



## Civic consciousness: A viable concept for advancing students' ability to orient themselves to possible futures?

Johan Sandahl

*Stockholm University, Sweden.*

**Abstract:** In history didactics the concept of historical consciousness has become an important theoretical framework in developing a meaningful history education. One significant aspect of historical consciousness is to give students a “usable past” to orient to possible futures. Previous research has shown that history is important when students think about the future but that their use of history in meaning-making is simplistic and based on present-day-thinking. Much research has focused on advancing students' ability to use history in orientation to possible futures, but less attention has been focused on contemporary studies and its role in the process of orientation. By introducing a tentative concept, civic consciousness, the issue of students' orientation is explored by studying students' perspectives on democracy in past-present-future. The data consists of 142 narratives and reveals a pattern of normative stances, process orientation and action orientation. These aspects are considered to be important components of civic consciousness and these have implications for how social studies educators should address the challenges of preparing students for the future.

**Keywords:** historical consciousness, history education, history didactics, civic consciousness, social science, social studies, citizenship education, civics

### Introduction

The argument is that teaching is primarily intended to equip people to live a good life now and in the future. In order to do this we need to deal with a number of existential challenges that we as humanity face. The challenges are existential in the sense that they are related to mankind's continued existence. Such threats are unfair distribution of resources, climate change, war, terrorism and pandemics. These are challenges that new generations have to address.

(Tønnessen & Tønnessen 2007:98, translated by the author)

In history didactics the concept of historical consciousness has become an important theoretical framework in developing a meaningful history education (Körber 2011). The theory declares that history education needs to focus on advancing students' ability to construct meaningful and coherent narratives that have practical use for them, so that students can orient themselves to possible futures (Jensen 1997). Predominantly, it helps students to orient in time, understand their own and others' identities, give tools for political action and be used for moral judgement (Karlsson 2004: 27-30, Rösen 2005).

Research has shown that history is important when people think about the future (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998); history is a part of a meaningful story, but often simplistic and

PLEASE CITE AS: Sandahl, J. (2015). Civic consciousness: A viable concept for advancing students' ability to orient themselves to possible futures? *Historical Encounters*, 2(1), 1-15.

based on present time ideas (Barton 2008). Much research has focused on how history education can help students construct more advanced narratives that do not over-simplify the past and are based on historical knowledge. Such means are tools to interpret the past through second order concepts (e.g. Lee 2005) and deconstructing different uses of the past (e.g. Karlsson 2011). However, the question is if history educators are alone in the process of advancing students' ability to orient themselves to possible futures?

In order to orient ourselves we ask questions both to the past and the present. Thus, we do not only understand the present in light of historical experiences; we also interpret what happens now in search of answers. In school, it is not only history teaching that contributes with the means to understand the present, but also subjects such as social science, social studies or civics (Cf. Sandahl 2013): subjects that aim at understanding the present and the future. Future perspectives in teaching have been described as a "missing dimension" (Bateman 2012, Hicks 2006) and its potential has been highlighted, especially for advancing students' ability to deal with possible, probable and preferable futures (Rubin 1998).

An important part of a contemporary aspect is the ability to understand and analyse competing ideological and political ideas that offer very different perspectives on the future. In short, we need to understand politics and how our own evaluative standpoints on current political and ideological trends influence how we see possible futures. The narratives we produce as political beings are important aspects of how we orient ourselves and how we relate to the surrounding society. In order to discuss these contemporary aspects, this article introduces a tentative concept: *civic consciousness*.

The aim of this article is to explore and discuss possible components of civic consciousness and how it relates to historical consciousness in a school context. Moreover, it aims to problematize how history and social studies educators can help students advance their ability to orient themselves to possible futures. Using a so-called snowball sampling technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), 457 surveys were collected from eleven upper secondary schools. Out of these answers, 142 contain longer narratives allowing the researcher to analyse how students reason about past-present-future concerning one specific topic: democracy.

## **The Theory of Historical Consciousness**

The radicalisation of political thinking in Germany in the 1960's paved the way for a critical discussion of the purpose of history education; this debate gave, in turn, birth to new theoretical approaches to historical learning and what should be in focus in schools' history teaching. These theorists were critical of a history education that focused on memorising the past. Instead, teaching should put *historical consciousness* in the heart of history education. In the words of German historian Karl-Ernst Jeismann (1997:42), historical consciousness expresses a "connection of interpreting the past, understanding the present and perspective of the future". The Danish historian Bernard Eric Jensen (1997:58) writes that we as human beings always make sense of our lives by interrelating our interpretation of the past with our understanding of the present and expectations of what is to come. Therefore, understanding history cannot only be limited to understanding the past but must also include the present and the future. In fact, history should be seen as part of contemporary studies and give students competency in orienting themselves to possible futures.

