

Should We Be Cautious of Multiperspectivity? Teaching Sensitive Histories Through Multiple Perspectives

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Abstract

This article examines multiperspectivity, an approach in history education that encourages students to consider different perspectives on the past. It focuses on the use of this approach when teaching sensitive histories such as the Holocaust and slavery, where violence and unequal power relations are central. The article argues that using multiple perspectives in these contexts can create three tensions. First, teachers may avoid making moral judgments in an effort to remain neutral. Second, presenting different perspectives side by side may make unequal positions appear equally valid, for example by treating the perspectives of victims and perpetrators as comparable. Third, teaching these histories only as events of the past may overlook the ways in which their consequences continue to affect the present. To address these points, the article suggests three areas for reflection in the forms of normative considerations. Teachers should reconsider what neutrality means in the classroom, use more complex categories of responsibility than the familiar labels of victim, perpetrator, and bystander, and question the idea that societies simply progress beyond past injustices. The article concludes that multiperspectivity remains a valuable approach to history education. However, when it is used to teach sensitive histories, teachers need clearer guidance that acknowledges unequal power relations, distinguishes understanding a perspective from justifying it, and recognizes both historical responsibility and the continuing effects of past injustice.

Keywords: multiperspectivity, sensitive histories, teacher neutrality, historical responsibility

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, multiperspectivity has become an influential term in social studies and particularly in history education. Generally understood as an approach which teachers can use to allow students to explore perspectives that go beyond their own, multiperspectivity has conceptually advanced the inclusion of different interpretations and subjectivities in the learning of history in schools, an element long considered intrinsic to academic historical practice, yet often difficult to implement within school history curricula (Abbey & Wansink, 2022; Kropman et al., 2020; Nygren et al., 2017; Stradling, 2003; Wansink et al., 2018). Scholars point to various benefits of multiperspectivity, not only for learning history but also for engaging with contemporary society. Some argue that the approach puts the learning of history to use because it challenges essentialist narratives of the past and exposes students to the nuances embedded in historical and social events, thereby making it more likely that they understand the complexity of society in the present (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019; Wansink et al., 2018). Others argue that, through exploring multiple perspectives, students develop important competencies such as historical empathy, therefore making multiperspectivity a catalyst for the development of the cognitive and affective dimensions of historical thinking, important for approaching contradictory views in a pluralistic public sphere (Bartelds et al., 2020; Nygren et al., 2017; Wineburg, 2010).

Despite these proposed benefits, research also shows that educators face significant challenges in implementing multiperspectivity. Such difficulties are documented both in analyses of textbook narratives (Hanne & Kaal, 2018; Kropman et al., 2020) and in studies of classroom practice (Abbey & Wansink, 2022; Wansink et al., 2018). Much of this scholarship has examined multiperspectivity as a general pedagogical approach across a broad range of historical topics. Less attention has been given to whether its underlying principles are equally appropriate when applied to sensitive histories marked by systematic violence and unequal power relations. In these contexts, the inclusion of multiple perspectives raises moral and normative questions that extend beyond the general challenges of implementation. This article addresses this gap by studying the conditions under which multiperspectivity may obscure rather than clarify questions of power, moral judgment, and historical responsibility. The concern is not with the inclusion of multiple perspectives as such, nor with rejecting multiperspectivity as a pedagogical approach. Instead, it concerns the claim that the pedagogical value of perspective-taking and neutrality can be transferred unproblematically across historical themes in the classroom.

In sensitive histories such as the Holocaust and slavery, understanding why historical actors held particular perspectives is not the same as treating those perspectives as morally equivalent or justified. An uncritical use of multiperspectivity may therefore generate three interrelated risks: the suspension of moral judgment in the pursuit of neutrality, the flattening of morally and historically unequal positions into comparable perspectives, and the treatment of ongoing historical injustices as though they were confined to the past. These concerns build on earlier discussions about relativism and historical interpretation in history education (Chapman, 2011; Howells, 2005; Wineburg, 1991), while placing greater emphasis on the moral questions that arise when these ideas are applied in the classroom.

Accordingly, this article asks: under what conditions can multiperspectivity become problematic when teaching sensitive histories? It addresses this question through a conceptual and interpretive analysis of scholarship in history and social studies education together with classroom-based empirical research. Particular attention is given to the Holocaust and slavery because both involve systematic violence and pronounced asymmetries of power and historical responsibility while raising different questions about the relationship between past injustice and the present. The purpose is not to treat these histories as equivalent, but to use them as analytically relevant examples through which to investigate circumstances in which multiperspectival teaching may obscure morally and historically significant distinctions.

