

## **The Fetishism of Understanding in History Teaching: Consumerist Dogmas and Historical Education**

**Anthony L. Smyrnaio**

Assistance Professor  
University of Thessaly  
Argonafton & Filellinon  
38221 Volos  
Greece

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the prerequisites of the contemporary education, and especially history teaching, in which innovation, experience, empathy and understanding are included into and also express the prevailing spirit of consumerism. Nowadays the main target of teaching history is to effectively catch school and generally public fascination, overcome boredom and routine that by and large characterizes global education, through the devices of always innovative methods and the rhetoric of an ever-increasing, better and deeper understanding of historical process. Thus pupils absorb and encapsulate the values of contemporary society and the managerial ethos of entrepreneurship, which chase after the interest of its clients aiming always at profit. This enormous and unending quest for meaning has the characteristics of a fetishism of understanding, a really itching of understanding, that is the enigmatical meaning of an obsessive fascination with one's own capacity and potentiality of experiencing. This political and economic agency of legitimizing the multiplicity of historical approaches, representations and interpretations makes the historical field a consumerist palimpsest that intensifies the rather metaphysical doubt about how much sense makes sense in history. At last, the article expresses the writer's doubt of the contemporary romanticization and aestheticization in education, history, and history teaching, and proposes a counter-power, a critical ethos of philistinism, which simply seeks to destruct the often tragic complication of modern life and understanding of our society, though such concepts and tools seem gradually to disappear.*

**Keywords:** history teaching, innovation, consumerism, experience, boredom, fetishism of understanding

### ***Innovation and consumption: the beginning and the end of the same story***

Innovation, consumerism, experience, and understanding, are key-concepts, and key-forces too, that may be considered as the four pillars of our contemporary society. In this paper I shall try to illustrate their interconnection, focusing especially on the impact they probably have to history teaching especially in primary and secondary schools. Nowadays, the uncertain oscillation between cruel modernist and ludico-esthetic postmodernist attitudes and projects in these schools leads to an educational field infected by contradictory ideas and forces, such as productivity, competitiveness, personification, and empathy, are paradoxically converged with each other. The obvious goal is to continuously reform the face and the essence of contemporary education in order to meet exclusively to the general intellectual and cultural climate of our era, namely, the consumerist tastes of the *Zeitgeist*. From the outset, I could argue that innovation, and its deepest matrix, creativity, are the only metaphysical concepts and principles that our society still endears (Smyrnaio, 2009:41). They are all-powerful meta-religious ideas that inherit from their own origin its irrational, un-experimental character. If "consumption is governed by a form of magical thinking" (Baudrillard, 1998:31), the same holds for innovation and creativity to an unprecedented extent. They evidently attempt to substitute gods in their demiurgic process and they virtually practice a secular kind of theurgy, in order to achieve ascent from the conditions of worldly existence, by performing supposed innocent scientific/consumerist ceremonies. Nobody can and should question their value and predominance; they are beyond any reservation, for they are simply called to take the place of god, to play god, although their accounts, not surprisingly, are, certainly, self-referential.

It is not surprising that not only innovation or consumerism, but even history itself plays the same secular role in replacing god from its throne: “History in modern times has fulfilled the role of meaning-giver – a secular replacement for those who have accepted the death of a god previously perceived in terms of Providence, or of a ‘destiny’ made conveniently manifest to some”, Southgate writes (2007:75). The almost unconsciously transcendental perception of creativity and innovation has as a result to remain fully unbothered and continue their mission to transform apace the world according to their really total, totalizing, and even more totalitarian thought. They, who cannot, or do not like such perspectives, are obliged to stay backward, to be off-line. Creativity is “a kind of moral imperative” and certainly has recruited “[t]hose engaged in the creativity industries – experts of various kinds, managers, media workers, designers, futurologists, public relations practitioners, psychologists, consultants, marketing gurus, educationalists, ‘thinkers of the unthinkable’, doyens of ‘promotional culture’, sensationalist artists and postmodern philosophers – all variously signal that to be creative is the highest achievable good” (Osborne, 2003:507-508). However, innovation and creativity are currently intertwined with consumerism. If creativity is a mainly modern concept, we may consider innovation as its postmodern counterpart. Yet both mingled with consumerism mirror the face of our world. Therefore, if consumption has now come to mean the “total organization of everyday life, the total homogenization” (Baudrillard, 1998:29) of it, innovation and consumerism have succeeded in building a dynamic network, a kind of an electromagnetic field, as I particularly dare say, inside of which people’s attention and interest, as well as the actions that ought to be taken, are almost absolutely captured and ensured. The ‘novus’ element and the pleasure of consuming became true allies. The systematic organization and further fostering of this network is based upon the essentialist, managerial and really effective perception that human nature is evidently unchangeable in the procedure of its self-deception. Thus, it is only needed to grab people’s interest by appealing to their personal needs and stay focused on their unspoken, intimate, even unconscious, wants. Moreover, aiming to engage their interest in how message can help them save time and frustration, it is also advantageous to convince them that the significant features of the offer have been designed to give a specific benefit to them. At last, it is really easy to persuade them to perform the desirable action. By appealing to humans’ deeper drives, it is possible also to defeat those hardened consumers, who tend to be unconvinced about marketing claims. The device is to use hard data where it's available (hence the strong illusion of exhaustively using historical sources in history teaching). The reason is that rhetoric, or even enthusiasm, can never produce the magnificently palpable “effect of the real” (Barthes, 1968) that is able to overcome any customers’ resistance.