As we are historical beings, both shaped by history and in the process of shaping history, no one can lack a historical consciousness. Jensen (1997) argues that a historical consciousness can be more or less advanced in different individuals, ranging from pre-conscious to fully conscious, where the interrelation between past-present-future is explicitly

part of a person's thinking. In order to advance students' historical consciousness, Jörn Rüsen (2005) described different components of what he calls a narrative competence. This is the ability to construct coherent narratives that are based on empirical historical knowledge, as well as normative positions that create meaning for our contemporary life. The components consist of experiencing the past by studying it, interpreting the past and using the past to orient ourselves, chiefly in an attempt to make sense of contemporary times by developing our identities and guiding us in moral issues. Also, orientation could be used to guide and prepare for future challenges. The Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson (2004: 27-30) has pointed out the importance of advancing students' historical consciousness so that they can use it to orient in time, understanding their own and other peoples' identities and give tools for political action.

The theoretical discussions over historical consciousness have been, somewhat unjustly, criticised concerning their lack of practical use for teaching history in school. However, in later years, substantial research has been focusing on how historical consciousness could be used as a guide in schools' history education (Cf. Körber 2011) and for explaining how students' historical consciousness could be advanced through history teaching. Such examples are tools to deconstruct different uses of the past (e.g. Karlsson 2011) as well as how historical second order concepts (Lee 2005, Seixas & Morton 2013) can be used to advance students' competence in experiencing and interpreting the past (as discussed by Nordgren & Johansson 2014). The goal is to give students a "usable past" (Cf. Wills 1996:385).

## **Studies on Students' Historical Consciousness**

With the fall of the Berlin wall, Francis Fukuyama (1989:3) declared the "end of history" in his famous paper. Contrary to Fukuyama's belief, the world witnessed the "return of history" with border disputes, new nations and civil wars in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Tägil 1993:5-6). Therefore, beginning in the mid 1990's, many researchers turned their interest towards people's relationship to the past. In Europe and North America, historians and history educators conducted surveys and interviews both inside and outside of school in order to collect data. Many, but not all, studied the data through the lens of historical consciousness in order to understand how people related to history and how it mattered to them.

In the United States, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) collected more than 1,500 stories from people about their reflections of how the past influenced their daily life and hopes for their future. The data revealed a strong pattern: The past was strongly present in people's thinking and it mattered to them in the present and so that they could charter their lives to come. The researchers could also see different approaches to history in how people constructed narratives; race and ethnicity had a strong impact. However, this past was disconnected from school history, and few of the participants found meaning in the history presented in school. Rosenzweig and Thelen concluded that their research had profound implications for history teaching; teaching needed to be rethought if we want students to engage with the past in a meaningful way.

In Europe, a similarly ambitious study was conducted in the *Youth and History* survey (Angvik & von Borries 1997). European students showed the same pattern as in the American study: They had a stronger interest in personal or family history than in "school history". However, the most striking result in the study was the impact of students' geographical setting. The researchers found mutual understanding and interpretation of the past in different parts of Europe. The collective notion of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991:5-7) seemed strong in people's view of history. One such distinct example has been presented by a

group of Canadian researchers (Létourneau, Lévesque & Gani 2013). Jocelyn Létourneau collected more than 4,000 written narratives where students described their perception of Québec's history. The researchers found striking patterns of an imperialist Anglophone narrative and a surviving Francophone narrative. Students' narratives were simplistic, but served a purpose: For identification as a struggling minority and for understanding of their contemporary life.

In conclusion, there is a strong common notion in history education that students shape their historical consciousness outside school and that they bring strong narratives to school that offer meaning to them. Furthermore, these narratives are often simplistic and dependent on the national context (Cf. Barton 2008). Therefore, history education should be designed to include students' perception of the past, present and future as well as a school history that matters to the students. This can be an emphasis on history to facilitate democratic participation by discussing, especially, human agency (Barton & Levstik 2004, Barton 2012), or to advance students' historical consciousness (Ahonen 2005), all with the common goal of giving students a "usable past". Naturally, the focus of these studies has been on how to transform history teaching in order to make students advance their ability to interpret *the past*; fewer, however, have addressed the issue of advancing students' ability to prepare for *the future*.

### **Is There a Need to Define a Civic Consciousness?**

The theory of historical consciousness declares that history education needs to focus on advancing students' ability to construct meaningful and coherent narratives that have practical use for them to orient themselves to possible futures (Rüsen 2005). Primarily, it will help students to orient in time, understand their own and other peoples' identities, develop moral judgement and give tools for political action (Karlsson 2004: 27-30, Jensen 1997, Rüsen 2005). In history didactics there is a significant amount of research on how history education can help students move from simplistic to more advanced narratives. Also, there is strong evidence that history is important when people think about the future (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998, Barton 2008, Barton and McCully 2010). Still, the question is if history educators are alone in the process of advancing students' ability to orient themselves to possible futures?