Substantiating this call for caution in applying the concept of multiple perspectives in the classroom therefore requires first establishing where these tensions become visible in practice and then identifying what a more critically grounded approach to multiperspectivity would require. The article proceeds accordingly. Section 2 situates multiperspectivity within the wider scholarship on history education. Section 3 examines the risks of the approach as it is currently understood and practiced. Section 4 outlines normative considerations for multiperspectivity, and finally, Section 5 summarizes findings and identifies implications for future research.

2. Multiperspectivity in History Education: Development, Uses, and Related Concepts

Multiperspectivity as a term has been defined in different ways and cannot be traced to a single origin. Early twentieth-century discussions linked it to literary theory, particularly Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, understood as the interaction of competing "voices" influenced by cultural and social perspectives (Hartner, 2014, p. 358). Given the proximity between narrative and history, the concept entered history education through debates among German historians in the 1990s.

Building on these debates, Stradling (2003) developed an influential theoretical guide for teachers on multiperspectivity, marking the shift from concept to pedagogical approach. He defined it as the ability "to put oneself in someone else's shoes and try and see the world as [others] see it" (Stradling, 2003, p. 14), thereby closely linking multiperspectivity to empathy and extending its relevance to students' affective and cognitive development.

Another factor behind the approach's popularity has been the Council of Europe's (2011, 2018) recommendations. These have promoted the inclusion of multiperspectivity in history curricula and contributed to its wider adoption of the method in countries such as England, Canada, France, and the Netherlands. Despite the absence of a standardized structure, multiperspectivity has increasingly been used to help students understand the past from multiple angles, including both early historical periods and more recent events and actors. In doing so, the approach has become more firmly embedded within social studies curricula, particularly through its alignment with core historical practices such as source criticism, contextualization, causality, and temporality. Following this wider uptake, recent scholarship has further developed the approach. For example, Grever and van Boxtel (2014, pp. 40–42) connect multiperspectivity to heritage, arguing that engagement with heritage sites allows students to develop historical consciousness across perspectives and temporal layers. Nygren et al. (2017) extend the approach by guiding students to engage with multiple takes on recent historiography, asking them to explore different scholarly interpretations of the causes of the First World War during history lessons.

In a related experimental study, Wansink et al. (2018, p. 497) operationalize multiperspectivity in three temporal foci: past, between past and present, and present, to examine whether teachers can guide students between synchronic and diachronic historical understanding. They argue that this is both possible and beneficial, but that it requires clearer pedagogical guidance, particularly when moving between "hot" histories, which are sensitive or controversial, and "cold" histories, which are more settled and less contentious (pp. 501–502). They show that emotionally and morally charged topics are more difficult to navigate through multiperspectivity. Wansink et al. (2018) thus connect earlier work on multiperspectivity to the concept of "historical perspective-taking," helping to clarify its conceptual overlap with related concepts such as historical empathy.

Historical empathy in fact appears as closely connected to multiperspectivity, largely because current debates have increasingly brought these concepts together. For instance, Huijgen et al. (2017, p. 114) define historical empathy as "putting oneself in the shoes of a historical person," which somewhat resembles Stradling's (2003) definition of what multiperspectivity entails. Similarly, Bartelds et al. (2020, p. 531) define historical empathy as "students'

cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their experiences, decisions, or actions.” These definitions therefore point to an important overlap between historical empathy and multiperspectivity, particularly in relation to perspective taking and the contextualization of historical actors.

More specifically, this research literature points to three key elements that have come to structure multiperspectivity as an approach in history education, with historical empathy embedded as one of these elements: (1) perspective-taking, which involves examining the past from the positions of different historical actors and considering how their social position, experiences, interests, and access to power shaped what they could see, think, and do; (2) contextualization, which requires students to place the actions and decisions of historical figures within the political, social, cultural, and economic conditions of the period rather than interpreting them only from a present-day perspective; and (3) historical empathy, which involves seeking to understand the motives, values, beliefs, and circumstances that informed the choices of historical actors without necessarily agreeing with or justifying those choices.

