Modern History in Light of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution

by

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After six years of lessons on the ancient cultures and the Renaissance, the Waldorf curriculum covers modern history in the eighth and ninth grades. Our concept of modern history should not be limited to the centuries following Napoleon's reign but should cover the span of time from the Renaissance to today. One decisive aspect of history lessons is to bring forth the new occurrences, the differences and the symptoms of each age. The modern age is distinguished by its roots in the Renaissance. Technology is the fruit of the natural sciences that were born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; colonialism and imperialism are the fruits of the great discoveries, just as the modern impulses towards freedom are an extension of the Renaissance man.

It is impossible for an adult to approach the fundamental problems of our times without personal convictions and engagement. Therefore "objective" instruction in history is not always possible. The teacher's engagement with the subject is especially important to educate children. At the same time the teacher can avoid propagating personal opinions and educate toward freedom when he has an eye for the child's inner being. Educating towards enthusiasm is not to be confused with spreading political propaganda.

In modern history the teacher meets a dilemma that he must overcome to the best of his ability—our world is in crisis. The crisis is defined by overpopulation, hunger, pollution, emotional strain, superpowers, the chasm between rich and poor, weapons of mass destruction, and not in the least pessimism and apathy. How can we educate children to hope and carry moral values without pretending the world is better than it is?

I believe we can view the entire Waldorf curriculum as an attempt to overcome that dilemma. These problems remain daily challenges in our history lessons. The teacher may not lie, but he knows that educating children to a positive future may not happen if he speaks continually about war, revolutions, concentration camps, famines and Hiroshima.

Our curriculum for history in the eighth and ninth grades acknowledges that at around this age, teens cross an important threshold in their lives. For some this may bring new maturity; they may become adults overnight. Eighth graders are often lazier than ninth graders. It is as if they have a reservoir of unresolved forces. They remind one of steam that is under pressure! The typical ninth grader has leveled off his pressure and shows greater concentration and an active intellect. Subject teachers play a larger role in their education than class teachers. Pupils engage more intensely and approach the teacher's level of knowledge in each field of learning.

In the eighth grade we concentrate on the vast exterior changes our civilization has made, how science and technology have transformed an agricultural society into an industrial society. In the ninth grade the focus is on the social, political and cultural changes. In Norway the eighth grade curriculum is the industrial revolution and the ninth grade is the French Revolution. These broad parameters leave the teacher with many possible avenues. He can choose the history he feels will best prepare his students for our modern times. The following themes are merely suggestions.

A dark moment in history is the bloody, slave trade that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to import labor for the sugar plantations. This is a picture of humanity spinning along the wheel of racism, colonialism, the money machine, world trade and the decline of civilizations. I chose the Danish historian, Thorkild Hansen's powerful book on the Danish-Norwegian slave trade, Step for Step, One by One. Silent and sweating in the humid, tropical heat, no, they were not chained together as reported in popular journals. Iron was too costly and who would they get to carry the heavy chains back when the trade at the fort was over and they returned to the forests for more Africans? The Dane L.F. Romer reported in 1754: "The slave's right arm was fastened with an iron vice to a huge piece of a tree, which the slave could barely lift, let alone carry upon his head and run away." That is how they traveled through the rain forest. He takes us to the white fortress along the coast, onboard the slave ship during the month-long transatlantic sojourn in tropical heat, sardined together until they reached the Danish island in the West Indies. He takes us to the sugar plantations and the slave's share of hard labor. The picture is clear before our inner eye—the sugar mill blown by the wind, long rows of blacks weighted down by exhaustion, the human being reduced to a machine, a thing, a mere product. This is truly a heavy but extremely important message for the children. As an artist, Thorkild Hansen uses the written word to bring us inner experiences of man's inhumanity to man. If one can express this all to students with compassion, they may feel the urge to help resolve our conflicts.

In the middle of all suffering we must be able to find something human. The antithesis must be there. Among thousands of scoundrels there must be one who is just. For example a human fate shines forth in the doctor Paul Isert. His story brings hope. Some opposed slavery. They were not merely cowardly, introverted but willing to fight for justice, to think constructively. Isert's short life cannot be retold here but it ended tragically and unsuccessfully. This was in the midst of the French Revolution and Denmark would not end slavery until fifty years later. Were his deeds therefore useless? In class we discuss the value of a seemingly unsuccessful life such as Isert's. Could he not have forgone the setbacks? Would slavery ever be stopped without the sacrifices made by people like Isert?

We have spoken about sugar. In the chemistry lessons the teacher goes into depth its properties, but already with a historical and human background. The work on the plantation and in the sugar mills is in the students' minds when the chemistry lessons bring forth an understanding of the products we all desire. Will it help us to better understand our for-father's motives and actions for which we are still paying dues?

The industrial revolution is very much an English phenomenon. The breakthrough was here; nowhere else did it happen so quickly and with such manifestations. Carlyle maintained that Napoleon would never have been defeated without England's surplus won of cotton spun by Arkwright's spinning machine and woven in Cartwright's loom, both of which were driven by Watt's steam engine. Teachers can present with economy by concentrating on that country including the Empire's world domination. It is important to study biography, the lives of one or two inventors. What inspired them? Technical competence? Idealism? Coincidences? Honor? Financial reward? There are many human motives! Most important is the atmosphere of the times that surrounded the great inventors: excitement for the new discoveries happened side by side. And remember the skepticism, for example the riots against locomotives when the steam mill in London was burned down in 1791.

The technical principles can be studied in relation to the machines before we enter the social consequences of the first industrialization: poverty, child labor, and slums. The proletariat, the new working class took its place in world history. It is time to read Dickens! Out of desperation awakens the positive social conscience awakens. We can be sure that Oliver Twist did not "live" in vain!

