



## Historical consciousness and the moral dimension

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**ABSTRACT:** Historical orientation is not only about discerning what happened in the past and what can reasonably be expected for and done in the future, but also about sharpening both our perception of the rules and logics and our standards for judging them. Historical thinking as the operation shaping such orientation, therefore, has to integrate reflections in the ethical and the temporal dimension and on their interrelation. On the basis of a classroom discussion and empirical data of students rating different statements relating students' personal identities with their assessments of the Frankish Crusaders raiding Jerusalem in 1099, and using the "FUER-model" of historical competencies, a distinction of two students' reflection as marking two different niveaus of historical competence is suggested.

**KEYWORDS:** historical consciousness, moral consciousness, historical thinking.

### I.

Historical Consciousness has been a subject of theoretical reflection and empirical research for roughly half a century now (Körber, 2015; Seixas, 2012; Seixas, 2015). Having (at least in the German context) contributed considerably to shifting the focus of history education from approaches focusing either on transfer of content-knowledge or targeting mainly educational and/or political aims (such as fostering allegiance with a monarch, a sense of belonging and coherence etc.) towards both a focus on the students' own identities and their orientation as well as on disciplinary concepts (Körber, 2015), the concept never has been theoretically worked out in a single, widely accepted way but rather has spirited a wealth of theoretical developments and empirical research (cf. Rüsen, 2006; Rüsen, 2007; Thorp, 2013; Thorp, 2014).

The temporal dimension being at the core of the concept, its relation to other dimensions of relating to the past and inter-relating past occurrences and structures to the present and future has been also subject of different reflections and efforts of modelling. In several cognition models for history education, the moral dimension has been included into the general concept of historical consciousness namely. historical thinking, without clarifying the relation between temporal and moral thinking. In Germany, Hans-Jürgen Pandel, has suggested to distinguish seven dimensions within historical consciousness, of which three (among them "temporal consciousness" and "consciousness of historicity", meaning "change") form a proprietary core of the domain of history, whereas the other four are shared with other disciplines – among them "moral consciousness" (Pandel, 1987; Pandel, 1987/2005). The distinction has been widely used in German research and teaching, even though both the definition of the dimensions as well as the interrelation of the different dimensions is far from satisfactory (Körber, 2015, p. 7). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, mainly based on disciplinary concepts, Peter Seixas and Tim Morton have included the "Ethical Dimension" in his "Big Six"

historical thinking concepts, claiming that it is important and even indispensable for reflecting on the implications of history for “us, today” (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 6).

Both models are not fully satisfactory so far: With a focus to the moral dimension and drawing on Kohlberg’s model of moral development, Pandel suggests that children only in rather late phases can combine or interrelate moral consciousness with insight into historicity (Pandel, 1987/2005, p. 13), whereas for the early stages, he postulates that children “judge on historical situations analogous to hypothesized present situations without applying a notion of historicity”, but also the existence of a “infantine historicism” which declares everything legit because of it being usual back then (Pandel, 1987/2005, p. 13). The former claim fully qualifies the problem of “presentism”, identified by Seixas and Morton on one of their “guideposts” referring to the ethical dimension in historical thinking, whereas the second would imply exactly the opposite, drawing on a fundamental alterity of the past, applying a modus of “understanding” the past actions. Neither the merely disciplinary nor the developmental approach therefore can satisfactorily address the interrelation or rather combination between temporal and moral thinking.

In the following, I therefore propose a conceptual framework which might help in this respect. It draws upon a concept developed within a competence-model of historical thinking developed by the German “FUER-group” (Schreiber et al., 2007; cf. Körber, 2015, p. 21). For this elaboration, the focus is not so much on the dimensions of the model, but on the concept of differentiation of levels of competences inherent in the model (Körber, 2015, p. 40).