Thus, the entire consumerist project is manipulated by an absolute “commodity logic” that “has become generalized and today governs ... the whole of culture... Everything is taken over by that logic, not only in the sense that all functions and needs are objectivized and manipulated in terms of profits, but in the deeper sense in which that is spectacularized, or in other words, evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models” (Baudrillard, 1998:191). The construction of an all-powerful web by both innovation and consumerism is reflected to the character of contemporary society, namely a mixture of production and deception, which has the ultimate goal to extract always more value and generate more economic surplus. However, these two pillars are strongly supported by the two other that previously mentioned, which are *experience* and *understanding*. The influence of the latter is extremely powerful, for all human, and even non-human, perceptions and activities are currently of the very nature of experience, which also ardently and desperately seeks for understanding. So knowledge does not suffice to understand reality, if experience refuses an offer of help. I argue that we live not simply in a knowledge-based society, but in an experience-based one. Therefore, innovation and consumerism are really founded on the omniscient psychology of experience and understanding. The latter are the fuel of the former, the driver of their success. It is really obvious that nowadays a voracious desire for experience predominates, and a systematically organized project is devoted to accumulate, re-create, classify, and accordingly disseminate, share and administrate every kind of experience, especially the sophisticated and extreme ones, all over the world. The purpose of such amassing is unreservedly humans’ self-actualization, the hallowed aim of postmodernist culture, which is just depicted as “experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption” (Maslow, 1993:45). However, that is precisely what generates, fosters, and improves the very spirit of consumerism, because the consuming fire is not a rational need for certain products, or services, but an unquenchable, irrational thirst for exceptionality, for social significance, for developing one’s potentialities, for fully, creatively, and joyfully, utilizing one’s capacities. “Consumer goods... present themselves as a harnessing of power, not as products embodying work” (Baudrillard, 1998:32).

Therefore, if all discourses are exercises in power, then the current mega-discourse of consumerism includes in its trajectory all the facets of contemporary experience coloring them with its indelible signs and symbols. Yet, the exceptional character of experience is comparable only to that of understanding, which bridges the gaps of experience with meaning. Understanding is not only the innocent satisfaction of curiosity, or an automatic response to the sacred needs of the capitalist economy, but apparently the foundation of power and control, and even more the seductive order of various elites to grasp people's interest, with the secret of obvious intention to maintain or enlarge their power on them. In a permanently not comprehensible world at the present the substantially moral imperative for understanding is not an act of desperation, or a natural reply for orientation, but a curious device for self-captivation in the world of stereotype and deterministic responses.

### ***Educational innovation as a drive of global consumerism***

If it is evident that today the culture of innovation prevails, then it is also true that, as a vehicle of power, it contains an aura of inevitability. All institutions ought to be innovative in order to both setting and keeping pace with technical and social change, always shaking up the world and shattering the status quo. All people are obliged to learn the myth of an ever-lasting and always disruptive innovation, all should be catechized in an ever-changing form of the reality, otherwise are consigned to the dustbin of history as the world incessantly moves on. Any other aspect is a chimerical argument, so we instinctively follow the stereotype of the innovation's determinism. Education is among the social institutions that traditionally shows a rather sluggish pace of innovation due to many reasons, but mainly to the diachronic indifference of politicians regarding the contribution of education's value in scientific and technological change. Yet, in the span of the last decades the innovative impulse in the field of education is truly unprecedented. We might speak of a dizzying 'innovation/creativity turn', in order not only "to get to the future first", but, conversely, "to invent the future itself" (Osborne, 2003:509). Rich or poor countries are called to create, organize, promote and disseminate myriad innovative programs in schools, following the global imperative of incessant reform of the world by performing powerful ideals of informality with flexible, non-rational ideas and non-linear thinking. In the field of education, as happens in the business world, "any glossary... reveals that creativity is increasingly susceptible to finesse through technique" (Osborne, 2003:509). The goal is not only to innovatively train children, but, even more, to "Educate to Innovate" (as in the President Obama campaign), following the order of educational pragmatism. However, it is not surprising that this effort is related to exclusively improve the participation and performance of American students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), since these are considered as the only factors that characterize a contemporary, future-oriented society. These are the real levers of capitalist economy; these are the true goals of the world. Thus, this innovation/creativity explosion seems now to be rather "a product of human agency and the machinations of experts and – loosely speaking – of workers of the intellect. It is, then, as much a matter of our governmentality as of ideology. Two kinds of expertise have been especially important in establishing the image of a veritable doctrine of creativity: psychologists and managers. These are really our contemporary ideologues of creativity" (Osborne, 2003:508).