Debra Bateman (2012) argues that curriculum often is "biased towards the past" and that future perspectives are described as a "missing dimension" (Cf. Hicks 2006), but Bateman's (2012 & Harris & Bateman 2008) research indicates that futures enrich practise in history and social sciences. Contemplating the future in school is somewhat precarious as students might form bleak images of what the future might be like, perhaps influenced by dystopic narratives in popular culture (Cf. Sandahl 2013). Nonetheless, Bateman (2012) and other scholars (Hicks 2012, Cf. Rubin 1998) argue for future perspectives in history teaching as well as other subjects, where students can address possible, probable and preferable futures. For Anita Rubin (1998), the future is important because it reveals peoples' view on the present and orients them towards what is to come. Rubin argues that these future perspectives are rooted in both past and present:

The human idea of the futures is not only based on sharp analysis of a single moment or action and its varying factors; it is also affected by emotions, fears, hopes, personal history, and experiences, as well as by the general views, values, and opinions shared by society and the environment. (Rubin 1998:498)

Consistent with Rubin's argument, Koselleck (2004:272) argued that our expectations are "future made present". However, one could argue that in our efforts to know what to expect we do not turn only to the past. In fact, past experiences can be seen as obsolete (Koselleck

2004:254). Moreover, I would even argue that it is not strictly history education that contributes to advancing students' ability to understand and interpret contemporary times and orient to possible futures. Different social sciences contribute with their theoretical and empirical knowledge, sometimes integrated with history, sometimes in specific subjects (Solhaug 2013, Sandahl 2013).

In previous work (Sandahl 2011 & 2014) I have highlighted a number of social science second order concepts that students need in order to advance their reflexive interpretation and understanding of contemporary issues, and facing challenges ahead. These concepts are not just procedural concepts on how social scientists epistemologically work with evidence, inference and causality when they organise, analyse and critically review societal issues. The concepts also concern how societal issues can be interpreted through different intercultural and ideological perspectives while discussing the evaluative dimensions of societal issues; when students study, analyse and discuss political and economical matters in contemporary society their understanding is not just about describing how things *are*, but how they *could* and *should* be (Lundholm & Davies 2012, Cf. Sandahl 2014). Thus, considering different understandings of society and its development is crucial for materialising different possible futures. The argument here, and allow me to paraphrase Sam Wineburg, is to understand both people on the other side of the millennium and on the other side of the tracks (Wineburg 2001:24). I would argue that getting to know the world around us requires both historical and contemporary understanding of human life.

As humans we try to understand what is going on and we ask questions both to the past and the present. Thus, we do not only understand the present, but also interpret the present in search of answers. An important part of this contemporary aspect is the ability to understand and analyse competing ideological paths that charter very different futures. We are all part of society, whether we want it or not. It is not possible for us to turn away from societal affairs; we need to relate to what is going on around us. Furthermore, our own evaluative standpoints on current political and ideological trends influence how we see possible futures; they are important for how we create meaning (Cf Rubin 1998). Reflections on contemporary times can be more or less advanced, but we are all conscious about the societies we are part of. These characteristics are parallel to important aspects of historical consciousness. In line with this argument, I propose a concept that focuses on these contemporary processes: *civic consciousness*.

The notion of consciousness, rather than literacy, is important because it provides personal meaning-attribution and not merely knowledge and cognisance (Cf. Ahonen 2005). Previously, the concept of civic consciousness has been used by political scientists interested in political socialisation and not much by educationalists. Just like historical consciousness, the concept of civic consciousness refers to an individual process of orientation in social and political life. Civic consciousness combines elements of reason, self-criticism and political commitment with themes such as social identity, personal habits, knowledge and values (Janowitz 1983:x-xi Cf. Lange & Onken 2013). In education these processes are sometimes referred to as social consciousness where students' relation to the world around them is in focus and aimed at advancing students' understanding of the surrounding world and helping them explore available alternatives (Schlitz, Vieten & Miller 2010). However, social consciousness is a concept referring to a generic process of widening students' frameworks from presocial to social consciousness (Schlitz, Vieten & Miller 2010). Hence, the concept of civic consciousness will be used in this article by focusing on students' understanding of contemporary political life and political alternatives. The article aims to explore what civic consciousness might mean in a school context by studying aspects of how students create a personal meaning of the political and social world around them.

## Aim of Research

The aim of this article is to explore and discuss possible components in civic consciousness and how it relates to historical consciousness in a school context; it also aims to problematize how history and social studies educators can help students advance their ability to orient themselves to possible futures. In contrast to previously mentioned studies, focus is aimed at students' understanding of contemporary society and their view of the future on one specific topic: democracy. The question raised is: *What stands out as important aspects in students' perceptions of Swedish democracy and how do they see its future?* The research question aims at describing the role of present understandings in students' perspective of the future. However, students' historical explanations are also included in the data, but they were asked to do so at the end of the survey to avoid triggering their "historical thinking".

