

ENCOUNTERING PAINFUL PASTS
– RENCONTRER LES PASSÉS DOULOUREUX
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ENCOUNTERING PAINFUL PASTS – A PORTUGUESE CASE STUDY

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Introduction

“History can be considered a scientific subject, vital to understanding society from a structural and a dynamic point of view. That is to say, understanding the human condition. (...) What happened in the past helps us to understand the world today. (...) Accepting that all the history is interpretative (...) its object is to understand why, and not what, happened (...) it is compulsory to give up a single explanation. (Mattoso 2012, 85–86.)

“(...) history teaching could more consciously rise awareness among students to reflect on how their own social and cultural situations are historically conditioned and what they ‘inherit’ from past generations, symbolically or materially” (Löfström 2012, 203).

Rather than constituted by events, history is made of mental representations. We know that history is interpretative, which makes it crucial to think of the issues of authorship, the acceptance of inherent subjectivity, and the need of transmission or didactic sharing that support reflection, and the need never to submit oneself to pseudo-authorities when speaking of history. This path leads us to encourage reinterpretations of what is “already said”, to rescue the themes that are politically incorrect during periods of history, and to win supporters to a knowledge that helps us to “understand the human condition” in the long term. These three strands allow us to identify sources, documents

and studies that bring something new to our historical knowledge, to study censored topics in engaged political times and to process knowledge that gives support to historical consciousness, engaged with the future. In this European project the Portuguese contribution wants to explore that triangle of scientific participation.

First, we would like to discuss the urgent and contemporary treatment of the Portuguese Colonial War (1961–1974) and give some information about our interpretative means. Two elements are in the focus: the release of the minutes of the State Council after the April Revolution 1974 (from May 1974 to March 1975) that allowed us to understand the positions of the leading Portuguese figures, and also the possibility to analyse films and documentaries about the Colonial War, made by foreigners or by Portuguese, that were hidden or unknown for a long time. This Portuguese reality is also contextualized in the European questions that emphasise the importance of “memory laws” of several countries or, in a more materialistic note, in the question about the war reparations that surfaced during the Greek debt negotiations with Germany, in 2011–2012.

If it is evident to use history to find new arguments, it is fundamental to know how history can help us prepare new citizens who can critically coexist with these realities. Let us exemplify this with the work we have been developing during our participation in this project.

The recent work by the Spanish Maria José Tíscar Santiago (2012) about the Portuguese history is important in highlighting the free space that all of us have in the interpretation and understanding of the past: the acceptance of the multiplicity of interpretations, the acknowledgement that no events are closed to new investigation, the identification of new roles in some situations – for instance in the process of decolonization – and the emancipation of plural histories. In recent news (Público-Ypsilon 2012) we have read: “The forbidden look on the war and the colonies – the negatives of our history”. Beside of the journalistic tone of the article, we have to stress its purpose, to “deconstruct the official regime discourse that the colonies were Portugal and that all their habitants wanted to remain Portuguese” (Público-Ypsilon 2012, 7), identifying audio-visual sources, documentaries and films that can contribute

to that affirmation. *Angola – A Journey to war* (1961) produced and broadcasted by the NBC, *A group of terrorists attacked* (1968), by the British John Sheppard, *Nô Pnitcha* (1970), by the French trio Tobias Engel, René Lefort and Gilbert Igel, or *The Birth of a Nation* (1973), by the Swedes Robert Malmer and Ingela Romare, who had already in 1971 made *In Our Country the Bullets Begins to Flower*; are some examples that help us broaden the horizon of the historical knowledge and consistent and conscientious interpretations. The pursuit of the themes that seemed to be confined to unquestionable bibliographic sources – we refer to historical works like the history textbooks that try to guarantee access to that information – demonstrates the distance between past knowledge and the consciousness we make of it, to form a constant reinterpretation.

Investigating, analysing and sharing ideas with our students about a subject like the Colonial War is to allow opening the door of historical consciousness, helping to understand the present and guaranteeing that the future will not be seen as monolithic. The path we walked with the students in the different schools participating in our study allowed us to know the realities that we are not always ready to see and acknowledge:

- a) The Portuguese Colonial War was a good subject for understanding the need to bring contemporary themes to debate in school and, by contextualizing, to provide a temporal thickness that could allow a valid interpretation.
- b) There is a great deal of motivation among students, to debate ideas and to give their own opinion, but naturally also interpretative fragilities that can easily be overcome by teaching that emphasises orientation and offers clues to multiple sources.
- c) A sustained dialogue put in evidence a degree of tolerance for the opinion of the other that indicates a willingness to defend democracy.
- d) Stating opinions openly, the evolution of interpretations according to the information presented by others and the capacity to relate to difference, made also irreconcilable differences seem natural.

