



Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in history education and historical culture

Editorial

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

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The last decades have clearly shown a change in how societies perceive colonialism. History museums seem to increasingly reflect critically on their colonial pasts and consequent curatorial practices (Brücke-Museum 2022; Lonetree 2012; Schorch et al. 2016), long accepted statues representing colonial leaders are being overturned (Decker 2024; Grever 2025; Wüstenberg & Gensburger 2023), and there is an apparent feeling of uncertainty as to which pictures and artefacts can still be shown in school lessons or exhibitions as evidence of colonial processes and atrocities (Edwards 2001; Foliard 2022; Hinz 2025; Sieg 2021). In many cases these changes are developing at a different pace in different countries. See, for example, the Spanish case (Carrillo Castillo, 2024; Estaba Amaiz, 2024; Nerín, 2020). Exploring the specific political and cultural conditions of how societies are dealing with both the past and history is key for understanding the historical narratives, perceptions and discussions in those contexts that also have a similar impact and influence on educational practices in formal and informal settings.

The debates on the decolonization of history education and historical culture are diverse and arise from different political situations in varied (post)colonial settings on the one hand, and in settings of the former and current beneficiaries of a (neo)colonial world system, on the other. Depending on their situatedness, such debates often focus on different aspects that have been neglected or only marginally perceived in other regions of the world, leading to the following questions: Why do certain countries attempt to deal with colonialism more openly than others? What strategies have been used to break through established patterns in dealing with colonialism? Why are certain voices still not heard or even ignored? How are postcolonial or decolonial perspectives introduced in school settings? What influence do historical master narratives or other established forms of dealing with the past still have? Can postcolonial thinking or decolonization even succeed with those conventional approaches to historical learning? The present HTCE issue approaches these and related questions through case studies from South Africa, Canada, Austria, Germany, Spain, and Australia. By drawing on historical, art-historical, museological, and history education frameworks, the contributions present a multifaceted prism through which these debates can be explored. The challenges associated with the decolonization of history education and historical culture cannot be adequately understood through a narrow national or regional lens. Instead, a wide range of case studies and diverse contexts is required to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the debates, approaches, possible pathways, and the conflicts that continue to shape these discussions. Achieving a constructive dialogue

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between different epistemic cultures that frame Indigenous concepts of dealing with the past is key (Kühberger 2025; Mahuika 2019; Sonkqayi 2024). Self-critical questioning of the status quo in different educational systems, media, disciplines, or institutions can also be considered. Aspects of anti-discrimination and anti-racism should not be neglected either.

The present issue addresses a variety of challenges and questions related to this topic. The research paper by Bongani Shabangu takes us to southern Africa. The text discusses debates about what kinds of knowledge and evidence should shape the school history curriculum in South Africa. Shabangu criticizes epistemic universalism, the idea that Western historical epistemologies are universally valid, arguing that this perspective marginalizes or dismisses other knowledge systems, especially indigenous ways of understanding the past. By examining the 1967 apartheid history syllabus and the 2011 post-apartheid curriculum, the paper shows how such hegemonic approaches can lead to epistemicide, the erasure of alternative knowledge systems in history education.

A similarly framed contribution by Heather E. McGregor and Harrison Dressler takes us to North America. They present findings from the Thinking Historically for Canada's Future project, which analysed social studies curricula from the Canadian territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut published between 1996 and 2021. The study examines how second-order historical thinking concepts are integrated into northern curricula and identifies five key themes, including cultural reclamation, reconciliation, alternative conceptions of time, the role of non-human beings, and experiential learning. It argues that history education in Canada's North adapts historical thinking to Indigenous knowledges, languages, and community priorities while operating within a curricular framework still shaped by colonial and Euro-Canadian traditions.

A markedly different situation is identified by A. José Farrujia de la Rosa in the Canary Islands. Although the influence of West African cultures is also present, the absence of Indigenous populations gave rise to distorted interpretations of the past. The paper examines how colonial epistemologies have shaped archaeology, museum displays, and school education about the Indigenous past in the Canary Islands. Using thematic analysis of documents and textbooks, it identifies narrative patterns that marginalize Indigenous perspectives and explains these through the concept of the "colonial library." It also presents the educational project *Memorias Guanches* as a practical example of decolonial pedagogy that connects classroom learning with heritage governance and museum practices.

