UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

NEW: Emerging Scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies

Facing national historical guilt in teaching history: a comparison between Australia and Germany

Hanna Rosalie Wortmann

> *Australian history should never be a source of smug delusions or comfortable superiority. But nor should it be a basis for obsessive and consuming national guilt and shame.*
> John Howard, 19/11/1996

Both Australia and Germany look back on a poignant past full of unprecedented cruelty. However, the way of dealing with this past and with the national historical guilt associated with it seemingly differs. This difference becomes particularly apparent in the way their own history is taught in these two countries.

According to Clark (2008), most Australian school graduates have one severe thing in common: they were taught about their national history in a repetitive, incomplete and fragmented manner. Even though most of them acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal history, there is a substantial lack of student engagement and a general sense of disinterest. This fatally leads to a 'troubling contradiction' (Clark, 2008, p. 68): though they consistently study Aboriginal history, their actual knowledge about it is patchy and fragmentary, maybe even superficial and therefore potentially dangerous. This half-knowledge could be dangerous, as it could be associated with ignorance and consequently be the basis for a lack of understanding towards Aboriginal people today and in the future.

Besides the lack of student engagement, Clark (2008) also refers to some students' tendency to reject Indigenous history altogether. This is closely linked to the question of national guilt and responsibility for Australia's colonial history, as the rejection of this topic dismisses any assumption of historical guilt and a responsible handling of it: nobody wants to feel guilty for something that he or she did not have any control over. It is easier and less disturbing not to know the exact truth about the 'pioneers' complicity in murder, abduction and rape, about fear and hatred' (Reynolds, 2000, p. 133), but to maintain an idealised version of the past. By stating that Australian history should not be 'a basis for obsessive and consuming national guilt and shame', former Prime Minister John Howard who was in charge in 1996 expressed what at least some Australians felt.

NEW: Emerging scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies **is a Student Journal from UTS ePRESS showcasing outstanding student works.**

In contrast, feelings of historical guilt are deeply imbedded in the Germans' sense of national identity (Rensmann, 2004). Every action of national pride, such as showing the German flag during football world cup, is carefully being reconsidered – somehow for fear others could misunderstand it as extreme patriotism. In line with this, the history of the Hitler era is a fixed and important component in German history curricula. The ideal of teaching Aboriginal history that is mentioned by Clark (2008), namely in an increasingly complex and recursive manner, seems to be translated into action in German schools teaching Germany's fatal past. In addition, most German students visit a concentration camp at least once, remembering and evoking the Holocaust at the same time. Just as Australians, Germans do not want to feel guilty for something they did not do themselves, but Germany has developed its own commemorative culture, maintained by public debates and continuous confrontations with its Nazi past in politics, art, film and television.

Both German history of Second World War and Indigenous history are difficult to teach and the moral questions raised by the Holocaust and 'total war' on the one hand, and colonisation and dispossession on the other hand, are not easily answered. Nevertheless, knowledge about the past can be a reminder of who we are now and a powerful strategy of prevention. In the face of rising nationalism in Germany and continuing injustice towards Aboriginal people, this seems more important than ever.

References

Clark, A. 2008, *History's children: history wars in the classroom.* UNSW Press.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *PM Transcripts*, viewed 11 May 2017, <http://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00010171.pdf>.

Rensmann, L. 2004, Collective guilt, national identity, and political processes in contemporary Germany. *Collective guilt: International perspectives*, pp. 169-190. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139106931.012

Reynolds, H. 2000, *Why Weren't We Told?: A personal search for the truth about our history*. Penguin Books.