the world (Koller, 2023). Such experiences enable the perception and integration of new or different elements into one’s own perspectives. This resonates with the idea that we are always dealing with ambiguities and contradictions, which can themselves be educational. According to these approaches, education always contains a (self-)critically productive and provocatively generative element, enabling individuals to question and observe their own reactions, such as by challenging previous perspectives or ideas, in order to integrate new elements. This understanding of education appears fundamentally significant for the following reflections, as well as for history education. Emphasizing the critically productive aspect of education Christian Heuer conceptualizes history education as “possibilities of becoming otherwise,”⁸ transforming, and being in contexts from which new insights and perspectives can emerge (Heuer, 2022). It would be presumptuous to propose a universally valid and complete concept of history education here. However, taking these critical and phenomenological reflections into account, history education appears to be fundamentally grounded in a critically productive distance toward past presents, oneself, and one’s circumstances. This critically productive encompasses two dimensions: first, the world and the traces of the past, as well as second, the self and one’s own perspectives on the past and the process of engaging with the past and history.

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From a history education perspective, fostering tolerance for ambiguity is closely connected to a reflexive understanding of history education that does not treat history as a reflection of objectively given canon of fixed facts, but rather as a field of competing interpretations of past presents. Using debates surrounding the renaming of streets shaped by colonial legacies in Germany as an example, it becomes clear how formerly colonial narratives, embedded in public historical culture, are challenged by alternative perspectives that illuminate the power relations and violence of the colonial past. These contestations have tangible effects on historical culture, reshaping public memory and commemorative practices. The discussions around street renamings, for instance in Berlin, illustrate how historical interpretations are publicly renegotiated and how marginalized perspectives gain visibility.⁹ This example demonstrates that postcolonial theories and postcolonial narratives are significant, as they promote the critical re-evaluation and pluralization of historical meanings.

Beyond this example, engaging with history inherently involves negotiating complexity and ambiguity, even in cases unrelated to the colonial past. Thus, history education, both in general and specifically regarding colonial legacies, may entail an expansion of perspectives, interpretive possibilities, and narratives, accompanied by increased complexity that gives rise to ambiguities, uncertainties, lack of clarity, and even contradictions. These ambiguities should first be identified and perceived, but also endured, since not all contradictions can be resolved through consensus. Within the context of history education, fostering ambiguity tolerance could serve the important task of strengthening the ability to intentionally perceive and acknowledge different perspectives without becoming overwhelmed by them. To further develop this argument, it is first necessary to clarify what the concept of ambiguity tolerance entails.

3. Ambiguity and tolerance of ambiguity

According to Thomas Bauer, ambiguity refers to a fundamental feature of phenomena that are ambiguous, unclear, undecidable, contradictory, or vague (Bauer, 2024, p. 15), and it essentially describes an anthropological constant in the circumstances for all human existence. Bauer further asserts that ambiguity can scarcely, if ever, be completely eliminated, simply because a world entirely free of ambiguity is impossible. “It is, therefore, humanity’s fate to live with ambiguity”¹⁰ (Bauer, 2024, p. 17). Maintaining states of ambiguity without prematurely reducing them into clarity presents a particular challenge, as such reduction often fails to capture the inherent complexity and indeterminacy of the situation. Conceptually, it becomes apparent that the term ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance can be misleading, as the prefix *ambi* suggests duality, which seems overly simplistic in light of existing (historical) complexities and indeterminacies.¹¹ Since alternative terms like polyguity tolerance or complexity tolerance have not yet become gained traction in the academic discourses, this contribution will continue to use ambiguity and tolerance of ambiguity. At the same time, related concepts such as tolerance for uncertainty (König & Dalbert, 2004) or tolerance for complexity (Dalbert & Radant, 2008) or the need for cognitive closure (von Collani, 2003) are often understood as conceptually equivalent to ambiguity tolerance.