In these perspectives the discourse in the focus groups allows us to see the importance of continuing with this kind of projects and taking history to the classroom so as to let the students work on knowledge that is curricular but also social and civic.

Adopted methodology: focus groups

In the Portuguese study, the Colonial War was chosen as the most painful period of our history in the twentieth century. The methodology is the result of the dialogue between the participant teams in this project; the focus group was the most suitable method for the project for its characteristics:

- it can highlight the respondents' attitudes, priorities, language and framework of understanding,
- it can encourage a great variety of communication from participants, tapping into a wide range and form of understanding,
- it can help to identify group norms,
- it can provide insights in the operation of group/social processes in the articulation of knowledge (e.g. through examining what information is censored or muted within the group),
- it can encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects and facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in a one-to-one interview. (Kitzinger 1995, 116.)

The acknowledgement of these advantages makes this methodology increasingly more used in research in the health and social science fields. However, it also presents some risks: the presence of one or two dominant figures that manipulate and conduct others' opinions (the moderator has in this situation a fundamental role), and the awkwardness of speaking about a sensitive issue in public. Yet such awkwardness is inherent to the social nature of any process of opinion building, and what is important to observe is the collective process of discussion, how the group generates points of view, negotiate with each other or challenge the formulated opinions and interpretations. It is imperative to understand what the young think about our painful past, and how and why they think in that

way. So we will not hesitate to use quotations that illustrate the way of thinking of these young people.

The interviews were made at two separate moments. In the first, in December 2011, we interviewed a group of 9th grade pupils, in the Santa Maria da Feira Secondary School, near Porto. The one hour interview included a brief introduction and explanation of the results this project would produce. It took place in a classroom during the school day. The focus group was made by one of the research team members in the presence of the others, and it was videotaped and audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. The six 14-year-old students, selected by the history teacher, were excellent communicators and keen on sharing their thoughts. Although they had learned about the Colonial War only in 6th grade, they had participated in a research project about the Colonial War during the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Colonial War in Angola in 1961. This focus group had a double purpose: it would give us an idea of the kind of answers we could expect from a similar group of students; and it would be used as a test, to get to know which instruments would be pertinent to use, and to polish the questions for subsequent interviews.

After this first approach, that we can consider preliminary, we resumed the work by identifying the participating schools and the selection of students to be interviewed. We considered necessary to have a five months pause before starting the interviews again because Santa Maria da Feira's group was doing exploratory work about the Colonial War, which would better allow the students to process the subject which they only had studied back in the 6th grade. It was suitable to make the second round of interviews at the end of the third term when the Colonial War is studied, as part of the unit "Portugal: from Authoritarianism to Democracy".

The second phase of the interviews was in the third week of May 2012. Five groups of 9th graders (14–15-year-old) and one group of 12th graders (17–18-year-old) were selected from each collaborating school that were Fiães, Avintes and Rebordosa. The interviews were done in the school premises, they lasted for about 45 minutes, and in some

cases the history teacher was present. Mostly the students appeared to be very outspoken and at ease in front of the audience and a video camera.

Six questions guided the interviews: Do you consider that you know well Portuguese history? What episodes in the Portuguese history are causes of pride or shame? Do you think that the Colonial War is part of our painful past? Are we responsible for what happened in the past? Do you think it is necessary to repair to the people who suffered of the consequences of the War? If so, who are these people? What do you think is the best way to repair for the unfairness of the past?

We tried to ask questions of every student in order to promote communication and the exchange of ideas in the groups. This aspect is less noticeable in this article since there are no codes for individual students but only to the groups they belonged to (A1, A2, R1, etc.), so as to maintain their anonymity.

The interview data was qualitatively analyzed. The students' ideas were placed in the following categories: historical consciousness, reparation, individual responsibility, collective responsibility, guilt, responsibility of other generations, and alia. The analysis that follows is informed by the words, but also by the gestures, smiles and silences that we observed in the interviews.

“The ghosts of the past”

“It is well-known that history only has the meaning that the individual gives to it. Therefore the studies of historical consciousness are a form of knowledge that allows us to discover how the individuals live with the “ghosts” of the past and, at the same time, use them as a way of knowledge. Since there are plenty of, and various, “ghosts of the past”, the lines of history are polysemic“. (Pais 1999, 1.)

