

## INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

My social studies education friend thought I had proposed a program of “history awareness.” My graduate student feared I was setting myself up in competition with Hayden White’s History of Consciousness program. My historiographically oriented colleague detected tones of 19th century German idealism. Yikes! And I thought it was such an innocent title!

When I proposed the International Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, I should have anticipated misunderstanding. The term is unfamiliar to North American readers but not without precedent. Herbert Gutman’s 1983 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians was entitled “Historical Consciousness in Contemporary America.”<sup>1</sup> Gutman’s subject was the processes by which certain events and their narratives enter — or are denied entry — into working class collective memory, not only at the level of public history, but at the level of the family story. Since Gutman’s address, of course, studies of collective memory have become what Michael Kammen called a “cottage industry,” not only in the United States, but also in Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> These studies emphasize the cultural and historical specificity of forms and institutions of memory, often positioning academic history as modernity’s memory. In general, however, that work has only a submerged, if any, educational dimension: issues of policy that speak to the needs of a group of students in particular, or a citizenry in general, are of secondary interest.

In adopting the term, “historical consciousness,” for the purposes of a Centre at UBC, I hope to bring students of collective memory into conversation with another line of research, that on the ends and means of teaching and learning history, which has been oriented towards strong educational policy prescriptions. This field, lying within the disciplinary contexts of education and psychology, has recently enjoyed a decade of renewed growth and development.<sup>3</sup>

The term “historical consciousness” takes something from each of these bodies of work. Like the memory studies, it sets up our own constructions of the past for comparison with those of other historical eras and other cultures. It acknowledges that the work performed by our own histories is specific to our own time and place. By comparing contemporary and local constructions of the past to those in other times and cultures, we understand much more clearly the contingency of those constructions, the work they do in the present, and how they do it. But, drawing from more policy-oriented educational research, the study of historical consciousness also potentially opens the question of what kind of histories, and therefore what kinds of history education, are

needed by and suited for, the cultural conditions of postmodernity. It opens the possibility, within the comparative context of memory studies, for discussion of policy trajectories for history education not only in schools, but also in the other cultural institutions that help to shape historical consciousness.

The Centre was at the core of the UBC Faculty of Education’s proposal for a Canada Research Chair. With the success of that proposal, plans for the Centre are developing rapidly. The Canada Research Chairs program does not provide major research funding, but rather the expectation that funding will be available from other sources. The Centre at UBC will be a network hub for a geographically diverse team of researchers, whose work centres on these issues. From around the world, they include such figures as Joern Ruesen (Germany), President of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Institut* in Essen, which has pioneered much of the European work on historical consciousness; C.F.G. Lorenz (Netherlands) whose theoretical work on *Geschichtskultur* encompasses both professional and extra-professional handling of the past; Sam Wineburg (United States) who holds a joint appointment in history and psychology at the University of Washington, and who has been at the forefront of American research on teaching and learning history; and Tony Taylor, who chaired the recent Australian National Inquiry Into School History, and who will now lead the National Centre for History Education that grows out of it. As well, a Canadian team of researchers—including a strong core at UBC—will be assembled to investigate the particularly Canadian dimensions of these issues.

A sophisticated virtual collaborative research space is currently being designed to facilitate collaborative and comparative work on an international scale. This will be informed by and have links to, the History and New Media Center (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>) housed at George Mason University in Washington, DC. It will utilize the local expertise of SFU’s 7th Floor Media group, which has been responsible for designing the *Histori.ca* webspace (<http://www.histori.ca/>), among other history-related virtual projects.

But the collaboration will also take place in real time and real space. Plans for a speaker series, visiting scholars, graduate student funding, and conferences (oriented towards theory, research, and practice) are under development. We anticipate, as well, the relocation of the annual *International Review of History Education* to be housed in the Centre.

Two ambitious research projects will constitute the initial substantive work at the Centre. The first is an international,

comparative investigation of the historical consciousness of young people. While most of the new history education research has been conducted within individual national contexts, one precedent for multinational comparison exists in the massive Youth and History project that investigated historical consciousness among European youth, with a sample of 31,000 teenagers across 24 countries.<sup>4</sup> The results of that work indicated that next steps should include more finely grained, if smaller scaled, comparative research.

The second project, though focused only on Canada, is no less ambitious. This collaborative effort involves identifying *lieux de mémoire* in Canada, following Pierre Nora's widely influential French project.<sup>5</sup> The goal is not an exhaustive survey, but a broad, purposive sample of sites and symbols, selected on the basis of their differences, subjected to a multidisciplinary analysis with a common set of framing questions. Sites will be chosen on the basis of their invoking narratives about the past to make claims about the present and future. Both Nora and Hobsbawm developed theoretical frames to investigate national identities and claims of nationhood.<sup>6</sup> This project, cognizant of Canada's porous cultural boundaries to the south, will extend their approaches to include, as well, claims for racial, ethnic, regional and gender identities. In developing an array of *lieux de mémoire* that invoke the past to shape present and future, two related objectives will be foremost: 1) to understand the interaction of sites and symbols, intellectually, institutionally, and in the construction of narratives about the past among multiple audi-

ences and 2) to understand the mechanisms for and dynamics of mediating conflicting claims about the past in and among the various sites. The results of this research will be of major interest within Canada, but will also provide a model for comparable projects in other national settings. It will help to set debates about school history into a much broader understanding of the shaping of historical consciousness. In the early 21st century, with different cultures butting up against one another — temporally, geographically and electronically — conflicting accounts of the past compete for our attention and our belief, with enormous consequences for national and group identities, public policies, and individual experience. In Canada, and elsewhere in the world, the idea of one unifying national history remains the political agenda of a relatively small contingent of vocal activists. Underneath their calls for unity, a plethora of competing narratives assert other claims to nationhood, or put regional, ethnic, gender, class or other identity groupings at the center of the story. We confront this multiplicity of pasts variously, as enriching, enabling and fragmenting. How we reconcile these accounts will frame the way we can imagine our futures. And how we convey to the next generation both a sense of the past, and ways to deal with conflicting pasts will thus determine in large measure the quality of Canadian and global citizenship. These are the concerns that will shape the work of the new Centre at UBC.

*Peter Seixas, Canada Research Chair in Education, University of British Columbia*

1. Published posthumously as the lead essay in Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Panteon, 1987). For more recent use of the term, see Sharon MacDonald, ed. *Approaches to European Historical Consciousness: Reflections and Provocations* (Hamburg: Koerber-Stiftung, 2000). In Canada, see Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Jocelyn Letourneau, *Les Jeunes à l'ère de la mondialisation : Quête identitaire et conscience historique*. (Sillery, Quebec: Septentrion, 1989).

2. Michael Kammen, "Review of Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*." *History and Theory* 34.3, (1994), pp. 245-2612. See also K.L. Klein, "On the emergence of memory in historical discourse." *representations* 69 (2000), pp. 127-150.

3. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds. *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*. (New York, New York University Press, 2000).

4. Bodo von Borries, "What were we looking for and what did we find? Interesting hypotheses, methods and results of the Youth and History survey." In J. v. d. Leeuw-Roord, ed., *The State of History Education in Europe* (Hamburg, Körber-Stiftung, 1998), pp. 15-52.

5. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: the Construction of the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996)

6. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983)