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## Empathy as an emotional practice in historical pedagogy<sup>2</sup>

Most of the pedagogies at memorials and museums in Germany dedicated to the crimes of National Socialism and the history of the GDR share the common pedagogical goal of developing a sense of empathy in students and visitors. This take on historical pedagogy holds that memorials and museums gain social legitimacy by communicating empathy, and thus by educating visitors about values and morality. The paper argues that this perspective on emotions in general and empathy in particular is very problematic and quite questionable. Teaching 20<sup>th</sup> century German history should, first and foremost, be about teaching history and not teaching values. It is observable that the sort of historical empathy sought out by educators does not automatically lead pupils to the desired views on morality. Rather, it tends to overwhelm them. If we define historical learning as an autonomous act of productive appropriation, empathy might come to signify the way learners integrate their perception of the other into the self, which ultimately bolsters one's capacity to judge and to be mindful of the plights of others. For this reason, the paper argues that empathy should be conceived of not as a goal of historical pedagogy in and of itself, but rather as one possible point of departure for getting students and museum visitors to engage with history.

**Key words:** historical empathy, empathy, historical pedagogy, emotion, emotional practice, moral education, imagination, memorial sites, museums

### 1. Empathy as the Royal Road to Successful Historical Pedagogy?

On June 8, 2012, the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Berlin-Brandenburg Forum on Historical Pedagogy met at the Leistikowstrasse Memorial in Potsdam to discuss *Emotionality and Controversy in Historical-Political Pedagogy* (see LaG Magazine 2012). Brandenburg's Minister of Education, Youth and Sports Burkhard Jungkamp greeted the

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teachers, museum and memorial docents, and employees of other places of learning by presenting them with a clear demand: “Children and adolescents must learn how to feel and empathize – even in history class” (Jungkamp 2012). Jungkamp didn’t offer any clarification of his statement. However, it pointedly demonstrates the unquestioned optimism that informs the way empathy has been used to legitimize historical education<sup>3</sup>. As the employees of museums and other places of learning presented their pedagogical theories that day, one thing became clear: empathy has become a key concept in pedagogical discourse. It seems that nobody could say anything about emotionally impactful learning without saying something about empathy. The quote from Brandenburg’s Minister of Education does a particularly good job of showing that empathy is increasingly seen as the royal road to successfully teaching children and adolescents about history. However, the privilege empathy enjoys is informed by a conception of emotions that should be a cause for concern. Without clearly defining what was meant, the participants spoke of a “force” that should be avoided (“emotional shock”) and a “force” that should be put to work in the learning process (“viewing emotions not as problem, but as an opportunity”). They spoke of the “emotional energy” of history and discussed why it was desirable that students and visitors feel “moved”<sup>4</sup>.

An attentive observer of German debates on what students should learn about the history of the Holocaust, violence, persecution, dictatorship, and subjection will find many iterations of the political understanding of the function of historical pedagogy that was pointedly presented by Jungkamp.

Most of the presentations on pedagogy at memorials and museums dedicated to the crimes of National Socialism and the history of the GDR might be seen as sharing the common pedagogical goal of *developing a sense of empathy* in students and visitors, even if the methods discussed often diverged sharply. They all drew on a conception of empathy that seemed to be so self-explanatory as to require no further clarification. The forum might thus serve as a good example of a contemporary discourse that has gained a large following, particularly at places of learning outside the school setting.

Put succinctly, this take on historical pedagogy holds that memorials and museums gain social legitimacy by communicating empathy, and thus by educating visitors about values and morality. In the context of historical learning, I think this perspective on emotions in general and empathy in particular, a perspective I will call positivistic here, is very problematic and quite questionable. My objections are informed by my work both as a historian of emotions and as a teacher of history. In the following, I will argue that teaching 20<sup>th</sup> century German history should, first and foremost, be about teaching history and not teaching values. Public debates often obscure the distinction. Further, I will demonstrate that the sort of historical empathy sought out by educators does not automatically lead

<sup>3</sup> This article primarily discusses the German debate on historical pedagogy on 20<sup>th</sup> century history. An international comparison is needed, but for reasons of space cannot be developed here.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the author’s notes.

pupils to the desired views on morality. Rather, it tends to overwhelm them. For this reason, the chapter argues that empathy should be conceived of not as a goal of historical pedagogy in and of itself, but rather as one possible point of departure for getting students and museum visitors to engage with history. I focus on German debates on pedagogy at memorials and museums on the history of National Socialism and the GDR.