The “ghosts” of the past, as Machado Pais calls them, can be more or less “frightening”, depending on the dose of forgetfulness that is injected in the memory of the generations with whom they live. In fact, there are several authors who voice the “memory

duties” (Nora 1984; Molpeceres 2011, 22)¹, expressing the tenuous frontier between “memory and oblivion” (Barton & Levstik 2004, 92; Pollak 1989; Ricoeur 2000) and the risks produced by the resentment of those who do not forget (Ansart 2001; Ferro 2009; Scheler & Frings 1994).

We tried to comprehend how the younger generations understand their past, identify the more difficult episodes that may cause pain, and how they live with it. The link between two poles stands out in our interviews, the one between “painful past” and the “Colonial War”. The consensus is evident and the explanation follows (the letter and number refer to the group where the quoted speaker was in):

“Without a doubt... because thousands of people died, not only Portuguese but also from other countries... (...) the people were forced to go, and they had to stay away from their families” (A1).

“Yes, because many people died unnecessarily... it was idiotic to be the last one and not to give independence to the colonies” (A2).

“Yes... because it was a depressing time” (F2).

“I agree that it is painful... because of the deceased” (R1).

“People who survived have problems still today ... post-traumatic stress” (A1); “one of my uncles was in the Colonial War” (A1).

For these students, the Colonial War is felt, and thought of, as the most uncomfortable episode, associated with the painful past, a “tragic event for all the countries, and I think that no Portuguese is proud of it” (A1). We should also mention the many lives that were cut short: “many lives were lost and many people were incapacitated... and many families are still crushed” (F2). The women and the children had to deal with the legacy of the war long after it was finished: “yes... it may have left wounds on a whole family” (F1).²

To assume the Colonial War as a painful past leads to opinions that reveal difficulty to understand the motives that were valued at the time:

“(I)t was foolish to spend so much money with the Colonial War... not to mention the isolation of the country from the other countries” (A2).

“It is an event that could have been avoided” (A2).

“(I)t was a war without any reason ... it could have been avoided” (A2).

When making a contextualized historical analysis, credible alternatives were searched that seemed logical to those who live in the present:

“The Colonial War could have been avoided if Portugal had gradually given independence to the colonies and had given our culture instead (...) and by helping economically, so the colonies could have become great allies and (...) could have been like Madeira and Azores, avoiding a war” (R2).

The inevitability of participating in a war is not an acceptable explanation to the young. They look into the past with the uncompromised vision of someone who is distant from the events. For almost everyone it is a war without reason, unfair, an incomprehensible episode for those who live five decades afterwards. However, a closer look leads to remarks like this:

“We can nowadays understand that it didn’t make any sense, that war, but... if we were living at that time, when Portugal wanted to expand, maybe we would think like Salazar (...) and we wouldn’t know how it would end, and perhaps it would make sense. Now we know that it was senseless and it led to nothing but deaths. We are at the same point or even worse but, at the time, how could they know? When a war begins, no one knows the outcome (...)” (SMF).

The unpredictability of the events is obvious in this young man's opinion. The attempt to understand the feelings and the way of thinking of the decision-makers explains the use of the conjunction "if" as a mitigation of the guilt and responsibility of the past generations. This milder position makes an effort to reconcile with the painful past or, at least, with those responsible for its legacy. To reconnect with the past, particularly the past that is violent and painful, may entail forgetfulness and silence: "People don't pay much attention to history. People usually forget about that and don't discuss what is really important in history (...) it is something that shouldn't be forgotten and can't be erased now. We are stuck with that in our country (...) because we were the ones who started it" (A1). Either because of embarrassment or disinterest, "if we ask most of the people, they don't know why the Colonial War took place" (A1).

Patent in our interviewees' considerations, this perception leaves space for performing history as a "place of memory", vital to any country's identity. As Pollak has declared, "memory, that collective operation of events and interpretations of the past that must be preserved, integrates itself (...) with more or less conscientious attempts to define and to reinforce feelings of belonging and social frontiers between collectives of different sizes (...)" (Pollak 1989, 9). Nevertheless, it is vital that those "interpretations of the past" would lead to reflective and responsible perspectives on the facts, so that neither discourses nor silences are means of distortion and manipulation of the memories of the past. Note, for instance, the French case that has to maintain balance between idealized memories of the *Résistance* and a "more realistic" historical version that recognizes the importance of collaborationism (Pollak 1989, 11; also Rousso 1989). Recently, the most prestigious instances recognized the "responsibility of France for the persecution of the Jewish people during the Second World War", stressing the "France's willingness (...) to honor the unburied dead".³

The ghosts that live in that strange country that is the past, live in the present together with moments of noise and silence that alternate in a negotiation process to harmonize the collective memory and the painful past. For a more attentive ear, silence and noise speak loudly.

Generational or intergenerational responsibility?