Consequently, any contemporary educational narrative, either in Mathematics, in Science, or in History, is any longer under the aegis of innovation and in the service of consumption which, in turn, is the axis mundi, the center of our culture. According to the dominant ideology teachers should acquire innovative, suitable, and transferable skills for drawing their preys in the world of knowledge-based economy, which is, of course, the very world of consumption. Early enough, Baudrillard (1998:69) had diagnosed the narcotic, soothing self-captivation on consumerism in the public discourse that, in vain, even criticizes it: "The whole discourse, lay and academic, on consumption is articulated upon this sequence, which is the mythological sequence of a folk-tale: a Man "endowed" with wants or needs which "lead" him towards objects which "give" him satisfaction. Since man is, nonetheless, never satisfied (he is, indeed, criticized for this), the same story begins over and over again, with the sterile self-evidence of old fables". This fairy story is continuously multiplied in our society. Moreover, in the field of human sciences, and in education in general, the innovative impulse is extended to forms that can at best inscribed to the domain of "emotional capitalism... a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (Illouz, 2007:5). The rise of the *homo sentimental* has an unparalleled impact on our times, and even more on education. The contemporary convergence between Pedagogy and Economics, two fields that have become inextricably intertwined through the entry of intimate emotions, along with the confusion between private and public spheres into the contemporary economic life, are indicative of the process being crucial by the emergence of the "emotional capital" (Gendron, 2004:35, Newman, 2005:8).

Converged with and subdued to the dominant socio-economic capital, emotional capital should be fully used and exploited in order to advance the knowledge and economy of contemporary capitalism. As Gendron (2004:9) notes, it is not simply a complementary one, an “additional capital”, but even more a “booster variable”, “a catalyser... in the constitution of the human capital”, “a potentializing” one, which is “essential for utilizing effectively social and human capitals”. It is not paradoxical, therefore, that the entrance of consumerist spirit into schools is obviously related to a personification of consumer’s needs and desires through advertising, which is becoming the most important element in the chain of consumption. As our society has already passed from a character-oriented to a personality-oriented culture, where “citizenship, duty, democracy, work, building, golden deeds, outdoor life, conquest, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity, and above all, manhood” have gradually substituted by such words, as “fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful, creative, dominant, forceful” (Susman, 1984:273-274, 277), the education in turn has thoroughly adopted the advertising spirit, where the best innovations come from listening to users and then meeting their unmet needs. Indeed, the intention is that everything should be directed towards an individual, which is also respected, cherished and noteworthy. Yet, this process of personification is related to the desire of being a member of a group, to conform to the norms and rules of a group and its identity symbols, so as to ensure personal security. It is precisely that paradox blend of uniqueness and conformity that creates the always hybrid and fluid current identity, actually eulogized in postmodern schools. However, this innovative impulse takes a thoroughly deterministic character. The unquestionable adaptation to the mainstream is considered as compulsory, and students should conform to the theatrical and spectacularized dimensions of emotional culture, through mainly Innovative Programs and Projects, so as to multiply and empower its very traits, revealing apparent qualities of both a *homo consumans* and a *homo economicus*. Aesthetic models are widely applied in the field of pedagogy and education, whereas interest, inspiration, insight, imagination, affection, empathy and performance are at the premium. Once again, the ultimate end of postmodern education is, not only knowledge, but knowledge mingled with emotional experience and understanding.