The most recent interdisciplinary studies<sup>5</sup> show just how much different definitions of empathy can diverge depending on disciplinary perspective. This harbours an opportunity, but if empathy can be just about anything, this might also lead to a dangerous overvaluation of it: “Empathy (...) is a complex mix of physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical capacities” (Assmann, Detmers 2016: 7). In explaining their definition further, Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers place particular focus on the role and significance of emotions in the process of developing empathy. They write that empathy is an “emotional contagion” and that it comprises “feeling *as* others”, “feeling *with* others” and “feeling *for* others” (Assmann, Detmers 2016: 7, emphasis in original)<sup>6</sup>. It is precisely these modes of empathy that express themselves in emotional practices which I intend to critically analyse in the following in their relation to historical learning.

Empathy might initially be defined as “a form of taking the perspective of the other that makes it possible for us to understand what she/he is experiencing” (Frevert, Singer 2011: 135), or as a way of temporarily entering the mind of the other or putting oneself in the other’s shoes, to take a few common images from everyday parlance. Or, as Fritz Breithaupt, scholar of German Literature, characterizes it: “At the very least we have the feeling that we understand other people and living beings, that we feel what they feel and that we can guess their intentions” (Breithaupt 2009: 18).

This preliminary definition has the advantage of referring directly to the emotional dimension of the encounter between self and other, similar to the definition from Assmann and Detmers already quoted. However, I suggest further that we conceive of empathy as an emotional practice, and that we discuss the ways empathy and the experience of alterity are related to one another in historical pedagogy and historical learning. In this sense, empathy should not just be understood as an imitation of the other’s feelings or as a way of experiencing what the other experiences. Rather, it should be understood as a way of forming an idea of the inner life of others, which is bound up with the concomitant demand that one try to relate to it. I will place particular focus on this last point in order to draw attention both to the ways the observer is actively integrated into the constitution

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter argues from the perspective of cultural history. It does not attempt to deal in depth with the philosophical literature or debates on the Theory of Mind.

<sup>6</sup> Stueber discusses various forms of “emotional empathy” – “emotional contagion”, “affective empathy”, and “sympathy” – “that are differentiated in respect to whether or not such reactions are self or other oriented and whether they presuppose awareness of the distinction between self and others” in: (Stueber 2014).

of empathic perception and to the ways the experience of empathy can have an effect on observers.

In the following, I will describe, explain and critically discuss the empathy hype in the German debate on teaching history at memorial sites. I first offer some insights on the implications of understanding empathy as a moral concept. I will then discuss the relation between empathy and emotions as well as that between empathy and historical imagination. This leads to the question as to how we should view empathy in the context of learning about history.

## 2. Empathy as Moral Concept

Why does Burkhard Jungkamp think history lessons should be the central site where students learn to feel empathy? The Minister spelled out his reasoning in no ambiguous terms: teaching history is teaching values. In doing so, he raised the capacity to empathize to the level of a historical imperative. Or, as Ute Frevert pointedly writes: “Sympathy, empathy, compassion: the new gospel” for “civilizing the human heart” (Frevert 2016: 81). Memorials of the crimes of National Socialism and the GDR should no longer simply serve the purpose of informing people about a series of historical events. At the least, Jungkamp claimed, they should further visitors’ understanding of politics and history, and should optimally further their sense of duty towards human rights, democracy, and contributing to world peace. With that, the minister took a clear position in the debate on what historical learning is and should be. The question is, again: is it learning *about* history (teaching as history has been), that is, an act of interpreting and acquiring knowledge about history as accurately as possible? Or is it learning *from* history (teaching values based on history)? For the latter, teachers are supposed to help students adopt the right dispositions for the present by teaching the events of the past. The German debate also reflects the conflict between adherents of historical education and those of historical-political education. More than others, the memorials and museums on the history of National Socialism and the GDR, which have to compete for public funding, see their legitimation in their commitment to historical-political education. In doing so, they attempt to fulfil the expectations of the sources of such funding. Many experts in pedagogy themselves claim that empathy is a necessary precondition for the development of political consciousness (Gaede 2000: 185). The basic idea is that empathy provides particularly strong foundations for learning about morality and is thus indispensable for museum and memorial pedagogy and for teaching history in general. However, the question as to why and how empathy has an effect in this context is systematically excluded from discussion.