Through time we witness a change in the habits, the ways of production, and the values that determine the satisfaction level of the human being. Relations between generations are often marked by intergenerational conflicts in which historical responsibility relies on the memory, on the registration that remains. When the former Greek prime minister Loukas Papademos stated that the Greek parliament faced a “historic responsibility” and that he was well aware of the “painful sacrifices” asked of the Greek people in exchange of financial help from the European Union partners, the principle of intergenerational equality was in jeopardy: this generation was presented as unable to leave to future generations a legacy of benefits lower than it has received from the prior generations, assuming that each generation has a responsibility to preserve the inheritance at least at the same level as it was received from the ancestors.

When we look to the past, we assume consciousness of the heritage that shaped us, the traditions that make us “just the way we are”, conveying an identity, the recognition of our roots – an historical heritage. However, a heavy burden may be implied here since consciousness of our roots will demand historical responsibility and the remembrance of the past. The Portuguese Minister of National Defense José Pedro Aguiar-Branco stated recently in the ceremony of the 50th birthday of the beginning of the Colonial War that “after 37 years we are still ashamed of the (colonial) war”. He also said: “We can’t deal with the reasons that made us go to Africa, we can’t deal with what happened there and with the ones that were there, a country that can’t deal with its past is doomed to live poorly its present and be skeptical about its future. The aim of this Ministry is to make peace with history (...)”⁴ He thus admitted accountability regarding the participants of the war.

It is patent in this study that some of the interviewed students do not feel accountable for what happened in the past, specially not for the Colonial War, and they transfer the guilt to the Portuguese rulers:

“We did nothing to make that happen... we are not to blame” (A1).

“We are not guilty... the people that ruled our country... maybe those were the really guilty ones” (F1).

“We are not responsible; the only ones to blame are the members of the government at that time” (A1).

“I don’t think we should be blamed because it happened before we were even born...” (A2).

“Our ancestors were a little bit guilty of the Colonial War” (R1).

“We are not accountable for that... we didn’t give our consent” (A2).

They accept heritage but not accountability: “... we are the heirs of our past but I don’t think we are responsible for it” (A1). Others accept the responsibility, however, but not accept guilt: “I think we should maintain a responsible role towards our ex-colonies” (R2), or, “we should assume responsibility, but we are not guilty” (A1). Indifference about the past is also present in the dialogue: “That is past and gone for us... and what happened doesn’t matter at all” (A2).

It is interesting to see that some of the young see themselves as an outcome of the past and they assume both responsibility and consciousness on their generation; although they cannot change the past, they think mistakes can be avoided in the future:

“We are not responsible... we are the outcome... and we are responsible for never let it happen again... we are an other generation” (F1).

“We can’t change the past, but we can change the future” (F1).

The students also mention the fact that they did not participate but the soldiers were forced to go to war, due to the dictatorial regime, and they mention also the pain felt by the families when the soldiers left:

“(W)e didn’t go to war but some people, because of their ideals, were forced to go... and their families were devastated” (F2).

“(W)e are partially guilty... but we can blame those people who forced young soldiers to go...” (R1).

The “historic past” is something that these students don’t forget about. This takes us, as a colonial nation, to see historical responsibility because of our ties with the past: “(...) we are still connected, both culturally and linguistically, and we have a relation, since we have a historic past and connections that we can’t disconnect; I think we should maintain the responsibilities, so to speak, towards our ex-colonies” (R2). A sense of moral obligation between generations, consciousness about the past and the present in the life of the citizens is present in the answers of the young (cf. Löffström 2012).

One female student does not hesitate to explain her own feelings of shame and sadness about something unjust: “I didn’t do anything... I didn’t do anything to contribute to the Colonial War. I wasn’t even born back then! But I feel ashamed and sad to know that my country, my family, other generations, took part in it, and even if they didn’t harm anyone, they participated in something horrible that didn’t have any explanation. I feel sorrow, sadness and shame for what happened” (R1). The students assign “the guilt” not only to the regime, but to the Portuguese soldiers who, in one student’s opinion, made the April revolution too late: “Estado Novo is not the only one to blame, the soldiers that went to the war are also guilty because if they... if the soldiers had made the April 25 happen, they could have revolted and made the war stop” (R2).

Accountability is acknowledged by the students as collective and as individual. Some students take the individual to the present, therefore the fault is not seen or assumed since they “have not been there”. Others blame the dictatorial leader:

“(T)here is both individual and collective responsibility...” (R2).

“If we think about it now, individually, we can’t blame ourselves and we can’t blame anyone individually, but if we think as a country then yes, we are all guilty because some of what happened, if not all of it, was our fault” (R1).