## Methods of Research

With the research questions in mind a survey was designed, focusing on one specific topic: democracy. Democracy was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is an important topic in the Swedish Social Science syllabus for grades 7-9 and in the History and Social Science syllabus for grades 10-12. Secondly, it is known to be one of the most frequent topics taught in Social Studies (Swedish National Agency for Education 2005). Thirdly, the concept of democracy is open to different understandings. In political science, definitions of democracy are often referred to as minimal or maximal. The minimalist definition stands for "elitist" democracy focusing on the system, that is to say, effectiveness in government and political rights. The maximalist understanding includes more political dimensions, mainly stressing social justice and peoples' participation in democratic life (Bühlmann, Merkel, Wessels & Müller 2008). In the survey, I wanted to give room for different understandings on a topic well known to the students.

Three open questions were constructed: one asking students to write a phrase or word describing their perception of Swedish democracy, one question asking them to describe how they think it will be in the future and one asking them to highlight historical factors they consider to be important in order to understand the development of democracy. They were also asked to explain their choice of phrase or word. The order of the questions was not randomly chosen. In contrast to other research focusing on students' ideas about history (such as Foster, Ashby & Lee 2008 & Angvik & von Borries 1997), I wanted to avoid "triggering" students' historical thinking. Alongside the open questions was also a questionnaire where students could fill in basic information such as gender, age, school and ethnicity. The survey was piloted with 45 students with the researcher present, in order to investigate time consumption and students' confusion when answering the survey. The students were given different kinds of designs, and after a preliminary analysis, it was clear that students understood the questions, and that the design with readymade lines and a start-off-sentence (for example, "In the future Swedish democracy will be") was the most efficient and triggering design.

An informal network of researchers in education was initially used to make contact with active and experienced teachers in different parts of Sweden. Following a so-called snowball sampling technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), the contacted teachers were asked to name other teachers that might be interested in doing the survey, preferably in other parts of the country. A snowball sampling technique is often used to reach hard-to-reach populations (Spren 1992), but in this case the method was a successful way to collect samples from a wide social network. The aim was to collect around 200 answers in order to have enough samples with longer answers to analyse. However, the snowball effect was stronger than

anticipated, and in the end, over 600 surveys were sent to urban and rural schools across Sweden.

A risk using this technique is that the selected sample is biased. However, the aim of this study is not to draw conclusions on how Swedish students' manifest their civic or historical consciousness in general. Rather, the samples were collected to give qualitative indications on how students' can think about one specific issue in terms of temporality. In total, 457 surveys were collected. Out of the 457 answers, 259 (57%) were labelled as short with answers with phrasing or word only. 142 (31%) were labelled as longer answers with explanations for the phrase or word. 56 (12%) of these were considered as missing data; these surveys were left blank in a closed envelope or with basic information filled in. Others had written gibberish or jokes instead of answers.

The students' answers were categorized into each temporal dimension showing patterns of similar phrasing. However, it was hard to draw clear conclusions from the phrasing when short answers were compared to long answers. When democracy was described, the phrase "unjust" could be explained as concerning the distribution of wealth or voting rights. The phrase "inclusive" could be described as inclusion in decision-making or social inclusion in general. The answers were analysed in order to reveal common patterns in the descriptions of democracy in the present, the future and the past.

## **Results**

When students wrote about democracy few answers were descriptive and neutral only. The vast majority wrote evaluative opinions about how it is and how it should be. Overall, the students' views were predominantly positive with a strong support for democratic ideals, but they also expressed concern for its future. The students' answers were in general process- and action-oriented and they saw themselves as actors in contemporary democracy. Students' understanding and interpretation were, for the most part, based in the present-day.

### **Democracy Perceived as a Normative Stance**

One of the most common answers when students described present democracy revolved around inclusion in the political processes. In this context, democracy was seen as something fair or unfair. The most frequent example was that minors were not allowed to vote. One student gave a typical answer:

[The Swedish democracy is] Unfair. It's not always easy to make yourself heard and even though it's understandable that people below 18 are not allowed to vote I think that younger people have more long-term thinking and are more politically active than people over 18. (BC042)

The students' answers can mainly be understood in terms of a maximalist understanding of what democracy is and how they perceive its future. There were many minimalist answers as well, such as positive descriptions of the majority rule, Sweden's well-developed transparency and specific political rights. However, this "elitist" approach towards democracy was less common than the students' maximalist understanding. The problems that Swedish democracy is facing were closely linked to issues of social justice, such as inclusion of minorities in general society and unequal possibilities for its members. Hence, democracy was understood as politics and the students recognised it as something they want to change according to their own political interest.

In students' understanding of democracy now and in the future there was a strong presence of their own political will. However, students were not always conscious of what ideological preferences that political will contained. Some wanted a more elitist rule with "experts"

governing, while others were blunter in what kind of political change they wanted to see. One student characterised future democracy in Sweden as corrupt, xenophobic, weak, segregated and without a welfare system. She elaborated about the welfare system in the following way:

When you realise that capitalism is just about pillaging, e.g. the cutting down of rain forests and inequalities in the free market you realise that it's too late to go back to a more fair society because all of the resources are gone. Some are there of course but man is self-centred and shaped by capitalism. You can't change that in a generation. (BC016)

For this student, the political cry was for a more socialist government to change society into something she wants. These kinds of frank political hopes and fears were not always present, but social justice issues and hopes for a better society were pervasive among students' views.

