What is History?
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THE announcement by Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin that from 2013, it will be compulsory for secondary school students to pass History in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination has sparked some interesting debate with regard to what and how History should be taught in Malaysia. Taking a step back, the debate over History, its place in the school curriculum, how it is taught and what exactly is taught is becoming a topic of intense discussion.

The growing pressures of globalisation, the overwhelming influence of global cyber culture, the breakdown of boundaries of space and time through access to real-time communications across borders and our shifting and increasingly worldwide forms of social networking captured brilliantly in the current hit movie, The Social Network, has ironically made many of us more aware of the need to know and appreciate history.

The immediacy of the "now" "consumer" culture which increasingly de-historicises contemporary reality means that grounding future citizens in a deep appreciation of History is critical for maintaining values of national self-determination, dignity and social understanding. Thus the title of Professor Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak's opinion in Learning Curve, Don't Make The Past History, captures well the irony and History's importance to the present. See http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/31dz/Article

The suggestion by Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Mohd Yusof Hashim that History must be made fun and creative is an important reminder that the pedagogy involved in teaching the subject influences the way students learn and engage with it. See http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/6gia/Article/

Ensuring that teachers are well versed in History and in how to teach it reminds many scholars of my generation of the classic work by E.H. Carr, What is History?

It's interesting how our own intellectual history influences how we view contemporary questions. Carr's famous description of History as "a constantly moving process, with the historian moving within it" (What is History?, Penguin Books, 1964, page 133) suggests the necessity of understanding History both as dependent upon facts yet at the same time not characterised by a "Gradgrind"-like understanding of facts that, as we know from Dickens' famous school master in Hard Times, was lifeless and ultimately lacking in any sense of empathy and ethical or aesthetic understanding.

Here again Dzulkifli's statement that: "Learning History is not as simple and straightforward as it is made out to be" http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/31dz/Article recognises the difficulties and challenges involved in teaching History.

It seems that Carr's famous question, What is History?, still resonates with debates over the place, role and nature of History as it is taught in school curriculum.
It is in the process of asking ourselves this question that we need perhaps to step back a bit and engage with what History would look like from an "empathic" understanding and from the point of view of Malaysia's national development.

Now this of course is not as easy as it may first appear. One significant issue which needs addressing is the extent to which our understanding of "History" is beholden to forms of understanding that are themselves "imposed" or representative of interests not necessarily in keeping with local knowledge and understandings.

The question I want to raise is the extent to which our understanding of History is rooted in a critique of the way contemporary understandings of History are themselves based in relation to imperialism, inequality and "mental captivity". This idea I came across several years ago in reading the work of Syed Farid Alatas, who is also referred to in Dzulkifli's article. This then led me to the foundational and critically acclaimed work of Syed Hussein Alatas.


These references are simply a beginning, but hopefully they can steer readers to engaging the problems of ensuring that "History" is taught in an empowering and creative fashion.

The works I mention in this article, admittedly only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, provide us with good intellectual grounding in engaging the problem of "What is History?" in the context of Malaysia's national intellectual and social development.

Taking the history of ideas seriously in discussions over History is after all an important way to ensure that what we teach as History is informed by critical reason and reflective empathy and not merely the regurgitation of unreflected upon "facts".

Gradgrind is a masterpiece of characterisation; hopefully he has no place in Malaysia's classrooms!

It seems that the issue of History, if critically understood, is not a kind of oversimplified chronology of "facts".

Rather the History debate is an ongoing discussion and engagement with meaning, national selfunderstanding, and the struggle for the truth.

It is critical to inform this debate through philosophical, sociological and pedagogical discussion as well as reflection.
It is no surprise that the values of empathy, reflection and discussion are necessary to the teaching of History and also an outcome of History being successfully taught.

The debate over History in the curriculum is no mere arcane issue relevant only to historians or academicians. We all have an interest in the issue.

Our self-understandings and our sense of self and community are deeply informed by how we grasp and place ourselves in relation to History.

What is History? This question is of critical importance to us all. Reading Carr when I was young kept alive the importance of this issue to me.

Reflecting upon this question in my contemporary work and taking seriously the project of historical empathy and critical anti-imperialism reinforces the importance of studying History for all of us.

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