“If Salazar had given independence to the colonies instead of war, maybe this episode would never have happened” (A2).

However, when they think about the collective, they think about the nation and, in this case, they assume responsibility: “... (responsibility) was not so much on the citizens of that time, but on the decision makers” (F2); “Most of it was Portugal’s responsibility” (R2). For these young there is, without a doubt, intergenerational responsibility and history still has a fundamental role in the pursuit of memory and consciousness of the responsibility for the construction of the future.

Historical reparation? Yes, no, maybe

Paulo Freire has argued that the passage from a naive consciousness to a critical consciousness is necessary for the changes in the field of historical consciousness, both for educators and learners. The capacity to understand the world requires ability and commitment to make that transition. Explaining the concept of historical consciousness, Jörn Rüsen argues that “historical consciousness can be described as the mental activity of historical memory, which has its representation in the interpretation of the past experience in a way that allows to understand the current living conditions and to develop expectations for the future in the practical life according to the experience” (Rüsen 2010, 112).

Three ideas help us frame the contributions of our students in what concerns one of the most important aspects of this work, the issue of the legitimate reparation of the victims of the painful events in our country’s history, and the scope of incidence of those events nationally and individually: We think that the analysis must be made in a framework of critical historical consciousness, appealing to an internalized and

consolidated historical memory, and generating an ability to interpret the past and perceive the present as a transitional path towards the future.

At first, the students were a little suspicious of the “usefulness” of reparation, especially the material ones:

“Portugal should give money to those people (victims of the Colonial War), but money would not erase what has been done, nothing could possibly pay for what some people had to face (...) lost for being there, and not with their families (...) Money can’t buy everything” (A1).

“It is not worth giving monetary compensations now” (A2).

“It is difficult to compensate, how can I say this, give them back a piece of their lives, of their past, which is impossible to do, I don’t know but...” (F2).

However, they accept that the participation in the events that were politically correct but personally painful if you did not agree with that intervention interrupted the normal life cycle of the people, and this should be repaired: “many people could not work because of the war, in that case they should be compensated because their lives stopped” (F1). Further: “money would not be a total help, but it would aid a little, by sustaining the family” (F2). Some interventions did not even question the right of being compensated: “I believe that the ones who survived... should be compensated” (F2).

On a second approach, there was harmony and greater frequency of opinions when the focus moved on to the social recognition in a framework of generational inheritance:

“Those people should be honoured... I don’t think giving money makes them justice... they should be listened to, and receive psychological help” (F1).

“Recognition, honouring those people is something that should be done” (A2). “At least they should be honoured” (A2).

“I also think those people should be acknowledged... they should know we are proud of them and very grateful for the effort they made for us” (F2).

“I think they should be honoured...” (R2).

This aspect, even with some critical voices – “honouring someone don’t take the pain away” (A1) – was consensual and motivated a larger number of opinions, revealing the awareness these students have of the role played by their ancestors in the historic events that, although painful, exist and should be explored. The ways they thought it would be fair to honour these people are interesting: they range from recognizing the role that the media play in everyday life and considering public visibility as a road to justice – “they should be on TV... being famous so they could be credited for what they have done” (A1) – to the more perennial ways of registration of their role – “pay respect to those people who... fought, recognize, award them, make memorial services” (R1). Another aspect relates to those considered responsible for such initiatives: while some consider political representatives responsible for doing something – “maybe greater care by the Government ... closer monitoring of the people who may have psychological damage” (R2) – others think that each person can do something – “when we listen to them, they know we are proud of them for their courage... just from our listening” (F2).

Their participation became more conscious when we approached the social utility of the traumatic events, particularly when they considered the social utility of incorporating in our present history events less “honourable” but by no means doomed to oblivion. The first step is to show respect and regret, in addition to compensation – “compensation to people ... would not solve anything because lives were lost ... but ... show some respect and regret...” (R1). Second, try to learn from history and, above all, be aware that “our knowledge of the past teaches us that violence is easily reproduced” (cf. Mattoso 2012, 86), so it is essential to realize that “historical consciousness cannot be seen as equal to simple knowledge of the past [since it is history that] gives structure to this

knowledge as a means of understanding the present and anticipating the future” (Rüsen 2010, 36). This makes us understand the activities of the students who participated in the study:

“The best we can do is to prevent it in the future” (A1).

“(A)t least, they shouldn’t be forgotten” (A1).

“(W)e must learn from the Colonial War ... maybe not let that happen again” (A2).

One aspect that caused some division among the young had to do with the people and spaces that could be involved in this process. On the one hand, they believe that those close at hand whom they listen to, or meet, deserve particular attention:

“(T)hose who suffered from the war, either psychologically or economically...” (A1).