The concept of ambiguity tolerance originates from the psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik, who explored the phenomenon in the late 1940s as part of her studies on the authoritarian personality, alongside Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno, 2020), among others. In 1949, Frenkel-Brunswik described how individuals differ in their tolerance of ambiguity (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949). She characterized those who are unable to endure ambiguous or contradictory situations, responding to complex and multifaceted matters with rigidity and inflexibility, thereby resisting them, as intolerant of ambiguity, the opposite of being ambiguity tolerant. Tolerance of ambiguity as a psychological phenomenon, can be understood, following the definition provided by English and English in the late 1950s, as the

9 Some of these debates can be traced here: <https://www.zeit.de/news/2022-12/02/strasse-und-platz-in-berlin-nach-freiheitskaempfern-benannt>; <https://www.zeit.de/2025/44/strassenumbenennung-berlin-mohrenstrasse-anton-wilhelm-amo-strasse>; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/mohrenstrasse-in-berlin-wird-umbenannt-nach-erstem-schwarzen-gelehrten-16915320.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/02/campaigners-celebrate-changing-of-colonial-street-names-in-berlin?> All newspaper articles last accessed on January 15, 2026.

10 Translated quotation.

11 I would like to express my sincere thanks to Philipp McLean for drawing my attention to this during a presentation.

willingness to accept a state of affairs capable of alternate interpretations, or of alternate outcomes: e.g., feeling comfortable (or at least not feeling uncomfortable) when faced by a complex social issue in which opposed principles are intermingled. Low ambiguity tolerance is shown by the desire to have everything reduced to black and white. (English & English, 1958, p. 25)

This definition implies that a high tolerance of ambiguity is associated with a lower need for certainty and clarity. In other words, individuals with a high tolerance of ambiguity are more likely to manage and sustain ambiguities and contradictions without prematurely resolving them. Studies by Milton Rokeach or Else Frenkel-Brunswik, for example, indicate that individuals with strong prejudices tend to think in more concrete terms than those with less pronounced prejudices (Rokeach, 1951), and that they are less likely to engage with complex issues, instead restructuring them into simpler and less differentiated frameworks (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1948; 1949/50; 1951).¹² According to sociologist Lothar Krappmann, the dynamic interplay between identity and ambiguity tolerance is particularly significant. In his understanding, ego identity emerges not despite contradictions, but through the capacity to live with and interpret conflicting role demands and competing motivational structures. Identity formation thus relies on the ability to endure and negotiate tensions rather than eliminating them, making ambiguity tolerance a key prerequisite for maintaining a coherent sense of self (Krappmann, 1969, p. 155). Drawing on empirical studies of how individuals deal with ambiguity, Krappmann identifies two basic strategies. First, individuals may suppress discrepancies and uncertainties, effectively removing contradictions from view. Second, they may reinterpret ambiguous and complex perceptions by transforming them into clear and simplified understandings (Krappmann, 1969, p. 155–157). As Thomas Bauer observes that our environments have always been and still are ambiguous, the world is full of contradictions, various interpretative possibilities, and ambiguity. Ambiguous phenomena and situations challenge individuals, who tend to avoid them, leading Bauer to conclude that humans are generally inclined toward intolerance of ambiguity (Bauer, 2024, p. 12–18). This view is further supported by Günther L. Huber and Jürgen H. W. Roth concerning learning processes (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 11). Endorsing this perspective highlights the importance of placing the ability to handle ambiguity at the core of educational processes, recognizing it as a key skill for navigating contemporary global challenges and promoting students' tolerance of ambiguity. The goal, then, is not to suppress or reduce complexity, but to sustain it in order to engage with it productively. Fundamentally, as Krappmann (1969, p. 167) emphasizes, this involves enabling learners to encounter and grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty. Therefore, it is evident that this key capability should receive particular attention in history education, as the competent handling of ambiguities appears to constitute a fundamental objective for history education.

As already indicated, ambiguity and uncertainty are closely intertwined. When phenomena appear ambiguous, that is, equivocal or even contradictory, it is simultaneously uncertain which interpretation is correct. For instance, it may be unclear which judgment is more accurate regarding past or even present, assuming that multiple judgments are equally plausible and well-founded. Drawing on studies by Jean Piaget, Günther L. Huber and Jürgen H.W. Roth argue that the ability to distance oneself from one's own actions and perspectives can expand the range of ways of knowing and to more complex worldviews. At the same time, however, this also increases uncertainty (Huber & Roth, 1999, 15). Huber and Roth describe a potential inherent in uncertainty, which, in their view, lies in its capacity to initiate individual action: contradictions or ambiguities can prompt the restructuring of individual knowledge (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 13). They suggest that, triggered by such contingencies, individuals may engage with controversies or even provoke them. As already indicated by Krappmann, an alternative to uncertainty and ambiguity is avoidance, clinging instead to one's existing certainties. From a societal perspective, uncertainty (like certainty) carries a social dimension, as it is constructed through social interaction. In this way, uncertainty becomes both a medium and an object of social engagement. Approaches to contradictions may either seek to reduce complexity by limiting the range of perspectives, or embrace contradictions as a fundamental condition of thought and learn to live with them. Contradictions, therefore, do not necessarily need to be reconciled or resolved (Riegel, 1973). Students can thus learn to recognize and tolerate these inner tensions, using them as a source of reflection and intellectual stimulation (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 16). A study by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson as early as 1985 already suggests that engaging with uncertainty and the controversies may foster learners' curiosity and interest. Controversial learning