These elements are closely connected rather than hierarchical, but they can be regarded as core to multiperspectivity given that each performs a distinct function that is necessary to the approach. Perspective-taking makes the plurality of historical viewpoints visible by directing attention to how different actors experienced and understood the same events from different positions. Contextualization ensures that these perspectives are not treated simply as personal opinions, but are situated within the political, social, cultural, and economic conditions in which they emerged. Historical empathy, in turn, allows students to move beyond identifying that different perspectives existed to understanding why particular actors thought, judged, and acted as they did within those conditions. When applied together, these elements move students from recognizing the existence of different perspectives, to locating those perspectives historically, and finally to interpreting the reasoning and experiences that constituted them. It is this combination that gives multiperspectivity its distinctive character as an approach to history education. Although the emphasis placed on each element may vary across countries and educational contexts, removing any one of them seems to significantly narrow what it means to engage with the past from multiple perspectives.

However, despite the way these elements provide a recognizable structure for the multiperspectival approach, it remains unclear whether they are equally suitable for all topics in history education. The way multiperspectivity is often presented can imply that these elements are universally applicable across different historical themes. Yet their apparent generality can become problematic when they are applied to sensitive histories, where questions of violence, responsibility, power, and moral judgment are more difficult to separate from historical interpretation. The next section examines these tensions by identifying three risks of multiperspectivity in sensitive histories through concrete examples.

3. The Risks of Multiperspectivity for Sensitive Histories

Many historical events discussed in the classroom involve dispute or conflict, although not all pasts qualify as sensitive histories. In this section, “sensitive histories” refers to historical processes and events in which groups were systematically harmed, dispossessed, oppressed, or killed (Savenije et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019). The significance of such histories does not end with the formal cessation of violence, but their effects persist through institutions, structural inequalities, collective memory, and contemporary social imaginaries. The discussion that follows uses three concrete examples, two related to teaching the Holocaust and one the history of Dutch slavery. Through these examples, this work examines the circumstances under which multiperspectivity, as currently applied, may generate pedagogical and moral risks in history education.

Consider the following scenario which aligns closely with how teachers often approach multiperspectivity in the classroom following the Council of Europe guidelines (Wansink et al., 2018; Martin, 2022). A history teacher in a socially and culturally diverse urban secondary school in Europe prepares a lesson on the Holocaust. The teacher has previously used multiperspectivity successfully when teaching less sensitive topics, such as Ancient Greece and Rome, and decides to apply a similar approach here. The lesson is structured around several historical sources, including survivor testimonies, documents produced by Nazi authorities, accounts from bystanders, and material relating to Jewish persecution and resistance. Students are asked to compare these sources, identify the positions from which they were produced, and explain how historical context influenced the actions and judgments of different actors.

The teacher is aware that the Holocaust may evoke stronger personal, political, and emotional responses than previous topics, particularly because some students may connect discussions of antisemitism, Jewish history, or collective responsibility to contemporary debates surrounding Israel and Palestine. To reduce the risk of the discussion becoming centered on present-day political disagreement, the teacher deliberately plans to focus on historical evidence, source analysis, and contextualization. The aim is to keep the lesson primarily cognitive and evidence based rather than relying heavily on emotional identification with historical actors.

In practice, however, the lesson becomes increasingly confrontational. As students move between different historical perspectives, some begin to connect the Holocaust to the current conflict involving Israel and Palestine. Instead of keeping the discussion focused on the historical position of Jews under Nazi persecution, present day political judgments enter the classroom. One student, for example, argues that "Jews are not victims," drawing on contemporary perceptions of Israel as a politically and militarily powerful state and on the suffering of Palestinians. In doing so, the student collapses two very different historical and political contexts, treating Jews as a single collective across time and associating Jewish Holocaust victims with the actions of the contemporary Israeli state. Other students challenge the statement, and the discussion begins to redirect itself from the historical sources towards disagreement about Israel, Palestine, victimhood, and responsibility in the present.

At this point, the teacher faces a difficult pedagogical dilemma. The purpose of using multiperspectivity was to encourage students to engage with different historical perspectives, yet the discussion has now moved beyond the intended structure of the lesson. Leaving the students' comments unaddressed risks obscuring the historical reality of the Holocaust and the systematic persecution and murder of Jewish people. At the same time, the discussion creates an important opportunity to clarify that acknowledging the suffering of Palestinians in the present does not diminish or invalidate the historical victimization of Jews during the Holocaust. These are different historical and political contexts, and recognizing injustice in one does not require denying injustice in the other. Yet making this intervention is far from straightforward. The lesson was designed to teach the Holocaust through multiple historical perspectives, not to address the contemporary conflict involving Israel and Palestine, and the teacher is already working within limited classroom time.