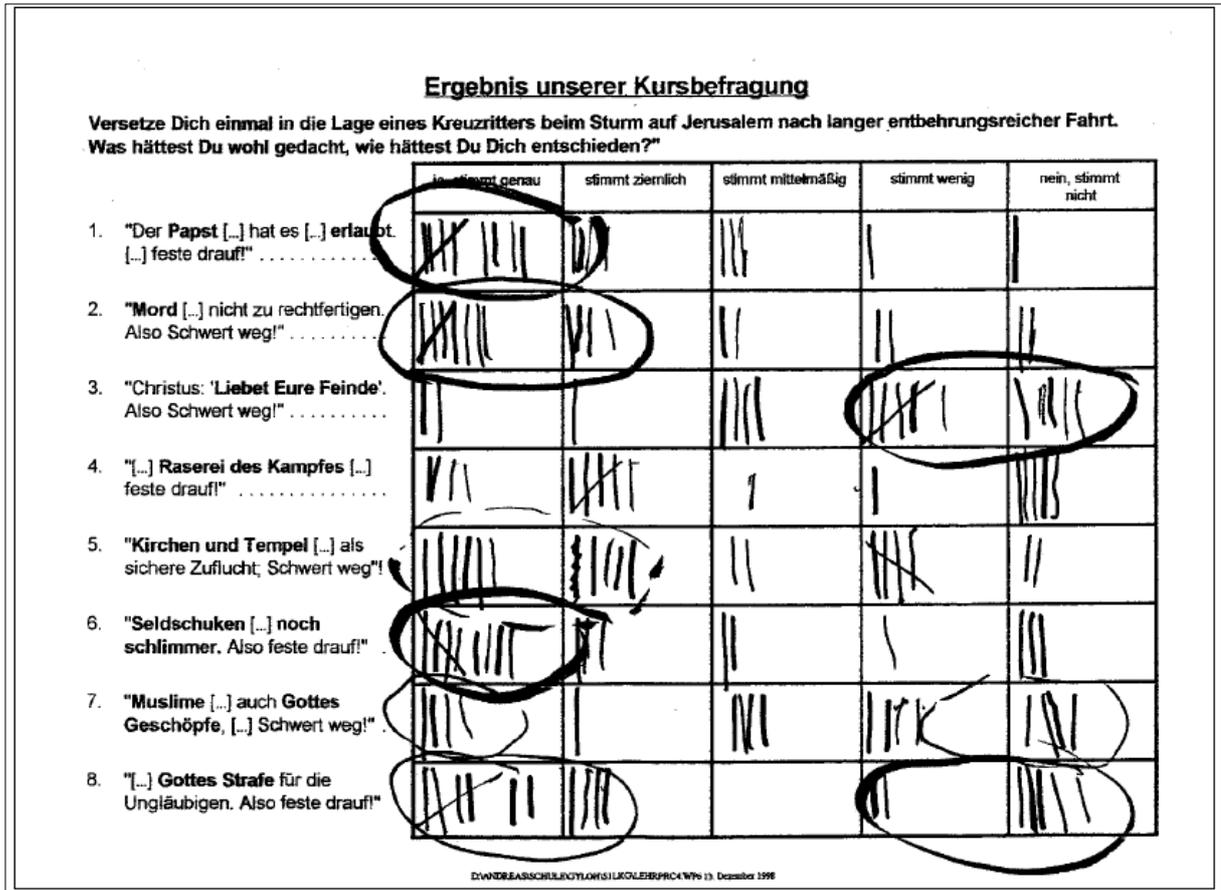
## II.

As a starting point, highlighting the dimensions of the problem, I’d like to refer to a teaching experience I made as student teacher in 1999 at a Hamburg Gymnasium (Körber, 2000). In the advanced course I taught then, students tended to either condemn the behaviour of participants in the past for not corresponding to today’s norms, respectively “explain” it with a reference to “personal interests” or apologise it with a reference to either usual standards back then or to general patterns, for example “that’s what happens in wars” when referring to My Lai. What’s more, some students showed several of these stances next to each other, whereas others had rather consistent opinions, but none of them seemed to be able to reflect on their historiographical nature and importance for the present.