A look at Anglo-American – but also German – multi-disciplinary research bolsters the impression that there has been a bit of a hype around empathy as the royal road to moral education, a hype that has drawn some of its energy from Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese’s discovery of mirror-neurons (see Iacoboni

2009). According to some social-psychologists and experts in pedagogy, empathy supports socially-minded, altruistic behaviour and reduces destructive forms of feeling, thinking, and acting. The right amount of empathy thus seems to make societies more social and provides foundations for peace and solidarity (Gassner 2007: 25). Empathy is connected with the very precise desire to promote, teach, and induce socially and morally desirable behaviour, as the use of the concept by teachers of ethics and religion shows. Thus, in many curricula, empathy, tolerance, the ability to deal with conflict, and civil courage often appear together side by side (see, for instance, The Bavarian Ministry of Education and Culture 2004: 2).

This interpretation of empathy as a moral concept has its origins in the British moralist David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* and Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Characteristic for their theories is the way they use the term "moral sense", which they also call "sympathy". They define it not as a primitive, innate capacity, but rather aim to explain its workings in terms of more basic mechanisms: "Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator" (quoted in Prinz 2011: 213). Hume and Smith, in different ways, used the concept to describe the act of sharing what another feels. This understanding corresponds with what we today broadly understand as constituting *empathy* (Prinz 2011: 214; Frevert, Singer 2011: 123)<sup>7</sup>. Contemporary neuropsychological studies on empathy support this finding, and take it even further. Laboratory tests have proven that perceiving the emotional state of another person can trigger representations of the same state in the observer and can thereby motivate socially-minded behaviour. Nevertheless, there are varying degrees of empathy and limits to how far this find goes. For instance, one study dealt with the effect membership on a soccer team would have on test subjects' reactions. Subjects were asked to watch members of their own team and those of other teams get fouled. They showed a much more pronounced reaction when members of their own team were fouled as when members of the other team were fouled (Frevert, Singer 2011: 138–143). These neuropsychological finds support in the claim that empathy (and thus socially-minded behaviour) can be learned when the contexts shaping one's perception of the other are positively invested. This finding makes empathy an interesting concept for experts in pedagogy. In contrast, a lack of empathy or the conscious suppression of it can pose a threat to the social fabric. This insight is the primary motivating force behind the desire for teaching people to empathize. The Dutch educationalist Ibo Abram claimed that empathy had to be a central aspect in the field of education after Auschwitz:

Barbarity – like Auschwitz – is the incapacity to empathize. Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* (the capacity to put oneself in the other's shoes) and *warmth* (an atmosphere of security and openness) (Abram 2010, emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> The authors also discuss discourses on moral feelings in history and in the present.

Ido Abram doesn't mean to say that a lack of empathy was the main reason for the Holocaust. Rather, he seeks to underline a certain hope that informs much work in the field of Holocaust education, at least in German-speaking countries. Abram implicitly refers to Theodor W. Adorno's 1966 radio talk "Education after Auschwitz". This text remains the main point of reference for the German debate on the education of emotions after Auschwitz. According to Adorno, Auschwitz was made possible by a social "coldness", an "indifference to the fate of others" (Adorno 2005: 201)<sup>8</sup>. I think that this continued recourse to Adorno's "Education after Auschwitz" helps explain why empathy as a learning goal is held so highly by German memorial pedagogy. A consequential understanding of this diagnosis means interpreting education after Auschwitz as education that aims to teach people to sympathize with others, which might here also be understood as a *moral sentiment* and socially-minded emotion.

### 3. Historical Empathy

It is precisely this take on empathy as a "moral practice" (Breithaupt 2016: 151) that scholars working in cultural studies have rightly called into question. "[T]he ethical currency of empathy" (Oliver 2016: 167) should not be taken for granted, but should continue to be critically discussed. In philosophy, there is lively, public debate on the moral (ir)relevance of empathy. Prinz pointedly argues: "In fact, empathy is prone to biases that render it potentially harmful" (Prinz 2011a: 214)<sup>9</sup>. This debate has not yet been taken up by discourses on historical empathy, which remain heavily influenced by the notion of empathy as *moral sentiment*. However, this is not sufficient for understanding historical empathy, which might become clearer if we note just one of its distinguishing features: while disciplines such as psychology and the neurosciences understand empathy as a mode of interacting with people in one's immediate spatiotemporal sphere, the historical encounter necessitates empathy with historical actors no longer present. Having an encounter with history thus demands that one bridge a spatiotemporal gap. Spatial, because the historical encounter not only takes place with people who lived in the past, but also with people who lived in different geographical areas. This double alterity makes for a particularly difficult challenge for the disciplines. The encounter with the past is never immediate, but always mediated. Media like history text books, documentary films, and historical exhibits and memorials serve the function of helping people overcome this distance.