¹² A comprehensive overview of early studies that provide insights relevant to the concept of ambiguity tolerance can be found in Lothar Krappmann (1969, pp. 150–155).

situations can, for instance, encourage greater interaction among learners and prompt them to actively seek out information (Johnson & Johnson, 1985). However, as Huber and Roth emphasize, it remains unclear whether these effects are attributable to the controversial nature of the learning conditions themselves, or rather to the fact that the controversial settings were more strongly oriented toward cooperation and consensus than the comparison condition, which was characterized by competition and negative social interdependence (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 17).

Findings suggesting that individuals tend to be either uncertainty-oriented or certainty-oriented present a particular challenge (f.e. Sorrentino, Short & Raynor, 1984). Since these personality orientations are also central to learners and their learning behavior, it can be assumed that students who are oriented toward uncertainty are more likely to be engaged by, and to learn more effectively in, open learning environments that address contradictions and controversies. In contrast, students who are oriented toward certainty are more likely to benefit from clearly structured learning formats that pose well-defined questions and offer corresponding answers (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 32). Similarly, it can be assumed that teachers who are oriented toward certainty tend to create well-structured and predictable learning situations, whereas teachers who are oriented toward uncertainty are more likely to design learning environments that invite learners to engage openly and contribute their own ideas and suggestions, as Huber and Roth consider. Their study provides indications that align with this hypothesis (Huber & Roth, 1999, p. 34–40). It therefore seems plausible that learners' orientations toward uncertainty or certainty are related to how they approach learning, and that teachers' corresponding orientations influence how learning environments are designed. This, in turn, suggests that learning experiences deliberately engaging with contradictions and controversies should take learners' individual traits and prior knowledge into account. As Huber and Roth (1999) also argue, such learning situations could, for example, be structured in a way that gradually helps students develop the skills to tackle complex problems and questions independently (Huber & Roth, 1999, pp. 140–143).

While discussions about handling ambiguity and fostering ambiguity tolerance are not unfamiliar in the theories of history education, engagement with these concepts remains relatively new within the discipline. As of now, there is no systematic framework outlining the role of ambiguity, and consequently tolerance of ambiguity in history education. For history education, the principle of engaging with the past from multiple perspectives, openness and indeterminacy are particularly crucial. However, this is not always reflected in school-based educational contexts. Ludwig Duncker, for instance, criticizes the prevailing understanding of knowledge that tends to categorize reality into 'right' and 'wrong' (Duncker, 2018, p. 145), which fosters ambiguity-intolerant judgments and attitudes. Tolerance of ambiguity has already been addressed in considerations of history education, though in a rather limited way. As early as 1997, Bernd Schönemann proposed incorporating ambiguity tolerance as a sub-goal within history education and identity, since it involves repeatedly questioning and recalibrating interpretive patterns, and consequently, one's own identity (Schönemann, 2022). Also, Bärbel Völkel emphasizes this ability, conceptualizing it as a competence relevant to human life and coexistence, which operates in areas of tension, rendering definitive answers or decisions elusive (Völkel, 2016, p. 118). Likewise, Heike Bormuth, Andreas Körber, and Patrizia Seidel emphasize this ability as a central didactical criterion (Bormuth et al., 2020).