The commodity logic that saturates contemporary education is actually at its peak in the case of the so-called “consumer education”, an education that self-affirms the true conformism to the mainstream. Its substantial mission is a delicate experience of consumption, a truly permanent process of elaborated satisfaction. It is obviously an education devoted to a sophisticated and, consequently, inescapable conformism, thoroughly subjected to a normative, purified catechesis. In this case, students should be provided with the knowledge of the market in order to recognize and analyze the mechanisms of the consumerist society. For these learners, the education’s goal is to provide them with the cognitive elements, the conceptions, procedures and attitudes that will facilitate their initiation to a deeper and more sophisticated consumption, which allegedly ensures them that they will be even more satisfied. Thus, to become informed, conscious, critical and responsible consumer, to be able to choose independently from information available, to acquire consumption skills, to have and recognize rights and duties, to take correct decisions regarding a more balanced and sustainable consumption, to identify and to evaluate the consequences of improper consumption, to evaluate the effects of advertising and marketing organizations and so on, are nowadays of greatest importance. However, such critically evaluated consumption doesn’t improve the sustainable quality of personal or communal life, but plainly ensures the consumers’ co-habitation, the consumer’s partnership, that captures, moreover, its members to an alleged “positivity” and “naturalness” of consumerism, paralyzing any possible reaction. Even more, it evidently fixates people on inanimate objects, and casts out those who insist on being off-line in that marvelous chain of consumption. It is about what I might call “fetishism with awareness”, despite its oxymoron. If, according to Bruckner (2000:53), “[c]onsumption is a degraded religion, the belief in the resurrection of things, wherein the supermarket is the Church and the advertising is the Gospels”, then education is dedicated to a kind of rational indoctrination to an irrational, profitable procedure. The aim is simply to escape from the malfunctions of ignorance of sales strategies and commercial advice, to identify the symbolic components of any advertising message and distinguish the real aims of the advertising and, consequently, act freely. And all this is innocently assessed as authentic consciousness and responsibility, since the robust world of consumption is unreservedly considered as the best of all worlds. It is obvious, therefore, that Pedagogy and Education can only be considered as the disciplines of the 21st century, if wholly and effectively be subjected and transformed to the real “Disciplines of Innovation” (Drucker, 1985), that is, to an incessantly neurotic unearthing of all knowledge’s goals and to an inescapable assimilation to consumerism.

### ***Innovation in contemporary history teaching***

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century it is obvious that the role of history in the ever-increasing knowledge-based economy is crucial. So, in European and American world, history seems in fact that it dominates the public mind as well as institutions. As Richard Evans states, “Consciousness of history is all-pervasive at the start of the twenty-first century” (Cannadine, 1999:10). History gives the impression that it absorbs everything and this prevailing obsession evidently turns out to be a “mass activity”: it “has possibly never had more followers than it does today, when the spectacle of the past excites the kind of attention earlier epochs attached to the new” (Samuel, 1994:25). There is a virtually bulimic interest for an absolute historicization of the world in academic and non-academic fields, though professional historians are usually skeptical about the depth and value of concern shaped outside their own guild. History’s “incurable heterogeneity” (Pomian, 1999:404) does encompass a wide range of practices which multiply its public prestige: the heterogeneity of history reflects the heterogeneity of the world. Certainly, history “is consecrated as the pre-eminent university discipline” (Davies, 2006:2), for it does not only decisively contribute to the historical research of every discipline, but also offers an overall mentality relevant to the contemporarily hegemonic idea of process, source and evidence. Therefore, as a dominant mode of knowledge, it occupies experts and amateurs who earn their living from its copious generosity.

Yet, public fascination with the past has overlapped the academic one. For instance, the popular taste and demand for ‘heritage industry’, the private research on family trees in order to discover a scarce and valuable genealogy, is now becoming more common especially amongst the Anglo-Saxons. It is evident that “much history in the mass media wallows in fin de siècle sentimentality, lauding a nostalgic world of community, stability and certainty”, Joanna Bourke claims (2007:xi). Also, the media-driven historical culture appeals to the masses in many ways, though at times it has verged on collective hysteria particularly through television and cinema, but also in any case it amply contributes to the development of extremely huge public spheres in history. As Davies notes (2007:3-4), “[h]istory comes at it 24/7 in news bulletins, in the press, in fashion, on TV in films, docu-dramas, and documentaries, let alone in novels, biographies, and erudite monographs. It fosters sociability through local history associations, membership of the National Trust or English Heritage, or family outings to living museums. It crops up in a host of local and national ‘sites of memory’. It imposes its rituals of commemoration: e.g., a few months ago the bi-centenary of the death of Immanuel Kant, more recently the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, last week the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, just now the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day”. Some scholars hazard predictions about calamities to historiography by the multifarious industries created to sell history for contemporary societies (Wright, 1985, Lowenthal, 1985, 1998, Hewison, 1987, Fowler, 1992, Brett, 1996 & Davies, 2006). For instance, Patrick Joyce (2007:97) tried to articulate the merits of critical history that fosters historical consciousness, and, among others, alarmed the community of academic historians against the forceful threats of consumer society and the perception of history as commodity, reminding that such an upsurge in historical consumerism is straightforwardly related to the present “power of the mass, capitalist market”. On the other hand, Keith Jenkins (2003:35, 39, 38) strongly opposing academic history, claims likewise that nowadays history as well as the past are simply “empty signifiers” that ‘journalists, politicians, media commentators, film makers, artists – can and do successfully access’ it, without paying attention to the “skills and methods” that the academic historians usually promulgate in order to legitimize their discipline.