When students wrote about the future the evaluative tendency became even more manifested. Most answers included phrases such as "I hope" and "I fear"; the students' perspectives of the future were either hopeful or crestfallen. This 18-year-old gave a typical answer:

In the future democracy is threatened. Threatened is not the word I'm looking for here, but I can't think of any better word. What I'm saying is that it's going the wrong way right now. Instead of talking gender equality we're talking about closing our borders to immigrants. That's contrary to what I've been hoping. It doesn't look bright if it continues like that. (SC013)

Overall, most students were hopeful when they thought about the future. Their stories of hope often included social justice, particularly the income gap between different social groups in society. In the students' perspective, decreasing income gaps would lead to more inclusion in society and "poor people" could raise their voice in the political debate. The crestfallen stories were often connected to a threat from populist parties such as the Sweden Democrats, and many believed that we would see more xenophobia in the future. In general, issues such as active citizenship, the environment, gender equality and social change dominated the students' narratives. Some of the answers were very personal in their demand for a better tomorrow:

I need to believe (in order to survive) that society will be more gender equal. That we will have the same opportunities as men. (BC042)

## **Democracy as Process and Action**

In general, the negative descriptions were not positioned against democracy; they rather acknowledged that there was room for improvement. Many of the answers described problems that should be addressed in order to improve democracy. A 17-year-old girl, critical concerning exclusion in present democracy, gave one such answer:

I think it is functioning well, at least when you compare to many other countries. We have a high turnout in the elections, low corruption etc. (...) Society needs to be more inclusive. Many groups need to be included and able to practise their democratic rights and have a full citizenship. They should be assisted and encouraged to do so (...) Democracy isn't a static state – it's a process. I believe that Swedish democracy should develop and improve. (BC048)

This kind of description, first describing the positive side of Swedish democracy and then criticising it, was common and could be seen as an inner tension between acknowledging a well functioning democracy as well as addressing its challenges. In fact, one frequent notion in the surveys was that Sweden's democracy is better than the democratic systems of other countries. There were different ways of expressing this view. Some referred to Sweden as a "role model" and others described the Swedish system as "superior". Among some of the students this picture was contested and described as something that Swedes flaunt with:



It's something we flaunt with, and that's not really fair. It's often told that we're such a good example and that "Sweden is so democratic". Still, we are facing huge problems like unfair distribution of wealth and other skewed power relations. (BC044)

It seems as if present day democracy has triggered students to think politically and to be evaluative in their answers. Furthermore, when they described present or future democracy, students were process oriented; democracy might be good or bad and it will change, for better or worse. This process-oriented understanding was not as clear and present when students gave historical reference.

The most common history oriented answer in the survey was the combined answer of "universal suffrage" with the explicit mention of women's' suffrage in 1919/1921. The majority of the answers specifically mentioned single events and not processes. Some described the process of democratisation, but singled out either the universal suffrage or "when the king lost his power" as the instance of this. Students referred to single events rather than describe the lengthy process of establishing Swedish parliamentarism between 1809-1974. In the following example the student described an understanding where the single event stands as particularly important:

One important factor in history is] when the king lost his power. The birth of democracy is an important event. If it had happened one hundred years later we wouldn't be such an equal society. (SC006)

The most common process-orientated condition was the rise of Social democracy and the labour movement in the late 1800's. Other examples were the enlightenment, industrialisation and secularisation.

Among students, there was also a recurring feature that emphasised engagement. Many were worried by the lack of civic engagement and that people have become politically numb caring only about their own well-being. People do not really get involved in politics for the questions that matter to students; mainly social justice, the environment and xenophobia. Many of the students also hoped that a new generation would change the political agenda and put these issues in the centre of the political debate:

[The Swedish democracy] might be in jeopardy. What I mean is that democracy is in jeopardy when people are not aware of their democratic obligations (...) The development is that we for a very long time have been comfortable and we are consuming simple truths. We're just thinking about our own well being and vote on single issues and not about the bigger issues. (SC001)

[In the future Swedish democracy is] Better than now. The people of Sweden perhaps will think more on what's important for society/the future. Things like the environment, the sick and so on. That might lead to things better than just for themselves. (RC009)

## Democracy as a Contemporary Narrative

Overall, historical references were scarce in the material until the students were asked explicitly to give examples of historical impact on the democratic development. Most answers were closely linked to contemporary society and did not include direct historical reference. This typical answer gave a view of the future that was deeply rooted in contemporary issues:

[In the future the Swedish democracy will be] different. I can't really say that I can predict it. Seeing the growing xenophobia and racism, sexism, gay bashing and also the development of scarce resources with peak-oil and the greenhouse effect I can't really see a development towards the kind of democracy we have today. (However, the growing movement for social justice that we see today gives me some hope...). (BC021)

This does not mean that all students lacked historical reference. Some were very aware that Sweden has a long tradition and that this is important in order to understand the stability of the Swedish democracy now and in the future. "Sweden is tied to history" as one student put

it, but there was a common denominator when students described history: the view that we are evolving towards a better future and that set-backs are considered as “going back in time”. This student talked about her desired future, but also included historical references when she described the journey that Swedish democracy has undertaken:

I hope the future is better. I believe that Sweden has made a journey of freedom in the last 100 years, which includes everything from being able to attend school and be admitted to the university. I hope that this journey will continue. That there will be freedom for individuals and every person's individual talent will decide a child's future rather than the size of their parent's wallet. (SC001)

Students' process orientation looked forward, rather than to the past. Even if they mentioned and discussed historical events, their normative stance was important to them, both in using the past and seeing the future. This student elaborated on the meaning for contemporary society by referring to a historical process, and also its impact on times to come:

[One important factor in history is] the emergence of a labour movement that made Sweden a “leftish” country with a relatively bigger focus on welfare and collective values. Due to the Social democratic welfare state the modern Sweden was founded. This will be important in the future as well because welfare and class inequalities will continue to be important questions that shape the political agenda. (BC013)

This kind of elaborate answer that relates history to the present and the future were quite rare. This does not mean that students disconnected history from the future, but rather that history simply “happened”. What has happened in the past was important for understanding the present time, but when they described their perception of the future they articulated their own political will and talked about change. Thus, agency is mostly considered as something contemporary and most students do not consider agency in the past. Others, however, did see the past as process and intertwined agency in past and present:

[One important factor in history is] that people have been engaged. Without strikes and demonstrations we'd never be where we are today. At the same time I think it's important that we don't become comfortable. Democracy can always be improved. (BC045)

[One important factor in history is] public protest. I don't think anyone with power ever wants to give it away. You need to fight for democracy! (SC013)

The historical references were in most cases connected to single events and not underlying processes in history. Many times, these events were seen as lessons that we have learned from our past and that we are better off now. This was particularly apparent when students referred to World War II, which was a “lesson learned” for humanity. For some students these lessons were not enough:

[One important factor in history is] The Holocaust. Acknowledged and remembered. The holocaust and the oppression of Jews have led to greater acceptance of that particular ethnic group. Perhaps it's an eye-opener for oppression against “new” groups. Still there's a lot of oppression against some groups in Sweden. (BC038)

## **Conclusions and discussion**

When students were asked to write about democracy, it triggered them to think politically about present-time democracy. Overall, they showed a maximalist understanding of democracy (Bühlmann, Merkel, Wessels & Müller 2008) and they did not explain it in a neutral and descriptive way. Instead, the data demonstrates that students gave an evaluative account for how they understood it. It was seen as good, bad, improvable and superior to give some examples. This view was even stronger when students gave account for how they perceived the future. The future they saw was often described in political terms: how they would like the future to be according to their own political will or how they fear it to be in

contrast to their political will. The students were generally process oriented when they thought about democracy; it was changing and they were a part of that change. This process-oriented account was not as present when students thought about historical factors that might explain the way Sweden's democracy has developed. Students put more emphasis on single historical events than on underlying historical processes. When students described the present and their view of the future they saw themselves as agents and engagement was emphasised. Generally, this was not the case when students discussed historical events where human agency was more or less absent in their understanding of the past.

The process orientation of the students' answers looks to the future, rather than to the past. Also, the normative stance was important in their interpretation of the past and what possible futures they saw. Alongside a historical narrative, here manifested mainly as a master narrative about the rise of Swedish Social democracy, was a contemporary narrative. This narrative was strongly influenced by their own political stance and what future they hope or fear.

### **Civic Consciousness: A Viable Concept?**

The theory of historical consciousness states that humans, in order to make sense of their lives, interrelate their interpretations of the past with understandings of the present and expectations of what is to come (Jeismann 1979, Jensen 1997, Rüsen 2005). This thesis is not contested. What is suggested is that an important part of this interrelation is found in students' being rooted in contemporary times. Parallel to historical consciousness is a process of making (political) sense of the present and the future. An important part of this process is students' own political preferences and how they use ideology to create meaning. Ideology and politics are not always salient, but are always present. In this meaning-making they see themselves as part of a process towards different possible futures (Cf. Bateman 2012, Rubin 1998). Students are political beings with ideological views on how society ought to be, and that has significance for their perspectives on the future. Based on this finding, I suggest that there is a parallel concept to historical consciousness, namely 'civic consciousness', that involves elements of normative stances, process orientation and political engagement. In the overarching process of orienting towards the future, interpretation is not just limited to the past but is also an important part of making sense of the present and possible futures. Furthermore, civic consciousness is an important conceptual tool that can be used to better understand how students construct meaning in their narratives, and not just in contemporary narratives, but also in historical narratives. As Debra Bateman (2012) has previously argued, future perspective enables students to make stronger connections between learning and their own meaning-making.