In a teaching exercise I conducted in this class, I challenged students with a task which – on the basis of active application of a specific kind of historical thinking to a highly pertinent historical account – laid open the diversity of their modes of thinking and provided them with information of many other students’ reactions to the same task. Both the task and the data were taken from one project out of a series of empirical surveys on historical thinking carried out in Germany by Bodo von Borries (Borries, 1992; Borries, 1995; later Angvik & Borries, 1997), in each of which the probands were confronted with dilemma situations of historical thinking.

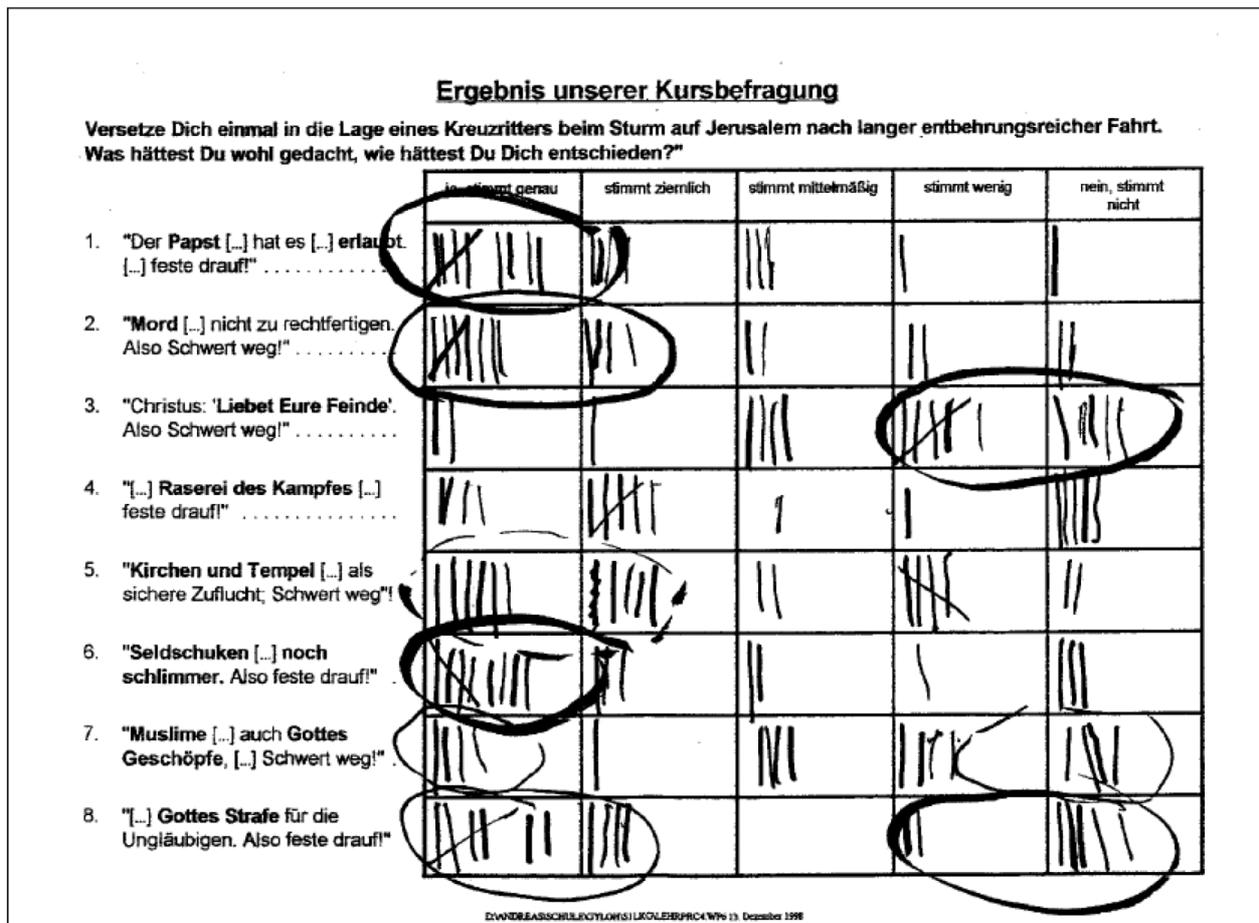
In the concrete exercise, after reading a text combining background information with an excerpt from the speech of Pope Urban II -1096, an account of the journey of the Franks to the East and an extract of William of Tyre’s account of the raid of Jerusalem, narrating the killing of the Muslims, including women and children and the pious rejoicing of the Frankish raiders after the deed, the students were asked, as had been the probands before, to assess, in 5-point-Likert-scales, eight statements on decisions they would have had to take on participating in the Crusaders’ raid of Jerusalem in 1099. The statements differed not only in the result of the decision - “Let’s roll!” vs. “Swords away!”, but also in the logic of argumentation, some of each referring to contemporary modes of thinking, some of them to