“(M)any Portuguese who were incapacitated physically and psychologically ... and also the families that were devastated” (A2).

“(T)he elderly suffer most from this... we not so much because it didn’t happen in our generation” (A2).

“(S)till today there are many people who have nightmares ... for example Edward’s [a colleague] grandfather” (F2).

Yet on the other hand they accept that “there are always two sides in a war” (F2), also those who are further away from us:

“... the Portuguese who suffered ... and the colonies” (A1).

“(W)e should compensate to the people of the colonies as well as to the Portuguese combatants” (A2).

“(W)e must also think of the population over there” (F1).

Again, the reparation would mostly be a recognition, or also financial support:

“(A)id the development of these countries [colonies]” (A1).

“(A)id money directed to the colonies ... I think it was an important aid” (A2).

Despite the harmony, it is important to register also the dissenting voices:

“(T)hey got independence, and they are no longer part of Portugal, so these countries should try to help their people” (F1).

“I think we should compensate to the ones from our country ... the other ... are another countries’ business” (F2).

In this subtheme of the project there is an obvious acceptance of the need to compensate the social, moral and emotional losses, rather than the economical or financial ones. The students believe that there are values and feelings that can be expressed but cannot be measured in material terms. The individual and social recognition is something that all of us can make without economic resources. What was more evident here was the role that history can have in the individual and social awareness if we are not ashamed of our past, if we discuss it, and if we use our knowledge to avoid painful futures. There was in the discussions an unmistakable sense of sharing ideas and constructing opinions that were increasingly conscientious and consistent. In this regard, the discussion on the Colonial War was an excellent vehicle for us to come closer to the meaning that history has, and can have, to the young when they are constructing their own notions and civic attitudes.

The importance of history

“Men do their own history, but not in the way they wish; they don’t do it under the circumstances they choose, but under the ones they have to face directly, linked with and transmitted by the past.” (Karl Marx)

“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” (Marcus Tullius Cicero)

Men do history in synchrony with the past. The distinguished Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero above refers to the importance of history in the life of human beings, associating it with the fact that if we don’t know the past, we can never accumulate experiences that allow us to reach maturity. However, that does not mean we only live in the past; the future also matters, but we need history so as to be conscientious of and understand the human behaviour. In this sense, when our students are studying history, they face its importance and the deeds that people did which helps them to understand what they themselves can be and do in the future:

“By studying the past... even when it is painful... we can understand and prepare for the future” (R1).

“... all the events in the past until now influence our opinions ...” (F2).

“In history there is everything... it is in history we can see how the people felt and suffer...” (F1).

“... I think everything is in history. It is in history that we can see how the people felt... some suffered, others didn’t...” (F2).

A nation without history is a nation without memory, and further, as José Barroso said in a speech in Torre do Tombo, April 24, 2004, “there is no national identity without historical memory”. In this research the students often think that national history is not prioritised much, and they suggest more should be invested in the school program and curriculum in this regard:

“... we give more attention to other countries (than to the history of Portugal)” (A1).

“We could know more about the Portuguese history” (R1).

“... we would know more about our own country because that is what matters most to us” (A1).

“We should study the Portuguese history more deeply” (A1).

The construction of historical thinking is gradually progressive and contextualized, so the students should not be encouraged simply to memorize information that presents history as a story of the past which fosters a passive attitude to historical knowledge. Contrary to that, to make inferences from different sources suggests that a vision of history can provide intellectual tools essential to the interpretation and explanation of social reality. History encourages reflection and critical thinking, “the study of history can help to understand human behaviour, and even inform about the emotional capacity that comes from everything that happens in reality; but this understanding cannot pass the level of knowledge and, thus, cannot exert great influence on personal decisions or on the choice of one’s path in life” (Mattoso 2000, 7).

Our young people do not avoid considering and discussing sensitive issues; rather, they place the focus on the discipline of history as a privileged place for addressing specific topics, including the most “painful”: “A history class is important for discussing these themes” (A1); “History (...) is the privileged stage to address these types of questions” (A2). History is present in literature, it inspires theatrical scenes, films

and television series. History helps us understand what changes and what remains the same. It also contributes to preparing our adolescents to face the challenges of today's society. As Miguel Cervantes said: "History is the rival of time, repository of facts, witness of the past, example of the present, and warning of the future".

Historical consciousness – work in progress

"The appearance of historical consciousness is probably the most important revolution we have had since the beginning of the modern era. Its spiritual reach probably surpasses what we know from natural sciences that transformed our planet in such a noticeable way. The historical consciousness that characterizes the contemporary man is a privilege, or maybe even a burden, that no generation before had to have." (Gadamer 1998, 17.)