Considering the need to grapple with this challenge, it is worth inquiring into the different ways experts in pedagogy and others have conceived of historical empathy. In the Anglo-American sphere in the 1960s, discourses on historical

<sup>8</sup> Adorno preferred the concept of *identification* over *sympathy*.

<sup>9</sup> See also the debate in the Boston Review: Against Empathy, 2014, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy> (accessed: 6.04.2017).

empathy developed at the same time that empathy was experiencing a boom in other disciplines (Weber, Marshal, Dobashi 2011). Debates on how empathy could be integrated into history lessons and the reasons for doing so in the first place marked a fundamental shift in the way many teachers conceived of history lessons and historical pedagogy beyond the classroom. Basically, emotional understanding was supposed to supplement knowledge of mere facts (Cunningham 2009: 680–681). Since the 1960s, countless theoretical articles and empirical studies on historical empathy have been published (Baring 2004). Since the 1970s, empathy has been part of the national standards in the USA and has been integrated into the curricula of history teachers (Baring 2011: 63–67). However, this was all preceded by heated debates on the unclear definition of the concept and the ways this rather fuzzy concept might be used in a didactic setting. For some, empathy was an act of imagination, while for others, it was a form of identification or even intuition. It was variously described as a “skill”, “mode of inquiry”, or “heuristic process” (Cunningham 2009: 681). Empathy has been defined in relation to “perspective-taking”, “side-taking”, “multiperspectivity” [a concept adapted from the German *Multiperspektivität* (Lücke 2012)], and, recently, as a form of mental “reenactment” [(Yilmaz 2007: 331), who writes: “Empathy is the skill to re-enact the thought of a historical agent in one’s mind”]. In order to test and verify these diverse conceptions of empathy, authors – the majority of whom work in schools – sought out concrete settings in which they could be used in the classroom, and described the success or failure of empathy exercises on the basis of more or less questionable empirical foundations.

Although the various positions on historical empathy differ in their details, they all share the following three points. First, none doubt that empathy belongs in the history classroom. Second, empathy is viewed by all as a useful heuristic tool for getting closer to the past. All meditations on historical empathy grapple with the fundamental question of how history should be taught: What is the best way to get students to experience history in the richest way possible? In Anglo-American pedagogical discourse, empathy is viewed as something that holds much promise, whether it be viewed as a learning goal, pedagogical method, or a social competency. For example, in a widely cited volume edited by O.L. Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager and Stuart J. Foster, empathy is associated with positive notions like “improved thinking” and “more carefully developed ideas” (Davis, Jr. *et al.*, 2001: 4), and the capacity to empathize is ascribed a central role in the process of learning about history: “[H]istorical empathy may allow the subject of history to come alive in the minds of students” (Yeager, Foster 2001: 17).

Third, all discussions of historical empathy deal with the cognitive and emotional components of empathy and their relation to one another. Most Anglo-American authors agree that the attractiveness of empathy lies precisely in the way it bridges these two dimensions. However, the question as to whether emotion or cognition should receive more weight divides them. At the beginning of the debate in the 1960s and 1970s, empathy was more heavily associated with im-

agination, identification, intuition, and even sympathy; thus, the emotional component took the upper hand. However, as the debate went on it began to be associated with rationality and cognition, which the volume referenced above, *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, makes clear. This shift can be partially traced back to the attempts to legitimate the integration of empathy in the national curricula of the USA and the UK. These attempts at legitimation show that empathy is often seen as the result of education or even acculturation, which in turn aims at forming individual's values. The moral dimension, however, remained, as one can read: "An unusually diverse group of American educational thinkers are calling for cultivating empathy in schools for the purposes of moral education" (Verducci 2000: 63). This clearly reflects a moral conception of historical empathy. Indeed, Anglo-American historical pedagogy seems to derive its legitimation from such a conception.