modern ethical standards.<sup>1</sup> When their assessments were anonymously published for comparison, a debate was immediately raging, on the ground that the distribution showed no “consistent” picture – neither in the sense that bellicist vs. pacifist positions were visible nor in contemporary vs. modernist stances (see Graph).



1 "Put yourself into the position of a Crusader in the raid of Jerusalem after a long, exhausting journey. What would you have thought, how would you have decided?" 1. "The Pope (...) has allowed it (...). Let's roll" 2. "Do not justify murder ... So sword away!" 3. "Christ: 'Love your enemies. 'So sword away! " 4. "[...] frenzy of the fight [...] Let's roll!" 5. "Churches and Temples [...] as safe refuge, sword away!" 6. "Seljuk [...] even worse, so let's roll!" 7. "Muslims [...] also God's creatures, [...] sword away!" 8. "God's punishment for the unbelievers. Let's roll!"

Graph



As can be seen, statements contradicting each other were met with approval or respectively disapproval (e.g. #1 and 2), some are commonly approved in which universal moral is either rejected (#3) or negated in favour of a “bellicist” decision (#1; #8), even though they follow different logics. Furthermore, while on some items the students strongly disagreed (e.g. #4 and 7).

This indicates that the question at hand here is not just one of morality, but of narrative competence, that is of convincingly linking the statements’ appeal to one’s own person and convictions. Some students might refer to a logic that in those times even they themselves would have acted by other standards than they would today, or they could state that in a similar situation it would be quite natural to act like that even under today’s condition.

This distribution of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders’ assessments reveals that Pandel’s ascription of such combination of applications of both alterity and presentism to young infancy on the basis of Kohlberg’s developmental model may be too simple. In some instances, the students seem apply generalized moral standards based on human rights’ ideas, such as in the answers to statement #2 (partly also #7). This observation can be explained referring to Kohlberg’s theory also: Students in early adulthood may have transgressed the level of mere conventional morality and learned to apply universal standards not only against contrary behaviour in their society, but also to actions in the past (cf. Kegan, 1982). To apply the understanding operation, therefore would require to at least temporarily abandon the universalist moral standard just acquired.

When the distribution was displayed in class, the obviously quite non-uniform evaluation of the statements within the class provoked an intense discussion. It started with a clarification

of different way the students had understood the task which had been intentionally ambiguous in this respect: “were we to answer what we ourselves would have done or what we think a Crusader would have?”. The exchange soon led to a differentiation that to try to answer “as a Crusader”, to understand his actions would require to concede different moral standards in those distant times and to acknowledge that if oneself had lived back then, one might have acted in similar ways. That this insight was in fact gained in a cognitive way, became visible when results of a large survey were taken into account, which had been carried out in a representative sample of 2063 students of the same age some years before (Fehler: Referenz nicht gefunden).