In any case, it seems to be a hardly camouflaged political agenda which endorses the idea of a stable, conformist and nostalgic past, intended to stimulate the imagination as an adjunct to tourist industry. A marketable, usable, and consumable history should have no vagaries. The past, though vanished, must be idealized and sanitized. It is about a history mostly a-historical, whose legitimacy is originally drawn from the very commodification of the past, which purveys an always *antiseptic* sense of history (Smyrniotis, 2012). Yet this commodification of the past is the product of the very commodification of the present: this shapes the views of those who are systematically educated to experience an intense nostalgia for a past structured in opposition to the actual or supposed ills of the present. Thus it is naturally expected by them to gloss over the negatives, to blunt even more the ambiguities, and perpetuate distorted images of such a sparkled past. Therefore, communities subjected to the huge pressures of commercialization, and attuned to the postmodernist emotional capitalism consume their history as consume everything: in a homogenized trope, with the same bulimia, meeting always the same deficit in satisfaction.

For the utmost goal of cultural-historical industries is to push the past into the mainstream in a number of new guises, various hybrids, ingenious ways, and diverse, overlapping popular historical genres, where “Historiocopia”, that is “the overflowing plenty and abundance of meaning”, meets pleasantly “Historioglossia”, a term first theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, that means “a multiplicity of hybrid discourses accruing around a single instance” (De Groot, 2009:11-13). “That TV history flourishes at the same time as reality TV is symptomatic: the past made real goes with a present made unreal. Their common ‘ontological ambivalence’ makes them both phantasmic”, Davies comments (2006:177).

However, this strong inclination to hybridism, dissidence, alternativeness, and “un-officiality”, namely, to the multiple versions and the new ways of engaging with the past that have not been still traced, may be firstly attributed to the excessive interest for innovation and incessant potentiality. Even a book that narrates and illustrates the challenging relationship between history and contemporary historical consumerism assures us that “[h]eritage-consumerism might well be a problematic, potentially destructive force, but, at the same time, these historical products bear within them a potentiality for thinking outside the box--values or introducing new ways of conceptualizing the self and the social knowledge; and in this they might be valuable for their defiance and dissidence” (De Groot, 2009:5). It is the same irresistible trend for everyone to be always dissimilar and disparate, “to read against the grain”, to open an endless suite of possibilities. We are all changeable hybrids, hybridity is our destiny, heterodoxy is our definite fate, this is liberating and beneficial, and that is precisely where we find ourselves in the midst of the reign of consumerism. We are not to have a stable identity, it is now almost immoral, but at all times, in all things, and in all places we are to construct a fluid one, obeying to a highly legitimized consuming determinism, as reflected to such revelatory excerpt: “If a particular commodity is to be made part of popular culture, it must offer opportunities for resisting or evasive uses or readings, and these opportunities must be accepted. The production of these is beyond the control of the producers of the financial commodity: it lies instead in the popular creativity of the users of that commodity in the cultural economy” (Fiske, 1989:32). An aura of Utopia seems to pervade all this heterodox enterprise of accumulation of hybrids, as Baudrillard once again states (1998:26): “There is something more in this piling high than the quantity of products: the manifest presence of surplus, the magical, definitive negation of scarcity, the maternal, luxurious sense of being already in the Land of Cockaigne”.

Let’s turn now to trace the voracious desire of people in postmodernity to see themselves not only as spectators but also as participants in any process of life, and certainly, in history. It is about the enormous illusion of participation, involvement, employment and interactivity, that cultural industry not only exploit by and large, but base its very function and, of course, fabulous riches exclusively on it. This enormous voracity for energy and pleasure hardly hides a traumatic loss inside contemporary citizenship, revealing a kind of still unconscious itching that irritates the skin of the inner as well as the social self and causes the reflex to scratch it. Such overwhelming itching is best reflected to the triumphant statements of Rosenstone (2007:13-14): “What we need is history that surprises and startles us. That lets us see things we haven’t seen. Hear things we haven’t heard. Feel things we haven’t felt about some particular period, person, moment or movement in the past. Learn things from the seeing, hearing and feeling we haven’t learned before. What we need are historians brave enough to experiment with the past in the spirit of scientists who investigate the unknown in the micro- and macrocosmic. What we need are historians who are brave enough to experiment with language, image, sound, color and any other elements of presentation that will make the past live and vibrate and terrify us once again”. In any case, what is found at the heart of such statements is that the ever new approaches to history should unconditionally “appeal to contemporary tastes” of people deeply saturated by consumerism: “We must paint, write, film, dance, hip hop and rap the past in a way that makes the tragedies and joys of the human voyage meaningful to the contemporary world” (Rosenstone, 2007:17). And for acquiring this fugitive meaning, the managers of public history are considered as the most skilled, because they “have a unique understanding of the contemporary zeitgeist and the issues and cultural nuances it makes pertinent”. Consequently, if historians and these “retrochic” (Samuel, 1994) adherents are to work together, they should “create a history which is both credible and relevant to today” (Groarke, 2005:71). In the case of history teaching, the consumerist spirit is also well-exposed. Once again the foe is the tradition, the traditional teaching methods, the monolithic approach of history by usually ignorant and tedious teachers, who just stand in front of students and start reciting all the details of the topics, names, dates and events, which appear to be very difficult to memorize. It is thus apparent that this monotonous, repetitive, non-participative way of teaching makes students passive learners, uninterested recipients of historical knowledge, students gravely handicapped by their own ignorance and tediousness.