German historical pedagogy, on the other hand, seems to be more reserved when it comes to discourses on empathy. In Germany, the Anglo-American debates on empathy as a competence or a learning goal have been almost wholly ignored. Contemporary debates on matters of historical culture among professional historians have also largely lacked a rigorous discussion of empathy. The article in the 2009 edition of the dictionary of historical didactics simply makes the rather lapidary remark that "empathy as a goal of historical pedagogy has not been sufficiently researched in Germany" (Baring 2009: 51–52). The literature on the topic gives one the impression that the scepticism towards empathy is the product of its proximity to the emotions, which seems problematic for many German experts in pedagogy<sup>10</sup>. However, the field's discomfort with empathy has yet to be expressed in concrete criticism.

This distance towards empathy as a category in historical didactics is, in some respects, understandable. If one conceives of empathy as the capacity to put oneself in the other's shoes, then one might surmise that explicitly asking students to develop empathy might do more to inhibit historical learning rather than foster it. The question arises: if the teacher tries to cultivate and encourage feelings of empathy while teaching history, does she not run the danger of having to define for whom or for what one should have empathy? Wouldn't that be like making a value-based decision for students rather than allowing them to come to their own conclusions (something that contradicts the fundamentals of teaching)? Doesn't it also necessitate that teachers select in advance which historical actors are worthy objects of empathy, thus excluding perspectives on other persons? Does this all not reveal that the concept is vulnerable to being manipulated? Thus, it seems

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, under the heading "Understanding Others/Alterity", Michele Barricelli writes that the obligatory "acquisition of a primarily cognitive empathy-competence that might be seen as contributing to the capacity to sympathize with others" is problematic (Barricelli 2009: 72). Even Frank Baring's study on empathy in history lessons in Germany does not go beyond the following abstract claim: "Historical learning as a goal of historical didactics needs historical empathy as a part of historical thinking" (Baring 2011: 314).



that empathy cannot be uncritically accepted as a royal road to good historical pedagogy. This scepticism can be supported by two more observations on German historical culture. First, the historian Ulrike Jureit recently claimed that an overarching “wish to identify with victims” has become the “norm of memory politics” in Germany, which has the tendency to foster the “illusion of coming to terms with the past” rather than providing the foundations for addressing history in a way relevant to problems of present (Jureit, Schneider 2011: 10). To foreshadow another observation, it might be a consequence of falsely understood empathy when learning about the Holocaust that some students consciously withdraw themselves from the learning process. Second, students’ resistance closes the circle by seeming to give legitimation to the overemphasis on empathy as a learning goal when teaching about memorials. In this context, Kerstin Meier quotes the expert in memorial pedagogy Matthias Heyl, who writes about the effects of a “choreography of emotions” at memorials:

‘Sometimes we see teachers who expect that we are here to stage a sort of memorial-pedagogical religious vision that might compel them to feel empathy with the prisoners. Like no other topic, young people are pressured to develop empathy’. As is well known, pressure provokes resistance – especially with adolescents, who do not simply want to dance along with this choreography of emotions, as Heyl calls it (Meier 2012; Heyl 2013).

Understood as an ethical norm and *moral sentiment*, historical empathy thus seems to do more to hinder historical learning than to foster it. The “dark side” of historical empathy, as it is called in the Anglo-American literature, should receive more attention (see Goldie 2011; Oliver 2016: 171–175). The next section will discuss this difficulty with empathy further and, in doing so, will take a closer look at the relation between empathy and emotions.

#### 4. Empathy and Emotions: Empathy as an Emotional Practice

What does empathy have to do with emotions? Is empathy a cognitive process that can be reduced to neurophysiological data, or is it an emotion, an ersatz emotion, or a behaviour? Psychology, neurology, social sciences and history have all come up with their own, often mutually exclusive answers to these questions. Nevertheless, most of the recent debates tend to focus on the relation between cognition and emotion<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The genealogical perspective reveals the proximity of empathy to feelings. In 1909, the American psychologist Edward B. Titcher translated the German word *Einfühlung* as *empathy*. The word *Empathie* then found its way back to German as a loan-word from the American about 100 years ago, standing side by side with *Einfühlung* without reflecting the transfer. On the genealogy of the concept see (Fontius 2010: 121–122; Verducci 2000: 78).

