

ISHD session Poznan 2020
How should history education respond to the arrival
of the Anthropocene Era?

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Proposal:

Are the aims of a historical education enduring and unchanging, or should they evolve in response to the challenges facing the human race? For many years, and in many countries, history education in schools has focused to a considerable extent on the transmission of a positive and celebratory narrative of the national past (Cajani *et al.*, 2019), and on the idea of passing on 'the canon' of the best that has been written and said (Arnold, 1875).

In 2017 the United Nations agreed on 17 goals for sustainable development on our globe (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>), related at least in part to Paul J. Crutzen's hypotheses from 2002 on the shift from a Holocene to an Anthropocene era in the decades after World War Two. This paradigmatic change was thought to have been caused mainly by dynamic industrial growth since the inception of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. The scientific debate on Anthropocene development is mainly a matter for the natural sciences. However, the aim of the symposium is to relate this hypothesis to its implications for the teaching of history in schools and to history didactics more generally. The principal research question is: How can the teaching of history prepare students to respond in an intelligent and well-informed manner to life under Anthropocene global conditions?

It could be argued that if the 17 goals are to be reached in the foreseeable future, societal discourse must include the subject matter of History. Otherwise the teaching of history cannot fulfil its purpose of shaping in the most useful way, the student's historical consciousness. If the subject matter of history should be connected to the student's everyday life, it would then be meaningful for the students to ask questions to the 17 goals, and try to understand them in a historical perspective.

As an example the first goal mentioned is 'To abandon all poverty in the world'. In a history lesson this would include a longitudinal examination of the inequality in the world from the ancient societies to the present. The didactical perspective would be historical thinking in order to qualify the student's historical consciousness and their acquisition of Allgemeinbildung/liberal education.

In his paper, 'Education for survival: an historical perspective' (2010), Richard Aldrich pointed out that Professor Martin Rees, a leading UK scientist and eminent world renowned scholar in his field, had suggested that in his view, there is only around a 50/50 chance that there will be human life on the planet in the year 2100 A.D., because of the gravity of major threats currently facing humanity. And yet in many countries (including the UK) there is no mention of these emerging threats. The current National Curriculum for history in the UK, for example, makes no mention of the historical dimensions of climate change. (A recent Secretary of State for Education in the UK opined that 'What parents want is children, sitting in rows, learning about the kings and queens of England.'

The UK is not the only country where the traditional 'national' paradigm of school history has remained influential, but there are other countries, notably Finland and Sweden, where ideas about the aims and purposes of school history have evolved to include issues of sustainability and other issues related to the arrival of the Anthropocene Era.

The session considers these developments from a variety of perspectives, in order to provide insights into what is an important issue in history education. Contributions to the symposium will include participants from countries at different points on the continuum between history curricula which retain an attachment to traditional 'national story' narratives about the past, and those that are moving towards a more global and human perspective, which acknowledges the shadow of the Anthropocene. Although participants come from countries which are at different points on this continuum, they argue that a meaningful examination of the past in order to give students the opportunity to reflect on the future challenges of the Anthropocene scenario is an important issue for those involved in history education to consider.

References:

Aldrich, R. (2010) Education for survival: an historical perspective, *History of Education*, 39 (1): 1-14.

Arnold, M. (1875) *Culture and anarchy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (most recent reprint).

Cajani, L., Lässig, S. and Repoussi, M. (eds) (2019) *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education in the Post-Cold War Era*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Please send your proposal (max. 500 words) to Terry Haydn (t.haydn@uea.ac.uk) until 10 January 2020 at the latest.