David Sylvester (2003:9, 12) sums the issue as follows: “The history teacher’s role was didactically active; it was to give pupils the facts of historical knowledge and to ensure, through repeated short tests, that they had learned them. The pupil’s role was passive; history was a ‘received subject’. The body of knowledge to be taught ... was mainly political history with some social and economic aspects... Teachers gave oral accounts of the main events, putting notes on a blackboard for pupils to copy or expand. Or textbooks were read, often around the class, to secure the main factual outline, and subsequently used by pupils to make their own notes. Causation was a concept regularly explored...”.

Predictably enough, the crucial contradiction is about critical thinking, a reasonable reflective method that focuses on deciding what to believe or to do. It has been a long time since a growing body of scholarly research suggested that in traditional history teaching students were not being taught how to think critically in assessing the validity of various statements that pertain to a number of issues. Such a method encourages student passivity and the uncritical acceptance of information that may be of a highly problematic nature, and emphasizes the replication of isolated fragments of information that students reproduce on static assessment instruments (Darling-Hammond, 1997:147). Only by reflecting on historical possibilities which existed in the minds of decision-makers, history students are able to gain a better understanding not only of what actually happened, but also why it happened. According to Paul (1992:53), “[s]tudents read the finished products of professional historians rather than problems and data which enable them to think historically. Students have little sense of how to engage in historical thinking and so do not recognize the historical dimension of the problems they face in everyday life”. Moreover, even in the case that school activities have gone beyond the simple teacher-centred and textbook-based instruction, and the application of knowledge and information is found on the so-called ‘objective’ evaluations, for instance, multiple choice, true and false, and matching exercises, then, such an approach not only lacks in meaning, but is actually harmful to students, because it functions in a manner inconsistent with its actual applications in real world contexts. As a result, history as a school subject, is, quite understandably, loathed by students, and the process naturally entails to become ill-disposed and, at last, misadjusted adults to conscientious and responsible citizenship. For the creation of an informed, responsible and self-conscious citizen is the ultimate goal of history teaching at the present, as many commentators advise (Tosh, 2008:124-126). However, the antidote of boring history teaching is included, of course, among the usual antidotes against any tedious process in our society. It is the underpinning of the very idea of boredom. However, though boredom is highly condemned at the present, it is actually “the ‘privilege’ of modern man” (Svendsen, 2005:21). It is responsible for humanity’s prime afflictions, but also is connected to desire and, furthermore, to interest. Thus, the appropriate remedy should be the mobilization of a suite of anti-routine functioning tool concepts, as interactivity, dramatization, cooperativeness, sensitivity, and, of course, empathy, so as to capture even the most soundless voices of the past. It is not surprising that these concepts are of the highest respect in such an educational-consumerist approach, giving the strong illusion that all pedagogical principles could at last be fulfilled in the self-affirming space-time of postmodernist emotional capitalism. They encapsulate the values of contemporary society, a society driven exclusively by the managerial ethos of entrepreneurship, whose potentiality is only to distinguish between profits and damages, benefits and drawbacks. Thus, instead of antiquated and boring methods of teaching history, and rejecting thoroughly the old “chalk and talk” approach as desperately backward, there are now multiple approaches to the past, plainly compatible to the heterogeneity of the world itself. A special feature is that the attainment targets are skill-based rather than content-based, while the new techniques are founded on the child’s own immediate experience, and focus on looking backwards, “using oral history, photographs, objects, and looking at the locality, the family, home and school. Earlier periods will be introduced mainly through stories, pictures and artefacts”, as M. Aris notes (1999:25). In any case, the course is oriented from the local and particular to the general and global, so that local studies are considered to be more valuable. The methods include the exhaustive utilization of historical sources, documents and archives, time-charts and time-lines, diagrams, engravings, cartoons, pictures, sketches, posters and worksheets, artefacts, video, television, computers and Internet. Moreover, in these techniques story-telling and re-telling, model-making, role-play, drama and concept-based teaching are used, while students are given the chance to visiting museums and historical sites, inviting experts in the classroom, participating in ‘living history sessions’, and so on. These are some of the numerous and marvelous activities, which closely relate formal and informal tropes of teaching history to each other in a multitude of ways. They all have long been appreciated offering great pedagogical value, as they are invented and consulted by teachers or other specialists for students’ better understanding of history.