We should understand emotions neither as purely corporeal reactions to external stimuli nor as purely cultural constructs. According to the scholar of cultural studies Sara Ahmed, emotions always have an intentional relation towards something and thus originate in relation to a real or imaginary object, writing: “[E]motions are in the phenomenological sense always intentional, and are ‘directed’ towards an object or other (however imaginary)” (Ahmed 2004: 28). Monique Scheer defines emotions as a practice of the “mindful body”, a kind of “doing emotions” (Scheer 2012: 200–201). We should acknowledge this connection between the physical body and the social body. Emotions are something that we learn, experience, and manage, but also something that we “do”. As Scheer writes: “We *have* emotions and we *manifest* emotions”. She calls emotions a practice of the self: “emotions themselves can be viewed as a practical engagement with the world. Conceiving of emotions as practices means understanding them as emerging from bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context, which always has cultural and historical specificity” (Scheer 2012: 195). I propose that we define empathy as an emotional practice in this sense.

This means that, as an emotional practice of the knowing body, empathy is not automatically triggered in the encounter with the other and does not always have the same intensity. Habituated forms of thinking and habituated attitudes define what feelings are perceived as being those of the historical other without necessarily corresponding to the feelings that she or he ever actually felt. Developing empathy with certain persons is thus rather difficult; for instance, with people who are rarely discussed in public discourse or who play a less significant role for one’s own self-understanding. Thus, one might say that a mix of individual dispositions and norms influenced by a particular historical culture determine to a large extent who a given observer can feel sympathy with and who not. This goes far in explaining researchers’ observation that the feeling of empathy expected by society is in no way a given among memorial visitors. Although visitors usually react in a predictable way to historical exhibits at sites of past crimes, some are headstrong. For instance, as Matthias Heyl discusses (2013), some assume an attitude of resistance. The predictability can be explained by the fact that empathy is a way of emotionally navigating the encounter with history that takes place within the boundaries of internalized social expectations. On the other hand, the self-willed behaviour of some visitors can be explained by the individual way our perceptions are shaped. As an emotional practice, empathy is a process of interpretation and not an immediate perception of the historical object. Thus, empathy certainly has the potential to bridge the gap between self and other. Nevertheless, this says little about who observers might (and might not) forge a connection with and little about whether this connection will give them any real insights into the lives of historical persons.

## 5. Imagination and Empathy

Now that we've sketched the relation between emotions and empathy, it might make sense to discuss its relevance in the process of constructing historical meaning. Important to note is that historical empathy always draws on a number of mediating instances to cross the spatiotemporal gap. As a particularly mediated form of encounter with the past, memorial sites might serve as good examples here. Memorial sites are places where "history didn't go further, but more or less abruptly broke off" (Assmann 1996: 16); because of their history, they can deploy little more than meagre remainders to give an idea of the events that took place. Thus, visitors are supported in their interpretation of the specific memorial site and their encounter with history by renovations of the site, monuments, placards, brochures, exhibits, and tour guides. However, in the end, the individual is responsible for grappling with the history of the site in her own way. Grappling with history as an autonomous act of productive appropriation most likely takes place as an activity of the *imagination* (Schörken 1994, 1995) and in the mode of *empathy*.

Particularly interesting here are the writings of historian Rolf Schörken. He understands the imagination as a "mental capacity" (Schörken 1998: 207) that plays a role in every act of interpreting, receiving and reconstructing the past. He thus not only positions the imagination at the beginning, but also at the "hallowed kernel of rigorous historical work" (Schörken 1998: 204). The observer's imagination is kindled by the "trace" (see Ricoeur 1991, particularly 191–192) of something past and places it within a larger historical context. Once a trace is made visible and interpreted, it invites one to draw inferences and inquire into its significance. The observer's imagination is kindled by these traces of the past, which have to be studied and interpreted. According to Schörken, the process of grappling with history, which relies on imagination, is a constructive act that consists in

filling an imagined world with life, that is, populating it with characters, giving it localities, rounding it out with events and actions, contexts, meanings, problems and solutions (Schörken 1995: 12).

Schörken's concept of the "imagined life world" makes clear the intuitive, emotional, and constructive elements contained in every reception and reconstruction of the past (see further Assmann, Brauer 2011: 74–75).

Imagination thus has much in common with empathy: both have the aim of developing an intense image of something or somebody and making them more familiar, and thus of understanding the foreign and the distant. Both are forms of visualizing something, and both have the function of reconstructing the past in the present and thus of making it tangible (see also Stueber 2016).

Thus, according to the ideas outlined above, empathy is an emotional practice that the observer uses to recognize and interpret the thoughts and feelings that

she believes she perceives in the other. It is a practice through which the observer places herself in a relation to the other. I suggest that imagination be included in our definition of empathy. We might then conceive of empathy as consisting in the act of imagination and the act of placing oneself in relation to something. The observer contextualizes found traces within an imagined life world. This act of construction is carried out by the will and the imagination. The images called up here are derived from media representations, cultural products, and historical interpretations that are inscribed into the knowing body of the observer. The imagination weaves together images in order to find the familiar in the foreign and to make the foreign familiar.