Result of Survey (N=2063; Grade 12; 1992; Germany) “Put yourself into the position of a Crusader in the raid of Jerusalem after a long, exhausting journey. What would you have thought, how would you have decided?”							
		Yes, fully correct	Rather correct	partially correct	rather in-correct	no, totally incorrect	no answer
1.	“The Pope (...) has allowed it [...]. Let's roll!”	195 9,1%	248 11,6%	249 16,3%	468 21,9%	803 37,69%	73 3,4%
2.	“Do not justify murder ... So sword away!”	1178 55,1%	443 20,7%	207 9,7%	145 6,8%	99 4,6%	64 3,0%
3.	“Christ: 'Love your enemies.' So sword away!”	634 29,7%	474 22,2%	408 19,1%	327 15,3%	214 10,0%	79 3,7%
4.	“[...] frenzy of the fight [...] Let's roll!”	130 6,1%	286 13,4%	393 18,4%	556 26,0%	690 32,3%	81 3,8%
5.	“Churches and Temples [...] as safe refuge, sword away”	697 32,6%	541 25,3%	403 18,9%	258 12,1%	158 7,4%	79 3,7%
6.	“Seljuk [...] even worse, so let's roll!”	158 7,4%	205 9,6%	485 22,7%	590 27,6%	613 28,7%	85 4,0%
7.	“Muslims [...] also God's creatures, [...] sword away!”	648 30,3%	506 23,7%	443 20,7%	265 12,4%	198 9,3%	79 3,3%
8.	“God's punishment for the unbelievers. Let's roll!”	141 6,6%	140 6,6%	239 11,2%	473 22,1%	1068 50,0%	75 3,5%

Graph 2: Data from (Borries, 1995, 135ff; 463ff); transl. AK 2016

Their results are quite different, revealing a quite definite rejection of all “bellicist” conclusions in favour of all “pacifist” ones, but therefore at the same time a rather “counter-historicist” stance. These results were met with some incredulity by the Hamburg class. As one student put it in her written reflection on the learning process. She writes that the responses of the other 12<sup>th</sup> graders:

somewhat surprised me, because my own had in almost all cases been the exact opposite. My own, personal opinion is in line with that the other 12th graders, but not the one I have if I try to see things from a Crusader's perspective, because he would in almost all cases opted for violence, I suppose, whereas I would opt against it [...] On the other hand, I think I would have given different answers [even] in place of the Crusader had I not had additional information. The text in the questionnaire describes their ways of thinking and their motivations quite clearly, but it takes stronger efforts of familiarization (at least for me). I don't share the views of the Crusaders, but I can comprehend them. (Körber, 2000, D2)

Obviously, she has learned to differentiate between her own, present position and values and that of a Crusader, which she might not really fully comprehend, but tries to understand. In her further elaboration, she tries to explain this foreign stance in a rational way, hinting to the influence of the Pope's preaching to illiterate people. What is more interesting, though, is the statement that she:

wondered that our morals today are so different from that of the Crusaders. It surely has to do with our education, but the question is why we have been brought up so that a human life counts so more for us as for them back then, even though they were so much more religious. One could suppose that it might be quite vice versa. (Körber, 2000, D2)

This kind of differentiation, which can be qualified as a positive kind of “double standards”, held together by a narrative, has not been met with approval by all students. One of the most active participants in the discussion, states in her reflection that she gained the insight that in contrast to her classmates, she obviously had:

a different stance towards morality and behaviour. Whatever hardships you have to endure, it never is justified to kill other people. It was the Crusaders' [own] decision. They knew before about the hardships. That it was supposed a call from God could neither convince me to commit a murder. [...] I have learned in the lesson that either I am unable to put myself into the shoes of the Crusaders or that my concept of morality is different from that of my fellow humans. [...] I pose different questions to why a person kills, why he acts as under another person's spell [...]. (Körber, 2000, D3)

Being a reflection after the intense discussion, this statement is specifically interesting. The author of D3 seems to cognitively grasp the claim to change the perspective refuses to perform it, because it obviously would infringe something like her moral integrity. This becomes specifically clear in her assumption that the others' more successful efforts to “understand” were indicators of their different morality. Obviously she herself can neither perform the operation of historical understanding nor can she understand that her classmates can at least partly differentiate between their own judgements as persons of today and a hypothetical judgement from a different context. Even the reference to the effort is requires – an affirmation of Tony McAlevy's claim that understanding and empathy requires quite intense cognitive effort (Körber & McAlevy, 1998). Or – from a disciplinary view: while the author of D2 engages in narrative meaning-making by reflecting on historical change not only of facts and structures, but also on values, the author of D3 seems to have found no narrative way of making sense over ambivalence.

