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Brexit, history and education: recognising conflict in a period of upheaval

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Abstract:

This paper will outline the implications of the UK referendum of 23 June 2016 on a recently completed EU-funded project into History teaching in secondary schools. Various scholars have noted the problems that may arise for UK researchers, particularly but not solely after March 2019, in terms of access to funding and the loss of a shared research community (e.g. Stock 2018; Trees 2016); they have also have acknowledged the role of heritage and archaeology in bolstering the 'new nationalisms' arising in Europe as a whole in recent years, and in the UK in particular (e.g. Gardner 2017). However, little has been offered by scholars undertaking research with European partners during the period 2015-19. By contrasting the intended outcomes of the E-Story project with the actual results, the impact of the referendum, which took place within the first year of the 30-month project, was significant despite being primarily a UK event. Although many of the limitations faced by the UK team may be ascribed to the different pedagogical environment experienced by school teachers in the UK in contrast to, for example Italy, the months of campaigning forming a prelude to the referendum, and the aftermath of uncertainty and political division, undoubtedly shaped the responses of the educators, students and researchers involved. In addition, the focus of the project was the use of IT in teaching the history of the First World War, rather than European industrialisation or the history of the EU. This therefore positioned those engaging with UK teachers, who expected an overview of the aims of the project, as sharing the benefits of the EU whilst rehearsing a well-known history of conflict. This paper seeks, then, to interrogate the role of an international project about the representation of the past, during a period of historic social upheaval and uncertainty, by drawing on George Santayana's assertion (1905) that 'Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness...Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it', and its misrepresentation in wider culture, in order to contextualise the contradictions posed by the project in a time of change and amnesia in the UK.

This paper will therefore offer a brief overview of the aims of the E-Story project in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, before moving on to outline the events of 2016-18 which impacted upon it, and continue to resonate in the UK. The paper will conclude by considering the extent to which George Santayana's work, and its later misappropriation or misattribution, can be used to contextualise the environment in which we worked on the project.

The E-Story project developed from several years' shared work involving a range of European researchers, primarily historians and media scholars, with the Istituto Parri in Bologna, and particularly Pierre Sorlin and Luisa Cigognetti, at its core. The Bologna team had initially identified who was working in broadly the same sort of areas, across Europe, and meeting in Bologna, first in 2011, allowed us to compare the representation of the past provided by various nations' broadcasters and websites, with the findings published but also forming significant aspects of our analyses of our own nations' self-representation. Then, in more recent years the Bologna-based team sought to encourage us to consider the teaching of history in the school classroom. Although in the UK there had already been some consideration of the development of history teaching and curricula over the course of the C20th, with historians such as David Cannadine undertaking detailed analysis, there had been little attempt to compare contemporary history teaching or to interrogate the range of approaches offered in EU-based schools. The proposed project might, it was hoped, offer the opportunity both to continue research into the representation of the past in each nation, and to consider the representation of the past on television and the internet alongside that taught in schools. An additional aim of the project was to offer educators in the nations' schools the opportunity to gain additional skills; free training, including accommodation and travel costs, was to be offered in Spain (and later, it was decided in the course of the project, in Italy also), to teachers with interest in developing their use of audiovisual material in the classroom. When we initially learned that the proposal submitted to the EU in 2015 had been successful, work began shortly afterwards to shape the specifics of the project, and in ways which, to the UK team at least, seemed oddly prescient or, perhaps any project dealing with the past from a transnational perspective would, at the time of the UK referendum and its aftermath, have seemed significant, and Santayana's words particularly poignant.

Nevertheless, to return to the overview of the project: in order to best decide what period of history would be useful to all seven partner nations - the UK, Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland - and to all history teachers seeking guidance in use of AV material, analysis was undertaken of each nation's history curricula, offered to students in the age range 12-17, roughly that of secondary school students in the UK. It became apparent that key areas of similarity focussed on the World Wars and that the history of the EU was not universally considered. A decision was therefore made to focus upon the First World War in the second training event, offered in Bologna in May 2018, and media professionals offered insights into the use of early C20th film before attendees were encouraged to create their own brief documentaries, for use in the classroom.