## 6. Empathy as Taking Sides, Distance and Narration

Paul Ricoeur claims that taking hold of the past is a way “to dull the sting of (...) temporal distance” (Ricoeur 1988: 144). In other words, it is a process of reducing the distance. Fritz Breithaupt also argues that she who expresses empathy first attempts to find similarities between herself and the subject under consideration, even if she ends up exaggerating them. His key claims about empathy can be understood along these lines: empathy is a mode of *producing similarity*<sup>12</sup>. Breithaupt thus defines empathy as the attempt to understand the other emotionally or cognitively. The basic move of understanding is to make something familiar or make it similar, which I have also referred to as imagination. Breithaupt claims that even if a plethora of false finds have to be taken along with it, the “exaggeration of similarity” is a precondition for empathy (Breithaupt 2009: 20–21). The act of making something similar, however, also strengthens one’s capacity to distinguish between the similar and the dissimilar; that is, the capacity to distinguish between self and other. One can draw two related conclusions from this: on the one hand, the act of imagining similarities decreases one’s distance to the historical other, while on the other, the self-reflexive act of placing oneself in relation to the other re-establishes the distance between the observer and the historical subject.

According to Breithaupt, this conception of empathy has two effects. First, empathy demands that one takes sides (Breithaupt 2016: 152). Second, it demands that one differentiate between self and other. Therefore, empathy is a “co-experience” (Breithaupt 2016: 152). Only against the background of the foreign or the dissimilar can one discern similarity (even if it is exaggerated). The reasons why I believe that one thing is similar to me while another is dissimilar are subjective and have their foundations in my individual experience. “Empathy is the form of belonging that one feels when one takes the side of the one and not the other” (Breithaupt 2009: 116).

<sup>12</sup> “It begins with the notion that empathy rests upon real or supposed similarity between the observer and the observed” (Breithaupt 2009: 18).

The need to affirm oneself by taking sides and legitimating one's choice bolsters the perception of similarity and the feeling of empathy. In encountering the past, the observer elects to feel empathy for those who she sees as being similar with herself (even if she exaggerates this similarity). This helps us understand why it is difficult to classify the victims of National Socialism only as *victims*, as their stories have a strong relation to the individual struggle for recognition and the fight for human dignity. These sorts of narratives make it easier to take sides than narratives of victimhood (the word "victim" [*Opfer*] has also become an insult in contemporary youth slang in Germany) (Abram, Heyl 1996). At the same time, taking sides with a historical person goes hand in hand with the construction of the other, of that which is foreign to me, which the observer excludes from her empathic perception. In feeling empathy, one takes sides with certain historical actors and against others. Constructing similarities and taking sides in the encounter with history thus seem to be modes of an *autonomous act of productive appropriation* that each individual student or memorial visitor pursues on her own; thus, each individual decides who might be the object of her empathy. So what does it mean to encourage students to take sides with one person and not another? If empathy is defined in this way, doesn't it thus seem that learning situations – whether they be in the classroom or at a memorial – that aim to ingrain certain perspectives are rather unfit for giving students and visitors the chance to feel empathy? If empathy is an *autonomous act of productive appropriation*, then the results of such situations are unpredictable and might even effect the exact opposite of what the curriculum or the memorial is attempting to do. It might be this uncertainty that gives rise to the scepticism that many experts in teaching history harbour towards empathy and the seeming need to encourage students to empathize with some historical persons and not others. Because empathy can only be conceived of as a goal of moral education when students or visitors take sides in the way desired by teachers and curators. But is this at all legitimate?

Breithaupt argues that the act of taking sides and constructing similarities is followed up by a "filtering, limiting, and blocking out of empathy" (Breithaupt 2009: 114). This, he claims, is the "decisive cultural achievement". Empathy shields one from the "immediacy of emotional excitement" (Breithaupt 2009: 32). To take up the example of memorial sites again, one might say that visitors have a successful empathic encounter when they develop an interest for the fate of a certain prisoner by constructing similarities between the prisoner and themselves. However, as visitors of a memorial in the year 2016, they should also be able to distance themselves and not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by what they perceive to be the emotional sufferings of the prisoner. Nevertheless, this empathic encounter makes it possible for visitors to develop a deep interest and maybe even understanding for certain prisoners. On the other hand, it also gives them occasion to draw the distinction "between self and other" (Breithaupt 2009: 54), thus allowing them to take a new perspective on themselves. This tension inherent in seeing the world through the lens of empathy protects one from wholly identifying with

historical actors, from a sort of automated sympathy and an excess of sympathy. Breithaupt calls this distanced form of empathy the “culture of empathy”, simultaneously the title of his book.