A further research paper directs our attention to Central Europe. The paper of Julia Allerstorfer-Hertel examines how images of cultural difference in art history contributed to legitimizing colonial ideologies. It applies the concept of the "colonial unconscious," originally proposed for German art history, to the Austrian context and focuses on the role of exoticism in visual representations. Through case studies from the late 19th century during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (e. g. Franz Kollarz or Leopold Carl Müller), the study shows how non-European people were depicted and argues for postcolonial reinterpretations of images in Austria's art history and historical culture.

Franziska Rein's contribution moves the discussion onto more theoretical terrain within a postcolonial framework. Her research paper examines the role of ambiguity and the concept of tolerance of ambiguity in history education considering debates within postcolonial studies. It argues that fostering tolerance of ambiguity can help students engage with complex and contested historical narratives, while cautioning against the risk of relativism that may undermine historical orientation. The article advocates a more differentiated approach to history education that challenges binary thinking and encourages critical dialogue about the entanglements of past, present, and future within persistent (post-)colonial power structures.

The miniatures section likewise features contributions that address the main theme of the issue. For instance, Rebecca Cairns' article examines how Australian history education research contributes to global efforts to decolonise history education within a settler-colonial context. Drawing on recent scholarship, it outlines practical strategies for decolonising classroom practice—centred on reflection, listening, learning, localisation, and evaluation—and highlights the theoretical importance of place, positionality, and settler colonialism. While emphasising that structural change must be led by First Nations communities, the article argues that non-Indigenous educators also bear responsibility for advancing decolonising approaches in history education.

For the situation in Germany, Johannes Jansen and Holger Thünemann provide an important insight through the project Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia. The project investigates how people in Germany perceive

the colonial era, whether they consider engagement with this past relevant, and to what extent they recognise connections between colonial history and present-day historical culture. Based on the first nationally representative large-scale survey on this topic in Germany, conducted in collaboration with the polling institute forsa, the working paper outlines the project's structure, methodology, and initial findings while also reflecting on methodological challenges encountered during the research.

A contribution by Laurin Blecha and Marius Müller on the museum landscape in Austria examines the colonial dimensions of Salzburg's cultural heritage through the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in the former residence of the prince-archbishops. Drawing on archival sources and secondary literature, the article traces the global entanglements of European colonialism reflected in the collection and critically analyses its historical formation, contemporary exhibition, and the persistence of Eurocentric narratives about non-European cultures and nature. It argues that Salzburg's particular historical position within the Holy Roman Empire and its ideological legacy have led to the decision to preserve—rather than fundamentally transform—the Cabinet, a choice that continues to shape the exhibition today.

This volume concludes with two miniatures that do not engage with the main theme of the issue but provide interesting insights into history teaching in international settings. Kevin Van Loon asks how the use of image interpretation scaffolds in history classrooms. His article addresses the challenge that students often engage with historical images passively rather than critically in history education. It introduces two image interpretation scaffolds – sequenced and flexible – that support adolescents in analysing and interpreting visual historical sources and situates their use within relevant didactical frameworks. The article also highlights how internet searches and AI tools such as ChatGPT can complement these scaffolds to foster deeper engagement and active historical inquiry.

The article by Niklas Ammert et al. examines the development and outcomes of an international history teacher training course organized by researchers from Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden within the European University consortium EUniWell. Focusing on heritage as a central theme, the course combined online seminars with an on-site week in Cologne to foster international collaboration, multiperspectivity, and critical reflection among teacher students. The evaluation highlights the educational value of international exchange and suggests that integrating moral perspectives and inclusive practices in history education can support democratic citizenship and enrich learning outcomes.

Given the richness of the arguments and the diversity of perspectives incorporated in the texts mentioned, we consider the result to be of great interest to educational discourse and encourage readers to learn more about the research compiled in this volume. We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to the authors for their contributions, as well as to all colleagues who provided peer reviews in the preparation of this volume.

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