Surely, this extensive variety of approaches is fully elaborated by encouraging children to employ themselves in cross-curriculum activities, and urges them to question, describe and explain, eliciting suggestions by using their imagination, contrasting and evaluating, and finally familiarizing them in problem-solving, and, above all, always discussing. Such approaches to the past also encourage students' critical thinking, engaging them in a heuristic activity, introducing them not only to issues that deal with content, selection and bias, but also to the nature of collective memory and many other aspects in the 'construction' of history. Nowadays, history teaching follows on the heels of cultural industries, trying in its part to bridge the gulf between academic, professional history and popular, consumerist history. A common criticism against these attempts is the sensationalized, advertising character of such "infotainment", which is virtually based not on pedagogical, or simply informative, elements, but on consumerist features that make "history interesting, entertaining, relevant and popular", especially among young people, that "look at history with a sense of humor and satire", that "give the viewers a sense that human history at times can be silly, random, and absurd", so proving even more that "what matters on television is not the show but the flow" (Wright, 2005:35, 50). The reason is that teaching history innovative methods add an always playful touch to old pain and suffering, trying to blunt the sharp dimensions of a generally inhospitable past and constantly emphasizing the self-satisfaction of an omnipresent and omnipotent subject that vigorously feels and reasons at the same time. However, is it really fatal that "[o]ne of the most interesting is that 'bloody revolutions' and 'violent civil wars' are the stuff of entertaining history" (Farrugia, 2005:16). At last, under all such overproduction of historical and educational tools it is possible to lurk not only the prevailing consumerist spirit, but the deep spirit of boredom of the teachers themselves. It is rather their own personal need and lack that drives the way, not the lack of historical understanding by their pupils or pupils' boredom. Such "an alibi for overcoming the weighty tediousness of the adults themselves" (Smyrniaios, 2016:32) should be taken seriously into account for it is precisely contemporary culture which continuously generates boredom, maybe as an antidote to its own monstrous acceleration.

### ***The fetishism of understanding***

It is well-known that the elegant concept of *understanding* is highly estimated and deeply respected in the fields of history, historiography and history teaching. All things there are plainly subjects concerning knowledge and understanding. The various disciplines of history, having already rejected, if painfully, the concept of exegesis as being desiccating and rational, have all-too-readily dedicated to understanding, "the beacon light of our studies... a friendly word", as M. Bloch noted (2004:118). It is an all-too-human word, which let historians disqualify historical, "archangelic" judgment and so open the "vast experience of human diversities" (Bloch, 2004:119). The Theory of Relativity and the "Uncertainty Principle" turn in twentieth century Physics reduced the differentiation between the latter and history, as well human sciences in general, a differentiation that had compelled historians to desperately prove their disciplinary character against the triumphantly proceeding nineteenth century "hard", rigorous, and accurate sciences. Additionally, psychology and, mainly psychoanalysis, being widely disseminated in public, in the scientific management, and human relations disciplines as well, prepared the field for history, after the World War II, to patent the concept of understanding as its hallmark, and even more, as its synecdoche. History deals exclusively with "human, all too human", and, as a result, comprehension is the utmost access to such an end. Yet, such insatiable hungry for meaning and sense, so inherent to modern subjects, is problematic. If for George Duby, "the quest for sense is a captivating game whose charms resemble those of exploration, perquisition, even divination" (Davies, 2006:175), then this spirit of adventure, of a voyage and expedition, of outright extraversion, even of detection as well, seems to characterize the entire historical quest. It is that likewise underscores the very consumerist enterprise, entailing to a new kind of the "over-sacralisation of the immanent" that once Gellner (1994:40) attributed only to Marxism. Therefore, this enormous quest for meaning, for sense, and for understanding, has become the *idée fixe* of contemporary culture, to such an unprecedented degree that one can naturally consider that in previous ages only an elite of philosophers, artists or ecclesiastics felt the need to seek for meaning, while all the rest were simply ignorant, not only of knowledge, but even more of experience and understanding. Such newly constructed Whiggish, linear interpretation of history could lead us to a consciousness of understanding that may be included in the field of fetishism. Thus, teaching history prepares children for complying with an innovative fetishism of unending historical understanding, where the multiplication of historical representations acts as an alibi for a better, deeper, and also a liberated rationalization of the past, though it rather seems to secure only the consuming technologies of a recreational re-enactment of earlier periods of time in the present.