The question remains: what structural preconditions are necessary for the development of empathy? Working within the narrative paradigm established by historical didactics, Breithaupt developed an important connection between empathy and narration. As a literary scholar, he sees narration as the site where empathy is fostered.

When a story is told, we tend to foster empathy (...). Human empathy is to a large degree influenced by narrative thinking, which is founded in narrative patterns and compulsions. (...) We make room for empathy by thinking in narratives, and we empathize with narratives by developing empathy with fictional characters (Breithaupt 2009: 114).

A sort of historical hermeneutics is hidden in this (literary) perspective. Taking sides, establishing distance, and recognizing alterity all take place in narration. Only narratives can produce, configure, and guide empathy (Breger, Breithaupt 2010: 11).

There is a clear connection to historical empathy here. In the context of the narrative paradigm, history has to be understood as a story, just as historical thinking is formed by narrative structures (see Barricelli 2012). The historical story is a medium that provides a structure for empathy, making it possible to imagine history and place oneself in relation to it.

## 7. Conclusion: Empathy as Productive Irritation

So is empathy a royal road or a dead end? Although I have taken a critical perspective on the positivistic conception of empathy, I would prefer to answer this question with a qualified yes rather than a clear-cut conclusion. To recapitulate, I claimed that empathy is a way of interpreting the experiences of an historical other. It is thus an emotional practice that comprises both imagination (which itself, according to Fritz Breithaupt, encompasses both the construction of similarities and the taking of sides) and self-reflection. Empathy thus has the effect of both decreasing temporal distance and establishing distinctions between self and other, processes that take place internal to the structure of historical narration.

Further, we inquired into the relation between empathy and historical learning. Taking the above into account, we might conceive of empathy as a productive irritation that punctuates the learning process, an irritation that teachers at memorial sites and others might deploy in a way conducive to learning. Having empathy thus not only means that one put oneself in the other's shoes, but also that one returns to one's own in order to recognize the astonishing difference between the

two positions. In the ideal case, this irritation might serve as a primer for learning about a historical person or event<sup>13</sup>. Thus, empathy not only harbours the potential to bridge the gap of alterity, but also to make it tangible. Empathy opens space for alterity and brings it into the open. This means that in feeling empathy, one initially learns more about oneself than about others. Empathic learning can thus break up preconceptions and lead to a greater sensibility for the plights of others.

Thus, if historical learning is to be successful, it cannot be bound to the reproduction of standardized values, images, and interpretations. Rather, as the article has hopefully shown, engaging, recognizing, and reflecting on one's own reactions in encounters with history might better lay the foundations for cultivating an empathic form of learning. Feeling empathy at a memorial site might be a valuable experience for visitors if they have the chance to react to the exhibition with resistance, distance, confusion, or sympathy, so that they might have the opportunity to reflect on their reactions afterwards in an open environment. Empathy allows one to recognize one's own unconscious resistances or sympathies, to critically engage with one's own perspective and thus to alter one's approach to others.

Empathy thus might be a starting point for educating people to develop tolerance, a cooperative attitude, and solidarity. However, it does not produce these stances by itself, as the conception of empathy as a *moral sentiment* might lead one to believe. Thus, I think we should focus less on trying to foster the development of the capacity to empathize and focus more on giving learners occasions to feel empathy by taking sides and establishing distance, all with the aim of honing their ability to interact with others. If we define historical learning as an *autonomous act of productive appropriation*, empathy might come to signify the way learners integrate their perception of the other into the self, which ultimately bolsters one's capacity to judge and to be mindful of the plights of others. With cautious optimism, we might say that the ability to empathize does not take the sting of otherness from the other, but rather allows learners to be fascinated by the other, making the encounter into a productive irritation that furthers the development of oneself.

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<sup>13</sup> Dominick LaCapra speaks of "empathic unsettlement", which is similar to my concept of productive irritation: "The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (LaCapra 2001: 78). I would like to thank Sophie Oliver for the reference.

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