At this point it should be added that perhaps unsurprisingly, the Great War is not uncontroversial in the UK. It is fairly well known that from the 1960s, satirists maintained a representation of it as a futile waste of life and indeed, they utilised commentators of the time, most notably war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, to do so. However, in the year before the E-Story project began, and arguably as part of the nation's commemoration

of the beginning of the conflict, several newspapers were active in promoting the comments of the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, that 'left-wing historians' were peddling 'myths' about the conflict which were then perpetuated in schools through teachers' use of history programming, in order to further unpatriotic ideals. Despite a range of scholarly and political criticism of Gove in response, conservative-sympathising newspapers such as the Daily Mail continued to support his position and arguably used it, or at least the anxieties aroused by the idea of the national past under threat which it drew upon and perpetuated, during pro-Brexit reporting and opinion pieces on the referendum campaign and in the months afterwards. It had become increasingly important that the right history be used correctly by politicians and historians alike, with interpretations that were not explicitly patriotic depicted as threatening to British values.

To extend this point slightly, it is well-known within the UK, and to some degree overseas, that the past was also used by both sides prior to the Referendum. The left-leaning and pro-remain newspaper the Guardian, for example, hosted a series of interviews with former soldiers who had seen the atrocities of the Second World War and saw remaining in the EU to be the only option to maintain peace. The Leave campaign actively built upon rhetoric reimagined in the previous few years of economic recession, which enabled the then Prime Minister David Cameron to claim, in a response to a question after a speech he gave in Milton Keynes in June 2010, that the entire British nation was 'in it together'; Leave also drew upon the authority of WW2 when referring to their desire to make 'Britain great again' in a manner redolent both of post-war rebuilding, and Donald Trump's campaigning in the USA. That is not to suggest that Cameron was pro-Leave; quite the contrary, but the ground laid by a political discourse of apparently shared thrift, which drew on tropes of 'make do and mend' in wider British culture which were deliberately reminiscent of nostalgia depictions of WW2, were mobilised successfully against the PM. In extreme and extremist cases, representations of immigrants from the Middle East, allegedly enabled to come to Britain by the EU, were depicted in a manner which some commentators found to mirror Nazi images of deported Jews in Romania; even if unintentional, such depictions encouraged fear of an overseas threat and indeed racist attacks against non-white people in the UK have statistically become more common since the campaign began. It is almost ironic that a campaign which on both sides attempted to use WW2, a period stereotypically represented as one in which the nation joined together, has been so divisive. When the Queen called for national unity in her annual Christmas message in 2018, even this was met with some derision, albeit in part because of her obvious wealth in contrast to that of many of her subjects.

In this specific political and historical context, it therefore proved difficult to run an EU-funded and explicitly transnational project, so we focussed on offering training to university History students, the teachers of the future, and a generation much more likely to have rejected Brexit. Certainly, in the years of austerity before the Referendum, schools had experienced cuts in funding which meant that even free training was not necessarily taken up

if lessons would have had to be covered by a supply teacher, who would have had to be paid for by the school. Therefore we struggled to recruit educators from the state school sector, and this then limited our potential access to schools and pupils for further activities in the classroom; even those former students from the University of Lincoln, who were happy to answer emails about their experience of teaching history, were not able to attend such events. In addition, as a Leave-voting area of the UK, it may be surmised that teachers in the East Midlands region may not have been willing to appear to side with the EU via such a project, which in previous years may have been 'advertised' through a school website as positive evidence of international links.

Therefore, when in schools or offering and participating in training events, we deliberately sought to employ Santayana's ideas to encourage students, and teachers, to think about the national past and present, and those present and absent from official accounts. We decided to focus on the lack of Black soldiers in accounts of WW1, as symptomatic of a wider lack of recognition of the significance of Black people in the British past and in doing so, hoped to highlight the limitations of unreflective aspects of nationalism, alongside xenophobia, played upon in much referendum campaigning. Florian will now discuss key aspects of Santayana's work, which may assist in illuminating the lack of critical thinking apparent in national politics and media at a time of austerity measures and in Referendum campaigning.

(Florian Gleisner)

I was part of the project in my capacity as someone with teaching experience and I have a background in philosophy. In my teaching practice, I have taught Critical Thinking and Reasoning to students from the age of 13 to 18.

Erin has already mentioned our difficulties in recruiting teachers and gaining access to schools and students. I will now attempt to analyse, using Santayana, some events and developments in recent UK history and their impact on the UK part of the Erasmus project, culminating in our difficulties. The motivation to use Santayana came from the, eventually ignored, suggestion that the Holocaust would be a good pan-European topic for the project. Auschwitz, as one of the most famous sites, has a traditional connection with Santayana's quote that "those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it".

I will now use three excerpts to lead up to this famous quote, all of which come from *The Life of Reason*.

Quote 1: "An age of mythology yields to an age of subjectivity, reason being equally neglected and exceeded in both."