### III.

Do we have any concept by which we can describe, categorize (and maybe judge) the students' different cognition? Such a model would have to be able to explain the observations that there seems to be no linear development from either presentist or historicist logics towards higher insight only. It must be able to explain the coexistence of the different approaches postulated by Pandel as well as a development which puts neither logic simply above the other.

In this last part of the article, I would like to suggest that a differentiation of levels of historical competences developed as part of the FUER model of historical consciousness might be apt for these explanations (Körber, 2015, 40f).

Also based on a general concept derived from Kohlberg's theory but stripped of the temporal (developmental) aspect, the concept postulates that historical competences can be held on (at least) three different levels (niveaus):

- the basic niveau is characterized by erratic, spontaneous and inconsistent performance of historical operations as well as by an inconsistent combination of (largely inconsistent and ill-defined) concepts and categories,
- the intermediate niveau is characterised by the ability to apply consistent concepts which have been developed in society and ascertain compatibility with the other members of society,
- the elaborate niveau is characterized by the additional ability to reflect on the character, the interrelation and the limits of concepts etc., including the necessity of improving them.

This logic of different niveaux of mastery of concepts can explain both Pandel's contradictory characterization of how young children conceive temporality, and subsequent developments. A coexistence of both, a) a historicist thinking which claims that in other times morality must naturally have been different and b) a presentist stance of applying our values to past occurrences, which leads to highly situative and even inconsistent, unstable application of either concept and blurred distinction of their respective characteristics and implications, then is a good indicator of a basic niveau: the question is of temporality of both identity and morals is addressed, but without (the possibility of) referring to clarified concepts.

The intermediate niveau would be indicated by a mastery of both concepts but as rather strictly distinguished and mutually exclusive. People holding this intermediate niveau, do grasp the different narrative implications of both (and other) references: To empathically understand the moral standards of others both requires and implies a minimum of abstention from one's own position, whereas to fully persist in one's own temporal moral position implies a certain hubris, denying the former actors the acceptance of equal standards. On this level, questions of temporal interrelations of moral can, however, only be reflected by using both concepts *next to* each other, choosing between them and their implications, at most identifying their only limited applicability. The reflection of the author of D3 seems to indicate to this niveau. The author grasps the difference in logics and implications between a) "understanding" as trying to tentatively apply (temporarily) foreign values to foreign contexts and b) judging the past actions by the standards of her own time, but apparently she can understand these two operations only as mutually exclusive – and the ability to perform either of them as indicative to a trait of personality, not a competence. This would – within this concept – indicate to her on the intermediate niveau of historical thinking.

The author of the other reflection (D2) however, shows her (beginning) ability to reflect on the tension between the efforts to understand and judge on one's own present values. She apparently is on the way to an elaborate niveau, on which the limitations and the interferences between the two concepts can be reflected upon in an integrating way, leading to an insight into the constructive nature of both our knowledge about the past and the concepts and terminology we use for characterizing them, including and insight that the latter are in themselves subject to historical change. In fact, the elaborate niveau then might be indicated by the insight that historical orientation is neither fully achieved with presentist judgements nor historicist understanding, but only by a reflective combination and "balancing" of these two pillars of historical thinking.

A fully elaborate niveau, then would demand the mastery of the related theoretical concepts of temporal alterity, in its utmost consequence as in David Lowenthal's contention that there was an ultimate difference between the present and the past, rendering the latter "weirder than we realize; it was weirder than we can imagine" (Lowenthal, 2000, p. 74) and of "presentism" – the unconcerned application of present concepts to the past – and their relation to the operations of understanding and judging.

#### IV.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that the temporal and moral dimension of historical thinking are inevitably interlinked in orientation processes, but that these interlinkages vary and their consistency may be interpreted as indicators of different levels of competences of historical thinking. This then also constitutes a subject which history education can explicitly address.

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