Another huge revolution headed down the tracks. On the Manchester-Liverpool line excited journalists held on to their top hats:

> At the moment of departure the locomotive pours out an explosion of steam, it seems to pause for a few seconds, but the explosions continue with shorter intervals, until they follow so

> quickly that you no longer can count them. These explosions remind me of the growls of lions and tigers. When it reaches a hill it slows down until the locomotive works like an exhausted working horse. The speed is reduced until the highest point is reached when the machine can work no faster than you could ride beside it on a horse. The breathing of the locomotive slows down as the movements slacken, it groans until the animal is finally exhausted and gasps like a tiger beaten to death by a buffalo.
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> At the height where finally the decent begins, the strokes come faster, the machine and train pick up speed and take only seconds to fly down the hill like lightning under continual artillery fire. The train storms away at a speed between thirty-five and forty miles an hour. The whole situation is overwhelming, almost scary.
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> The thunder from Vesuv and Etna's volcanic explosions were enormous, but the scenes our locomotives awaken bring a better self-image and awaken our admiration for mankind's spiritual strength. It is more alive than the works of authors, painters and philosophers.

As teachers, we ought not emphasize great moments from technology's childhood for romantic reasons. Many children today experience at an early age adults who are critical of the other side of technology—noise, cars, traffic, and pollution. Young children may sit in cars listening to their parents share their hate for cars. Buckled in to their seats, how would children handle that situation? Usually distrust, fear, cynicism grow from their parents' hypocritical attitudes! The same can occur when children live with an uncritical attitude toward technology. Both sides can be addressed and explored when learning the history of technology. Otherwise there would never be an opportunity to go to the depth of those forces that release technological gains and cause decisive consequences for human beings and for nature. Educating the children to think critically must be based on the nature of technology. We want to whole-heartedly admire Stephenson's first locomotive and be carried away like the first passengers. Whatever one wants to overcome, one has to know. Disconnected hate, dislike or fear will never help us overcome the backsides of technology. It is very dangerous for teachers to stir up feelings in favor of one side or the other, no matter how clearly the truth may be proven. Our task as teachers is to present material and explore symptoms so they may occur in the child's life according to his or her prerequisites to gain knowledge, experience feelings and act. As teachers we must trust that each generation will find its own way to freedom. In addition to history, physics and biology lessons contribute to the children's deeper understanding of technology.

The unsuccessful revolution by the citizens of France in the 1790s is a main theme in the ninth grade. Is it necessary to spend so much time on those chaotic events that ended with Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon family? The French Revolution is confusing on the outside, and it is easy to get lost in the names, political parties and concerns about who guillotined whom. On the other hand, one should not be perplexed about what the French Revolution inaugurated in world history (See a thorough examination of the subject by Hans Jorgen Hoines, "The Ninth Grade and the French Revolution").

Because it was the first revolution in history that turned social status upside down it has received much attention. Oddly what interests us most deeply is everything that did no happen but remained in the world of ideas: the unrealized ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood. The French Revolution made new demands on feudal society but was not able to realize those demands. Rather, it can be found in the content of consciousness during the following centuries, in all political, social and cultural expressions—the battles for national liberation, socialism, communism, suffrage, human rights, and so forth. This demonstrates how careful we need to be with the idea of cause in history. This does not mean the revolution did not have its cause in previous conditions. We should give the pupils strong pictures of the Sun King's Versailles and of the desperation of the people in Paris of 1789. At the same time it is the effects of the revolution that brought about new expressions of human equality, of each individual's personal integrity, and of the dream of brotherhood. It is the essence of new global and universal thoughts that became a major threat for the rulers of Europe. Yet the ideas that arose during the revolution were not new! They grew from the seeds of ancient civilizations, now reaching expression at the level of consciousness mankind reached by the end of the eighteenth century. People were receptive to a more tolerant view of the human being but not able to realize those views in the social realities of the day.

The French Revolution is a great theme for raising important questions with pupils, such as: What were the consequences of the events? What goals did they try to achieve? What goals did they achieve? It is important to ask even difficult questions, for the process helps the children differentiate historically. For example, what shall we think concerning Bismarck? What happened in the Russian Revolution and how did it differ from the French Revolution? A major area we can never avoid is the role of individuals in history. One should not get lost in generalizations about groups of people, such as the French, the English, the soldiers, the proletariat, and so forth. Naturally, groups of people play major roles in history, but individuals carry an increasing amount of responsibility. His

limits are pressed, in a few minutes he must make decisions for many people no matter how well the democratic processes are developed.

In the ninth grade we also study German history. We start with Prussia and emphasize the successful attempts for democracy at the Frankfurt Parliament after 1848 and how Germany fell under Prussian premises. We learn about Bismarck and the Empire, authoritarian democracy, the rivalries between European superpowers and the many events preceding World War I.

It is also very interesting to discuss how the old and shaky regimes in Austria, Turkey and Russia played a role at the turn of the twentieth century. The pupils need a multi-sided view of the moment the shots rang out in Sarajevo. The teacher should make a big effort to help the children not be "happy" about the "exciting events" that follow. Historians agree to share the blame for World War I is shared evenly among the countries involved. And we learn that World War II is directly related to the peace agreements and conditions that led to economic disaster between both wars. The goal is not to remove blame from Hitler or the Nazi ideology, but to help the discussions reach some neutral ground where we can ask: What is Nazism? It is something that may reappear in political events, our disdain for the weak.

We need to approach the goal of history lessons—to develop a comprehensive, universal perspective of humanity. We should not get lost in unimportant events for history is full of them, but point to the changes during past four hundred years that have brought us together while the questions remains in each individual: Have we come closer together?