Present to varying degrees in the different compulsory education systems, the learning of history and geography responds to three successive, interlocking or overlapping objectives, depending on the period and the country. The first of these is to forge a national or community identity. Another is to foster integration into wider spatial contexts and to position oneself in relation to neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. The third is to transmit both explicit and implicit ethical and civic values. These three functions underpin the legitimacy of history and geography at school.

Speculating about history and geography teaching’s potential for helping people to live together in an increasingly interdependent world implies asking what such teaching means to the nations, States and social groups practising it. Against a background of globalization and the simultaneous emergence of new forms of regionalism, what does the teaching of history and geography mean? How can different societies meet and how can they live together?

To respond to this challenge, history and geography must now look beyond their original objectives so as to facilitate such an encounter and give it meaning, based on understanding of others and respect for other cultures.

Original language: French

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What do we mean by history and geography teaching?

The meaning of history and geography teaching is neither constant in time nor fixed in space. There are constant adjustments to changes in political and social contexts and the requirements of each country so as to respond to what are perceived as new needs and thereby re-establish the legitimacy of such education. But despite these variations in meaning, the teaching of history and geography seems to fulfil three functions: to forge identity, to foster integration and to transmit values.

Forging identity

School is where representations of national territory are forged:

There are constant complaints that our children do not know enough about their country. If they knew it better, it is rightly said, they would love it even more and could serve it even better. But our teachers know how difficult it is to convey a clear idea of their country to children, or even simply of its land and resources. To schoolchildren, their country merely represents something abstract which, more often than we might think, remains alien to them for quite a long period of their lives. To capture their imagination, we must make their country visible and bring it to life (Bruno, 1877, p. 4).

Reading *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* [The tour of France by two children], published in 1877, and learning to decipher the map on the wall have symbolized the kind of geography taught for the purpose of legitimizing a finite space. This approach to geography teaching thus conveys, implicitly rather than explicitly, the idea of substantive identification between a territory and the people living in it (Guérin, 1991). This spatial legitimization has a historical dimension (heritage), a geographical one (natural boundaries) and also an economic one (territorial features are translated into statistics, classifications and records of achievement). Geography thus produces the kind of egocentric discourse that evokes love for one’s country, stresses geopolitical aspects (as reflected in warlike or sporting metaphors) and engenders a collective culture.

History accomplishes the same function. Understanding the past helps in controlling the present and justifying domination and changes of course. History has repeatedly been put at the service of political objectives and social demands. The dominant structures (States, churches, private interests) control and finance education, publishing and reproduction, thereby continually conveying the impression of an official or ‘politically correct’ version of history.

Marc Ferro (1981) shows, however, that there are several layers of history in every nation. First of all, there is history that is taught at school, i.e. institutional history that speaks for, or justifies, a policy, ideology or regime and may, to a greater or lesser extent according to the time and place, be subjected to scientific criticism. This is, as it were, history seen and projected ‘from the top’. Alongside it there may at times be an ‘institutional counter-history’—a repressed history that sur-