Michael Gove, when he was Education Secretary in 2013, asserted that history teaching had been taken over by a politically left-leaning agenda and people. He sought to correct this by replacing critical evaluation with rote learning of names, events, places and dates, in chronological order. Gove did not talk to teachers or their unions, and did not seek the advice of academics.

Coupled with the policy of austerity (freezing pay for teachers), accelerating privatisation of education through academisation, there were calls to band together. References to the "Blitz spirit" were evident, as Owen Hatherley notes in the Ministry of Nostalgia.

In the run-up to the referendum (23rd June 2016), the two opposing campaigns "Leave" and "Remain" aimed to garner votes of those people who were allowed to vote. With hindsight, the leave campaign has often been called cynical, the remain campaign has been called useless.

The leave campaign sought to mis-represent and emphasise negative perceptions of the EU. Commonly believed falsehood were often elevated to facts. The Remain campaign attempted to raise fears about the consequences of leaving the EU, most of which were based on economic factors.

The Leave campaign mythologised the EU. It became an unaccountable monster which would force the UK to accept immigrants, especially after Turkey became a member. It would soon have its own army. It would be a "super-state", with unclear threats to democracy and freedom. Expert opinion was discounted. People should trust their instincts. Immigrants are bad for jobs, housing and the health service. Critical thinking was to be suspended (otherwise the "lump of labour" fallacy and statistics on the impact of immigration would have told them otherwise). "The UK had enough of experts." If only they had Santayana's advice to hand: "To revert to primordial feeling is an exercise in mental disintegration, not science." But science and experts counted for nothing.

The Remain campaign could not, however, point to the good in the EU (other than economics). To do so would have been to concede that the UK's status in the world depended,

at least in part, on membership of the EU. After the referendum, France overtook the UK economically.

Quote 2: "There is nothing sweeter than to be sympathised with, while nothing requires a rarer intellectual heroism than the willingness to see one's equation written out."

Reasoned debate requires such heroism, albeit on a rather smaller scale. Being pandered to does not. Facts stand in the way of this "sweetness", so they are discounted or devalued. Sources are suspected of bias and ignored.

What positives can individuals (here: teachers) or institutions (here: schools) now take from cooperating with an EU project? At best, you show that you have an interest in international relations. At worst you demonstrate that you are not already overworked (because you have time for a frivolous, academic study), you take sides in a divisive debate (because the outcome would be pro-EU, wouldn't it?), which will offend half the population whatever the perception (or more in Lincolnshire). Schools are already both, accused of and criticised for, teaching to the test or teaching irrelevant things (i.e. things which are not on the syllabus).

I was not disappointed by the students I had a chance to interview. Those who volunteered to be debriefed after the classroom activities were over, were pro-Remain. A selected and self-selecting group of young history students - typically, statistically remain-leaning. Teachers might have anticipated this. What if results were reported publicly? A pro-Remain stance of students might be unpopular with the regional population.

Quote 3: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The fuller quote reads as "Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Remembering the past means not returning to the state of infantile ignorance of facts. It does not require first hand memory, but memory can be prosthetic. Teaching becomes fundamentally important.

Basic facts about the EU were not taught in UK schools. Therefore it was easy to misrepresent them, such as the veto, the connection of EU membership to the court of human rights, the role of the EU council and parliament in law-making and its democratic processes and even basic geography, let alone consumer protection, workers' rights and environmental protection.

The distribution of leave to remain votes is most obvious along age lines. The older the voter, the more likely to have voted leave and vice versa. The level of ignorance became clear in the aftermath. A telling news item was that the google search "What is the EU?" trended after the referendum. Followed by "What happens if we leave the EU?". Representatives of some of the regions in the UK most benefitting from EU funds and policies were asking the UK government to guarantee that the funding was maintained after Brexit. If experience had been retained by the regions' populations, it might have told them that this was unlikely. Particularly as the government was preparing for an economic shock after Brexit.

Finally, there were other parts of recent history which were ignored. The UK joined the EU as "the sick man of Europe" in 1973.

In conclusion, it seems evident that Critical Thinking needs to be taught explicitly, in schools, and needed to avoid the current situation in which the UK has found itself. With Critical Thinking comes the capacity to discern between fiction and history. It is useful to remember that Santayana's comment on the past has been regularly, and tellingly, misattributed to Winston Churchill, who did, however, state that the loss of the past would lead to "the most thoughtless of ages. Every day headlines and short views" in a speech in the House of Commons in November 1948. More poignantly still in the current climate, he had remarked after the Stresa Conference in 1935 that "It falls into that long, dismal catalogue of the fruitlessness of experience and the confirmed unteachability of mankind... lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history." Our experience of attempting to work with the EU during Brexit confirms this.