"Historical consciousness is the reality from which we can understand what history is, as a science, and why it is needed". (Rüsen 2010, 56.)

Whether seen as a privilege of the modern man or a necessary fundament to historical understanding, the concept of historical consciousness and its importance and definition has been the subject of countless conversations. In fact, Cerri (2001, 95) has warned of the fallacy that "the concept of historical consciousness is common to all who use the expression". Here we quote Rüsen to approach a definition that meets what we see as historical consciousness: "(...) the sum of mental operations with which men interpret their experience of the temporal evolution of their world and themselves, in a way that can guide, intentionally, their practical life in time" (Rüsen 2010, 57).

In conversation with our interviewees it was clear they saw that there is a systematic application of the learning of history in everyday life, and the study of specific topics related to the national history motivates

the feelings of belonging to a local, regional and national community. Agreement about this was spontaneous, without disagreeing opinions. Above all, there was the idea that history and the work undertaken in this study give the opportunity to “think twice” before acting:

“... even today all the events of the past until now influence our opinions because they (...) all are different, all events have different moments and feelings (...) I think that (...) if we would really deepen these events that would certainly change (...) the way we see things”(F1).

We believe that the future is malleable and depends on the knowledge we have on the past. A critical and thoughtful look, focused on our ancestors’ actions, allows us to “be conscious that what is happening (...) might contribute to our future” (R2). Because “it is not enough to just think, we have to reflect upon what happened. It is necessary to understand what is necessary (to do) so that it can’t happen again” (F1). This opinion comes close to what Rüsen has said about the relation between memory and historical consciousness. To him historical consciousness is not the same as memory since “to interpret current experiences of time, it is necessary to mobilize the memory in a certain way”: take a trip back in time and recover the past to our present, by the movement of the narrative (Rüsen 2010, 63). In fact, the historical narrative is remembering the past in the light of the present, chaining itself to “future expectations that are formulated from the intent and guidelines of human action” (Rüsen 2010, 64). In our students’ words:

“... we can understand and prepare the future (...) I think that in the future nothing like that will happen, but if we thought that it might happen, some alternatives should be arranged” (R1).

“History (...) is not something that we should be, or have to be, captured by, but it is something that guides us to the future. I think we should know what happened in the past because similar situations must have happened, and we should take that in consideration in our future decisions” (SMF).

“This way we can learn from other peoples’ mistakes in the past, and in our own decisions from now on we have to think about it so that we don’t repeat the same mistakes” (SMF).

The optimism present in these opinions reveals two notions: a predisposition to believe that the past is closed and will never happen again; and the certainty that if it will repeat itself, we would find more effective alternatives than our predecessors, since we possess more information that allows us to change history. Gadamer agrees: “the consciousness that we have of history today differs fundamentally from the one of the past by the way the past presented itself to the people or to an era”. Therefore, the modern human, more than having a privilege, has an obligation to be fully conscious of the historicity of the present and the various perspectives on specific questions. The idea of the relativity of thought by each individual awakens and we “discover that not everyone has the same opinion” (F2). It is in the crossing between relativism and the possibility of having various perspectives that ideas like this appear:

“Treating people in the past as though they were similar (or identical) to ourselves, with the same goals, intentions, beliefs, and attitudes, makes such understanding impossible. Only by recognizing how the perspectives of people in the past may have differed from our own will we be able to make sense of their practices. (...) To understand why people acted as they did, we need to focus on what they were trying to accomplish, the nature of their beliefs, attitudes and knowledge, and the culturally and historically situated assumptions that guided their thought and action”. (Barton & Levstik 2004, 207–208.)

It is when the interlocutors put themselves in the position of the other that they see the distance between the place of the self and the other. This “sense of otherness” (Barton & Levstik 2004, 210) witnesses

of some recognition of historical empathy, an obvious attempt to be the owners of the past:

“(...) I have now consciousness of it, but if I had studied better, probably... and if I had done an interview with someone who (...) has participated in the war I would have a greater consciousness of what they suffered, feelings they felt, everything that was going on around them while they were there, and of course the things in the everyday life would begin to have more importance to me” (F1).

Let us consider closely the last sentence: consider that history has importance for how we think about the simplest things in life, the everyday life. The sharing of stories and experiences about a “painful past” and oppression may engage the thoughts of those who listen and make them think about the value that everyday actions can have. Can we ask for more?

Didactic implications

“We know very little about the way history is perceived and the effects of how history is introduced in the classroom” (Rüsen 2010, 34).