The *fetishism of understanding* has, therefore, the enigmatical meaning of an obsessive fascination with one's own capacity and potentiality of experiencing, and, at the same time, judging and comprehending this experience. It may reflect to a post-modern long-expected synthesis of Rationalism and Romanticism, "the reconciliation of the quantifiable with the marvelous" (Bruckner, 2007:55), where sense and logos are closely intertwined, offering, at last, an alleged solution to the fundamental dilemma of the Western thought itself. It is probably fetishism for the systematic manipulations with the signs of exchange between simulacra that are continuously transforming themselves, producing always conditioned reflexes. It is fetishism for the asymmetry between slowly changeable people and rapidly changeable things. It is fetishism, because as there is ever no historical truth, according to postmodernist, de-constructionist, historical adherents, no truthful knowing of the past, no real interpretation of it, but only fictive constructions and plausible representations, then the fetish obsession is not towards the old "truth" and its incorporated objects, but towards the multifarious versions of it, and, lastly, to the centered, all-knowing, self-reflective and omniscient subject and its very capacity for knowledge. The already legitimized multiplicity of historical representations and interpretations makes the historical field a palimpsest. In fact, the postmodernist overproduction of historical meaning through multifarious approaches to the ever unknown past, does not reduce but, conversely, "intensifies the metaphysical doubt about how much sense makes sense" in history (Davies, 2006:194).

Therefore, Davies asks (2006:188): "The crucial question is: how much sense makes sense? History's answer is: more sense makes more sense... This argument shows how indeterminate history is: total recall makes it redundant, total amnesia impossible. It oscillates apparently between the barely adequate and the not too much". The way from modernist to postmodernist history approach is thus marked by an inclination to the old Whiggish interpretation of history. If the singular narrative – truth is a backward deceit, then the contemporary multiplicity of historical narratives should be a progress to the better understanding the past. Such "better", "deeper", and "wider", comprehension does not, of course, suit to the ruptures, discontinuities, and inconsistencies of postmodernist historical views, but, clearly, to a modernist, Whiggish one. For, as history "has to meet an excessive demand for meaningfulness... [i]t would actually make most sense to 'stop the nonsense' of always making human existence make more sense. Historical sense, oscillating between the barely adequate and the not-too-much, appeals because it offers a quick fix, a neat, synthetic blend of meaning-substitute [illusio]" (Davies, 2006:192). If Bloch (2004:121) assures us that "one word... dominates and illuminates our studies: comprehend", even if "we never comprehend enough", for Davies (2006:89) comprehension is, conversely, "a crippling ideal", "a phantom", "a chimera", because it always have "to cope with more – more material, more interpretations, more values". This legitimized excess of "more", and "even more" precisely constitutes a neurotic desire utterly homologous to the consumerist desire that dominates our culture. Thus, if meaning in historiography has from the beginning an intrinsic trauma that multiplies its, however futile, efforts to understanding, in history teaching this wound is translated to a multiplication of technical tropes and modes to approach an all-embracing, but ever fugitive, understanding. It is about a hydrocephalic history teaching that uses all the consumerist alternatives to reach better understanding. It deceits itself, and its recipients as well, with the illusion that the more alternatives one uses, the more understanding he hopes to get. The contemporary obsession of alternativeness dominates every aspect of our life, in congruence with the concept of choice, which is the hallmark of neo-liberalism.

Yet, such thrust for meaning and understanding is a relatively recent phenomenon, which caused by "the deontologization of meaning in modernity". While for the long span of historical times people believed that "everything is full of gods", that can be understood as "everything is full of meaning", as Thales of Miletus had put it (Dux, 2006:34), since modernity, and by its revolutions in natural sciences, industry, and politics, that ontology of meaning collapsed. Then, man gradually gained "awareness of his autonomy", recognizing his competence to be himself the "constructor" and author of his world. He succeeded it by "decentering" himself from the world, setting himself in straight opposition to it (Dux, 2006:35-37). However, if meaning is "a basic form of human existence that pervades all the others", and if it is "the structural form that organizes action", and since "action is action with meaning" (Dux, 2006:20, 24, 22), then the contemporary thrust for meaning is naturally characterized by an enormous recourse to action, as a return to its origin, that is, to its nature.

## Conclusion

At last, and in an age of all-powerful futurism, I tend to believe that the multifarious engagement with the “pastness” is probably only seductive. The current world of extreme technological acceleration has not the slightest need or desire to recourse to the past, neither for acquiring lessons nor even for intellectually exercising. Contemporary nanotechnology, for instance, and the magnificent openness that it releases has already brought the future into the present. Thus, any educational commitment to the past is the less useless but the most seductive, for it welcomes children to the “affective turn” of current historical consumerism. Maybe, only a counter-power, “an ethos of philistinism” (Osborne, 2003:514), not in its old and crude, but in its newly elaborated methodological version, would bear against the threat of the mystic and sacralised powers of the contemporary romanticization and aestheticization in education, history, and history teaching. For critical thinking should not be concerned of only deeply elaborated projects, which simply enhance the often tragic complication of modern life, but of even hybrid ways that insist on supporting human simplicity, which nowadays lacks at most. It might be a really innovative and unusually intelligent goal that seeks for its adherents.

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