As briefly outlined above, the concept of ambiguity tolerance appears particularly relevant and adaptable as an extension or refinement of the didactic principle of multiperspectivity dealing with controversy of history (Bergmann, 2016; Lücke, 2012). When perspectives and diversity of viewpoints are applied to phenomena these phenomena can be perceived and assessed as ambiguous, contradictory, or uncertain. Multiperspectivity refers to the recognition and consideration of multiple, contrasting, or even conflicting perspectives on a particular historical topic (f.e. Lozano & Wansink, 2022). Klaus Bergmann (2016, p. 34) and Bodo von Borries (1996) suggest that tolerance, as it relates to multiperspectivity, constitutes an important aspect. Also, Stefan Benz notes that the concept of multiperspectivity is inherently linked with notions of tolerance (Benz, 2018, p. 299).¹³ Accordingly, it can be argued that ambiguity plays a central role across all three levels of perspectivity: multiperspectivity, controversiality, and plurality (Bergmann, 2016, p. 29–30). Inherent to this principle is that learners engage in reflective and self-reflective examination of the perspectivity of sources, representations, and their own judgments, coming to understand that history cannot reproduce the past itself, but can only construct a narrative through

13 Benz (2018, p. 299) links tolerance in particular to the third level of plurality, which directly focuses on learners themselves. Depending on the questions they pose to the past and the ways in which they interpret it, students may arrive at different answers for the present and the future.

interpretive processes (Benz, 2018, p. 296–300). The culmination of history education is that students engage in historical reasoning, and the resulting historical judgements may indeed be ambiguous, contradictory, and uncertain. This implies that history education inherently operates with ambiguity and includes ambiguity as a goal of the educational process. This brings us back to a key point: it is crucial to consider how students can engage with this ambiguity without becoming overwhelmed. Here, the concept of ambiguity tolerance offers a potential approach that history education could promote to help students manage these challenges. Multiperspectivity is thus associated with recognizing and considering different perspectives on historical topics, which can help reduce negative “Us-Them” perceptions and intergroup tensions while promoting mutual understanding (Korostelina, 2013, p. 19). From a postcolonial perspective, this is particularly significant because it underscores the importance to acknowledge multiple, often marginalized perspectives on history. By doing so, it challenges dominant or Eurocentric narratives and creates space for more inclusive and critical understandings of the past. At the same time, the concept of ambiguity tolerance is closely linked to contingency. Contingency¹⁴, which already constitutes a theoretical and conceptual premise of history education (f.e. Grewe, 2024; Rösen, 2020), and ambiguity are closely related, as both highlight the openness and indeterminacy of social reality. Contingency refers to the fundamental possibility that things could be otherwise, whereas ambiguity describes the coexistence of multiple interpretations that cannot be clearly resolved. Ambiguity can therefore be understood as a concrete experiential form of contingency, making perceptible that meanings, evaluations, or explanations are not fixed but depend on perspective and context. Engaging with ambiguity thus necessarily involves dealing with contingency and the uncertainty it entails. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s system-theoretical concept of contingency, Arno Combe, Angelika Paseka, and Manuela Keller-Schneider argue that dynamics of uncertainty can be understood as constitutive elements of procedural experience, knowledge formation, and, consequently, of educational processes (Combe et al., 2025).

To reflect the concept of ambiguity tolerance for history education, it appears especially fruitful to draw on insights from neighboring disciplines, for example considerations by Claudia Lenz, who has explored the concept of ambiguity tolerance as central concept for democratic education (Lenz, 2020). Lenz emphasizes that tolerance of ambiguity is a crucial skill for pluralistic and diverse societies (Lenz, 2020, p. 16). This is especially relevant from the perspective of history education when democratic education is considered as a key objective. In the narrower sense of promoting a mature engagement with both the past and the present, one potential aim of history education could be to enable students to develop the capacity to navigate and manage the ambiguities that surround them. In this way, history education could make a meaningful contribution to democratic education by fostering students’ ability to engage thoughtfully and critically with complexity and uncertainty.

As demonstrated, the concept of ambiguity tolerance is particularly compelling from the perspective of history education, especially when considered through a critical understanding of historical learning that aligns with postcolonial critiques. Since this contribution primarily aims to explore the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of ambiguity tolerance, it will, at this stage, forgo an in-depth review of empirical research. Nevertheless, a few observations warrant mention. Currently, within research in the field of history education, there are no empirical studies that explicitly engage with investigating tolerance of ambiguity among learners or teachers. This is likely because the concept has not yet been systematically developed for historical education, nor has it been empirically investigated. A considerable need for further research emerges here. At the same time, a tentative outlook on empirical research from neighboring disciplines may be informative. Markus Bredendiek, for example, found that tolerance of ambiguity correlates with intercultural competence and the understanding of others (Bredendiek, 2015, p. 222). Both interculturality (e.g. Gentner, 2019) and understanding of others (e.g. Degner & Henke-Bockschatz, 2004) have already been addressed within history education research, though what precisely is meant by the concept of understanding others and whether it is a useful concept for history education remains debated. It would therefore be valuable to investigate whether these correlations between interculturality, understanding of others, and tolerance of ambiguity also manifest in history education, among both students and teachers. Another relevant observation comes from Angelika Paseka and Ilse Schritteser, who note that uncertainties in the classroom are often quickly resolved, while potentially productive moments of uncertainty are not further explored by teachers (Paseka & Schritteser, 2018). Understanding how teach-