“The (Finnish) history curriculum will probably continue to put the emphasis on teaching factual knowledge and the critical skills of historical thinking but it would be important as well to give space to problematizations that invite the students to reflect on the moral and political element (of history) and to the student’s personal view on the past and their relation to it” (Löfström 2012, 203).

The usefulness of our project can also be measured by its ability to create interpretative elements that can change the practices of teaching history. If we know little about “how history is perceived” by the young, those moments are fundamental to know. When we have questions

about how history education consubstantiates in the history class, those moments of exploratory reflection cannot be wasted. We should not continue to focus only on what teachers say, but in what students think.

What did this project bring with it, with regard to students' thinking? Let us start by the students' comments on the resources that are pertinent for effective historic learning:

"It is more believable for us to see things and be in touch with (...) people's testimonies, go to museums ... history fieldtrips" (A1).

"... we can also approach these themes with family members... with people who have participated, because that is rich with details and has a personal history" (A2).

"(T)hose testimonies are more important (...) because they lived in that situation and know how to describe how it was, the Colonial War" (A2).

"(P)eople who lived through those moments have a more credible opinion" (A2).

"I think that the most important thing was to be with those people and with many other opinions... meet the other person, know what happened, what the person did... that was really important and enriching to us" (F1).

"When we speak with someone who was actually there, we can get a lot of information, and even the feelings they had during those moments" (F2).

"We spoke to our grandparents... I think it is really interesting to know their opinion... and the feelings are also present... is not like a simple book" (R2).

In this aspect the study proved to be a novelty that contradicts the findings highlighted in previous studies. When in 1999 it was stated that “the oral narratives of adults other than teachers recognize that they wouldn’t have much to learn from prior generations (...) and indirectly recognize that teachings of their parents and grandparents will not prepare them to be good interlocutors with regard to history” (Pais 1999, 36), a decade later it is possible for us to find students who think differently. Those with experience in didactics can easily identify the motivation and enthusiasm in the procedures involving a direct contact with the memories of prior generations. Also the diversity of resources is valued, and there is demand for audiovisual elements in history teaching:

“(D)ocumentaries about our history and of other countries (are) excellent ... we learn more with them than (...) with the teacher talking in a classroom with the book in front of her” (A1).

“...instead of talking, our teacher showed us a film (about Stalin) and it was so much more interesting, and maybe we learned quicker (...) it captures our attention, it is a different thing, and we like different things that catch our attention” (A1).

“...there was a series on TV about the Colonial War that showed the two versions of history, the Portuguese and the colonies’, which helped to understand what the Colonial War was” (R1).

With regard to teaching strategies, it is clearly understood that history classes and teachers have a guiding role in the learning process: “History classes give us a small introduction, then we can go home and study in detail” (A1); “the classroom is the appropriate place because we have someone to guide our study” (F2). The students think that research work, like a young historian’s workshop, can be a good way to consolidated knowledge and opinions: “These research papers help us develop our capacity to think” (F1). This is the lesson our interlocutors give to those

who think of the implications of the study for teaching. We have to understand that the “collective forgetfulness of the past has in itself a great importance, since it reveals the darker side of the culture, community that in the present time doesn’t want to experience a certain reality”, fearing that “this way of thinking disables knowledge, judgment and practice” (Gago 2007, 68), and this “includes the role of history in the public opinion and the representations in the media, considering the possibilities and limits of historical representations (...) and exploring various fields where historians equipped with that point of view should work” (Rüsen 2010, 32–33).

We have to involve students in that task and make them the protagonists in the process of studying history. They do not reject that responsibility; they understand what motivates them and what gives them more historical credibility. Then we have to listen to them so that we together can form an informed opinion and become conscious of our past. All history should be processed, particularly those events that are more forgotten in the pain and shame of time. To forget that sinister part in a country’s past is the only thing to be ashamed of!

Notes

1. Cf. the project “Los deberes de la memoria”, created in 2003/2004, under the theme “No à la guerra”, in the context of the war in Iraq. By 2011, this project had already dealt with themes like national identities, immigration, the Spanish Civil War, Francoism, transition, violence, and Latin America.
2. The project “The children of the Colonial War: Post-memory and representations”, launched by the Centre of Social Studies at the Coimbra University, is a study of the “interaction between the family memory and the collective memory of the Colonial War”, and it seeks to understand the process of “memory transmission and the vulnerability of the trauma between generations”.
3. <http://expresso.sapo.pt/hollande-reconhece-responsabilidade-francesa-nos-crimes-nazis=f741427> (3.7.2012).
4. <http://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/os-ministerios/ministerio-da-defesa-nacional/mantenha-se-atualizado/20111219-mdn-guerra-colonial.aspx> (11.8.2012).

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