The views of students presented in this article manifest civic consciousness in their attempt to understand and make sense of contemporary and future democracy. Ideology and their own political will seem to be just as important in their interpretation and understanding of the present as it can be in their understanding of history (Cf. Létourneau, Lévesque & Gani 2013). In order to advance students' ability to orient themselves to possible futures, we need tools other than the ones found in the historians' toolbox. Such tools should advance their way of understanding and interpreting the present as well as giving perspectives on the future. We need to advance both their historical thinking and their social science thinking.

The students' view of history, as found in the data where historical processes are simplified, is personified in single individuals and shaped by a national context, and well documented in history didactic research (Létourneau, Lévesque & Gani 2013, Barton 2008, Lee 2005). In previous research, it is also recognised that students tend to interpret the past

from present perspectives (Seixas & Morton 2013). This might be a problem for history educators, and the material in this study indicate that students seem to distance themselves from the past and do not consider humans as agents in the past as they do when they discuss the present and the future. However, this article suggests that we need to understand students' interpretations of the present in order to advance their ability to orient to possible futures. This could be done by more in-depth studies of students' contemporary master narratives.

## Implications on Teaching Past-Present-Future

History education can give an important contribution in order to help students construct narratives that they can use in their lives to make moral decisions, be a guide in their search for an identity and give them tools for political action. Engaging with the past requires historical thinking and the ability to understand the different uses of history that we encounter in our lives. Still, students are rooted in the present and when they look towards the future they involve interpretations and analysis of the society around them. In order to advance this interpretation they need tools other than historical ones. Social science theories and methods are needed in order to understand contemporary political, social and economical settings. Students need tools that help them advance their ability to use ideological and intercultural perspectives on societal issues and how they themselves are a part of shaping the future, just as people were in the past.

To advance their contemporary narratives, there is a need to engage with social science second order concepts. Examples of such concepts are how social scientists create inference, how they use perspective taking and what evaluative dimensions are rendered by societal issues (Cf. Sandahl 2011, 2013 & 2014). In the same way that students show simplistic historical narratives in history, they tend to present simplistic understandings of contemporary society. In the effort of advancing students' ability to make sense of the future, both history educators and social science educators can be seen as stakeholders. The goal is not just a usable past, but also a usable present. The tools (such as second order concepts) are not the same, but the goal is similar: for new generations to understand that they too have choices when they address challenges that are threatening our existence. Understanding human agency has, and continues to be, an important part of meeting those challenges.

## References

- Ahonen, S. (2005). Historical consciousness: a viable paradigm for history education? *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(6), 697-707.
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Revised and extended edition. London: Verso.
- Angvik, M., & von Borries, B. (Eds.). (1997). *Youth and history: A comparative European survey on historical consciousness and political attitudes among adolescents*. Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung.
- Barton, K. C. (2008). Research on Students' ideas about history. In L. Levstik, & C. Tyson. (Eds.), *Handbook of research in social studies education*. London: Routledge.
- Barton, K. C. (2012). Agency, choice and historical action: How history teaching can help students think about democratic decision making. *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*, 7, 131-142.

- Barton, Keith. C. & McCully, Alan. (2010). You can form your own point of view: Internally persuasive discourse in Northern Ireland students' encounters with history. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 142-181.
- Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bateman, D. (2012). Who's thinking about the futures? Challenging the ways we think about curriculum. *The Social Educator* 29(3), 11-17.
- Bateman, D., & Harris, C. (2008). Time perspectives: Examining the past, present and futures. In C. J. Marsh. (Ed.) *Studies of society and environment: Exploring the teaching possibilities*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia.
- Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10, 141–163.
- Bühlmann, M., Merkel, W., Wessels, B., & Müller, L. (2008). *The quality of democracy: Democracy barometer for established democracies*. Paper presented at National Center of Competence in Research: Challenges to Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Working Paper No. 10a. Available Online: <http://www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/nccr/publications/workingpaper/10>
- Fontaine, P. F.M. (1986). What is history didactics? *Communications (of the International Society for History Didactics)*, 7(2), 90-102.
- Foster, S., Ashby, R., & Lee, P. (2008). *Usable historical pasts: A study of students' frameworks of the past*. Full Research Report ESRC End of Award Report. RES-000-22-1676. Swindon: ESRC.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, 16, 3-18.
- Hicks, D. W. (2006). *Lessons for the future: the missing dimension in education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Hicks, D. W. (2012). The future only arrives when things look dangerous: Reflections on futures education in the UK. *Futures*, 44(1), 4-13.
- Janowitz, M. (1983). *The reconstruction of patriotism: Education for civic consciousness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jensen, B. E. (1997). Historiemedvetande – Begreppsanalys, samhällsteori och didaktik [Historical consciousness - Conceptual frameworks, social theory and didactics]. In C. Karlegård, & K-G. Karlsson (Eds.), *Historiedidaktik* [History didactics] (pp. 50-51). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Jeismann, K-E. (1997). Geschichtsbewußtsein [Historical Consciousness]. In A. Assmann, & K. Bergmann (Eds.), *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* 5, überarb [Handbook of history didactics] (pp. 42-45). Aufl. Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer.
- Karlsson, K-G. (2004). Historiedidaktik: begrepp, teori och analys [History didactics: conceptual frameworks, theory and models of analysis]. In K-G. Karlsson, & U. Zander (Eds.), *Historien är nu: en introduktion till historiedidaktiken* [History is now: An introduction to history didactics] (pp. 25-70). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Karlsson, K-G. (2011). Processing time - On the manifestations and activations of historical consciousness. In H. Bjerg, C. Lenz, & E. Thorstensen (Eds.), *Historicizing the uses of the past: Scandinavian perspectives on history culture, historical consciousness and didactics of history related to World War II* (pp. 129-143). Bielefeld: Transcript.

- Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Körber, A. (2011). German history didactics: From historical consciousness to historical competencies – and Beyond? In H. Bjerg, C. Lenz, & E. Thorstensen (Eds.), *Historicizing the uses of the past: Scandinavian perspectives on history culture, historical consciousness and didactics of history related to World War II* (pp. 145-164). Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Lange, D., & Onken, H. (2013). Political socialization, civic consciousness and political interest of young adults. In M. Print, & D. Lange (Eds.), *Civic education and competences for engaging citizens in democracies* (pp. 65-76). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Lee, P. (2005). Putting principles into practice: Understanding history. In S. M. Donovan, & J. D. Bransford. (Eds.), *How students learn. History, mathematics and science in the classroom* (pp. 31-78). Washington D.C: National Research Council.
- Létourneau, J., Lévesque, S., & Gani, R. (2013). A giant with clay feet: Québec students and their historical consciousness of the nation. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 11(2), 156-172.
- Lundholm, C., & Davies, P. (2012). Students' understanding of socio-economic phenomena: Conceptions about the free provision of goods and services. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 33(1), 79-89.
- Nordgren, K., & Johansson, M. (2015). Intercultural historical learning: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(1), 1-25.
- Rosenzweig, Roy & Thelen, David P. (1998). *The presence of the past: popular uses of history in American life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rubin, A. (1998). Giving images a chance: Images of the future as a tool for sociology. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 43, 493-504.
- Rüsen, J. (2005). *History: narration, interpretation, orientation*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Sandahl, J. (2011). *Att ta sig an världen. Lärare diskuterar innehåll och mål i samhällskunskapsämnet* [Taking on the world: Second order concepts in the social sciences]. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.
- Sandahl, J. (2013). Being engaged and knowledgeable: Social science thinking concepts and students' civic engagement in teaching on globalisation. *Norddidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2013(1), 158-179.
- Sandahl, J. (2014, forthcoming). Preparing for citizenship: The value of second order thinking concepts in social science education. *Journal of Social Science Education*.
- Schlitz, M. M., Vieten, C., & Miller, E. M. (2010). Worldview transformation and the development of social consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 17(7-8), 18-36.
- Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2012). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.
- Solhaug, T. (2013). Trends and dilemmas in citizenship education. *Norddidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2013(1), 180-200.
- Spreen, M. (1992). Rare populations, hidden populations, and link-tracing designs: What and why? *Sociologique Bulletin de Méthodologie*, 36, 34-58.
- Swedish National Agency for Education. (2005). *Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003(NU03). Samhällsorienterande ämnen - övergripande perspektiv, fördjupande*

- ämnesrapport till rapport 252* [The national evaluation of Swedish high schools: Social studies]. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education.
- Thomas, T. K. C. (2005). Civic and Political Education. *Education and Society in Hong Kong and Macao, CERC Studies in Comparative Education*, 7, 175-200.
- Tägil, S. (Ed.). (1993). *Europa – historiens återkomst* [Europe – The Return of History]. Hedemora: Gidlunds.
- Tønnessen, R. T., & Tønnessen, M. (2007). *Demokratisk dannelse: fagdidaktikk i samfunnskunnskap* [Democratic education: Subject matter didactics in the social sciences]. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Wills, J. S. (1996). Who needs multicultural education? White students, U.S. history, and the construction of a usable past. *Anthropology Education Quarterly*, 27(3), 365-389.
- Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

### **About the Author**

Johan Sandahl is a PhD-candidate at the Centre for Teaching and Learning in the Humanities (CeHum) at Stockholm University. His research interests are didactic issues in Social Science and History. His licentiate thesis, published in 2011, focused on second-order thinking concepts in Social Science. He is now working on his doctoral thesis that will be presented in 2014.

Author Email: [johan.sandahl@cehum.su.se](mailto:johan.sandahl@cehum.su.se)