¹⁴ A comprehensive treatment of the concept of contingency from an educational and educational-philosophical perspective is provided by Ralf Mayer (Mayer, 2020).

ers handle ambiguity in history educational processes, whether they use it as an opportunity for learning, quickly resolve it for the sake of clarity, or manage it differently, remains an open question. In this context, it would also be valuable to refine the findings by Claudia Dalbert and Matthias Radant, who reported that teachers demonstrate significantly lower tolerance for uncertainty compared to other professional groups (Dalbert & Radant, 2010). Similar insights are highlighted in Andreas Gruschka's work, who introduced uncertainty as a structural feature and prerequisite of educational processes in 2005 (Gruschka, 2005) and revisited the concept in 2025 (Gruschka, 2025). Gruschka observes that classrooms rarely engage with the inherent ambiguity of the subject matter, favoring instead closure, narrowing, and simplification (Gruschka, 2011). So, it would be particularly interesting to examine whether this tendency is also present among history teachers, either to a lesser or greater extent. Analyzing the potential of ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance in history education raises immediate questions about the feasibility of this concept. Are history teachers and students even capable of engaging in such complex cognitive operations? Would they be overwhelmed when confronted with pervasive ambiguity? Research on philosophical discussions with children by educational scientist Kerstin Michalik shows that children are capable of participating in differentiated and reflective discussions that teachers might not have expected (Michalik, 2019). Of course, it would be somewhat bold to generalize these findings to all students, suggesting that they are universally able to engage in such complex, nuanced, and reflective discourse. Drawing on these insights from neighboring disciplines, it appears to be particularly intriguing and relevant, alongside the further theoretical-conceptual investigations of this concept deemed necessary by the author, to empirically explore how students and teachers actually handle ambiguity in history education. Clearly, significant further research on students' and teachers' engagement with ambiguity is still needed.

Building on these considerations, the next question arises about the role of tolerance of ambiguity in the context of history education, particularly when viewed through the lens of critical postcolonial approaches.

4. Tolerance of ambiguity as a goal for history education?

Assuming that critical postcolonial approaches in the context of history education call for an increase in complexity as well as in ambiguities the question arises as to how theories of history education can respond to that. It seems reasonable to suggest that fostering tolerance of ambiguity could enhance students' ability to navigate a complex, ambiguous world, and serve as an educational goal aimed at developing a historically oriented competence: one that tolerates ambiguity without being overwhelmed by the complexity or slipping into black-and-white thinking. Promoting this capability could contribute to history education in the spirit of postcolonial studies by helping students identify, question, and challenge colonial thought patterns, perspectives, and narratives, thereby rendering representations of colonialism more ambiguous, multifaceted, and power-critical, one of the central theses of this contribution. Consequently, history education could aim to enable students to engage in exploratory processes to develop their own historical interpretations, which may be ambiguous and contradictory, and to collaboratively explore and negotiate these through dialogue. This involves students discussing their own positions, perspectives, and even values and norms, in order to appreciate the complexity underlying historical and contemporary circumstances. From a stance of tolerance toward ambiguity, the goal would be for students to recognize and sustain alternative, potentially conflicting perspectives without feeling compelled by uncertainties to select a single "truth" or perspective as correct. Such an approach supports the power-critical deconstruction of master narratives, which are often aligned with colonial ideas or frameworks. It is assumed that by promoting tolerance of ambiguity, especially when discussing, questioning, and attempting to dismantle colonial traces in the present, students can cultivate critical, open, and flexible thinking. Encouraging ambiguity tolerance could prepare students to manage the contradictions and uncertainties of their world, a key capability that is likely essential in today's rapidly changing societal and global contexts. Attention, however, should not be limited to students and their engagement with ambiguity. Also, teachers should be considered. In this regard, Bettina Blanck argues that engaging with uncertainty, an inherent feature of ambiguous and complex contexts, constitutes a central dimension of teacher professionalism (Blanck, 2007).

Despite these potential benefits, the role of ambiguity tolerance in history education remains insufficiently explored and cannot be assumed to be uniformly advantageous. This contribution

can offer only initial reflections to discuss the opportunities and limitations of engaging with ambiguity in history education. These reflections do not aim to provide concrete strategies for fostering ambiguity tolerance in history education. However, they do suggest that grappling with ambiguity must be taken seriously, particularly given its connection to democratic education and the complexities of the globalized world. The preceding discussion also highlights a potential risk: History education could veer toward relativism. Such relativism may result in an inability to reach any consensus on the interpretation of past events, with the potential consequence that students lose their sense of orientation in relation to history, thereby undermining key educational objectives such as the capacity to act and orient oneself historically. This raises four questions: 1) Are historical narratives or is historical reasoning permissible even if they stretch plausibility and validity? 2) How should teachers deal with historical narratives or reasoning that, for instance, advance hostile, discriminatory or anti-democratic arguments? This leads to a related question. 3) Is there a definable framework for tolerance of ambiguity? And necessarily connected to the next question is: 4) Who would establish such a framework? These questions themselves generate further ambiguities, demonstrating that while the concept of ambiguity tolerance appears both plausible and potentially valuable for history education in a globally complex context, implementing it is clearly a highly complex undertaking, especially in a world still shaped by post-/colonial power structures.

As a preliminary conclusion, history educational processes that engage with tolerance of ambiguity are situated within the tension between recognizing complexity and deliberately deepening it. They aim to enable learners to participate in exploratory and transformative processes without sliding into relativism, disorientation, or inaction. At the same time, these processes should provide opportunities for students to learn how to navigate ambiguities and contradictions. From a postcolonial perspective, it appears particularly promising for history education to treat historical meaning as negotiable and fundamentally mutable, fostering dialogue about the past, present, values, norms, judgments, attitudes, opinions, ambiguities, and contradictions. Such dialogues could facilitate an exchange on equal footing, or at least attempt to minimize power imbalances. Especially on topics involving challenging historical content, such as colonial histories, cultivating a tolerant stance toward ambiguity in negotiating historical meaning can productively harness tensions and help prevent the deepening of societal divides.

These considerations suggest that fostering tolerance of ambiguity can make a substantial contribution to history education and directly engages with central concepts of history education such as multiperspectivity or contingency. It is plausible that students, through dialogical negotiation about the past, can gain fundamentally new insights. Firstly, they are confronted with perspectives, ways of thinking, and opinions that were likely unfamiliar to them. Secondly, because they are challenged to critically examine their own standpoints, ideas, and arguments. In this respect, promoting ambiguity tolerance supports transformative learning thus constitutes a core element of history education. Hegemonic narratives often lack complexity, entanglements, alternative perspectives, ambiguities, contradictions, and diverse interpretations. They do not stimulate the uncertainty and exploratory engagement that seem central to history education. Expanding the complexity of narratives and embracing a diversity of perspectives, though, for example, by including the personal experiences of those affected by colonial pasts and their ongoing impacts can make a meaningful contribution to achieving this goal.

In the sense of a history education that seeks to contribute to decolonization, what is crucial is “the fundamental engagement with our own ideas, narratives, and semantics of our discipline, which were established during a time and in a scientific context when Europe still ruled large parts of the world as colonies and sought to explore and comprehend them”¹⁵ (Grewe, 2016, p. 16). Such competent engagement seems to be grounded in ambiguity tolerance and the ability to endure ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions, and controversies, approaching them with curiosity, openness, and mutual recognition. Viewed in this way, the concept of tolerance of ambiguity may serve as a lens for examining how students can be supported in dealing with the ambiguities of past and present without becoming overwhelmed or resorting prematurely to black-and-white thinking. Recognizing and engaging with ambiguity may thus constitute key moments in history education. Accordingly, it appears worthwhile to further investigate whether tolerance of ambiguity should be understood both as a component and as a goal of history educational processes, and whether it ought to be systematically elaborated on both theoretical-conceptual and empirical-pragmatic levels.

¹⁵ Translated quotation.

To cite this article

Rein F. (2026) Ambiguity. Rethinking history education in postcolonial perspectives. *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education*, 3(1), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.12685/htce.1597>

Peer review

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

There are no ethical conflicts for this publication.

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