This is where the central tension of the multiperspectival exercise becomes visible. The structure of the lesson directs the teacher to continue moving through different perspectives, meaning that the next step would ordinarily be to introduce another historical actor or source and ask students to consider that perspective. Yet the teacher may also recognize that the discussion now requires them to pause and intervene. The difficulty is knowing how. Multiperspectivity offers little guidance for situations in which perspective-taking gives rise to morally or politically charged claims that cannot simply be left unaddressed. The teacher may also feel insufficiently prepared to lead a sensitive and potentially confrontational discussion about the relationship between the Holocaust and the contemporary Israeli Palestinian conflict. In this situation, moving to another perspective may appear to be the safest and most manageable option. It allows the teacher to return to the planned structure of the lesson, reduce the immediate tension, and avoid entering a discussion for which they may not feel adequately prepared.

The issue, therefore, is not simply that the teacher chooses to move on. In theory, multiperspectivity offers significant opportunities: it allows students to contextualize historical actors, to empathize with their positions, and to understand the motivations underlying their actions. In this situation, however, that potential is hindered, because not every perspective can be engaged with at the same level of depth or scrutiny. Some perspectives require more rigorous historical and moral evaluation than others, and multiperspectivity as an approach does not clearly specify how a teacher should recognize or respond to that difference. It provides clearer guidance on how to introduce, contextualize, compare, and move between perspectives than on when that process should be interrupted. It does not indicate when a teacher should pause perspective-taking to address a moral boundary, correct a historical distortion, or examine how present-day conflicts are influencing students' interpretations of the past.

The teacher's decision to continue with the exercise should therefore not be understood only as an individual failure to intervene. What it does is to point out to the limitation in the structure of the approach itself: the teacher has a procedure for engaging students with multiple perspectives, but no equally clear procedure for responding when that engagement produces claims that require explicit moral clarification.

This example, however, is not merely illustrative. Empirical studies document a comparable pattern across classroom practice, confirming that the structural gap identified above is not confined to this scenario. Wansink et al. (2018) describe how history teacher Dylan in the Netherlands asked students to adopt the perspective of "a fanatic Nazi" but did not address the underlying morality of that perspective (p. 518). As in the scenario just discussed, the difficulty does not lie in Dylan's execution of the exercise itself but in the absence of a subsequent step in which the moral status of that perspective is made explicit. The same study reports that another teacher, Ruby, "aimed to remain neutral and discuss perspectives as openly as possible" (Wansink et al., 2018, pp. 518–519), once more detaching from the moral dimensions of history by embracing neutrality. Here, neutrality itself is applied as though it were a stopping point rather than a stance requiring further clarification, leaving the moral asymmetry between perpetrator and victim perspectives unaddressed. These cases show that the absence of a clear procedure for critical perspective-taking challenging neutrality is not specific to the Holocaust-Israel/Palestine scenario described above but recurs in other instances when multiperspectivity is applied to sensitive histories: teachers are given clear guidance on how to introduce and compare perspectives, but little guidance on when and how to interrupt that process to address moral judgment. Left unaddressed, this attempt at neutrality in

multiperspectivity risks creating confusion among students, as an approach intended to strengthen historical thinking may instead blur their understanding when teachers abstain from engaging in the moral dimensions of the past, which are also a necessary component part of constructing that understanding.

Building on this, attention now turns to a second risk: that multiperspectivity can treat historically unequal moral positions as though they were simply different viewpoints. Consider again a history lesson on the Holocaust, this time with closer attention to a specific set of questions. As outlined in Section 2, current uses of multiperspectivity typically ask students to: (1) engage with different historical positionalities; (2) contextualize actions by linking them to motives and values; and (3) develop historical empathy in order to grasp the complexity of past and present events. However, because these principles are implemented with considerable openness, their application in the classroom can take very different forms.

Consider another aspect of a lesson about the Holocaust as an example. Students may be asked to reflect on three positions: Jews, Nazis, and bystanders. The lesson might begin with the question: What was it like to be Jewish at that time? Students describe exclusion from public life, fear, isolation, loss of rights, and the constant threat of violence or death. The focus then goes to perpetrators: What guided the decisions of Nazis to persecute Jews? What motives and values underpinned these actions? Students point to racial ideology, propaganda, the construction of a common enemy, or obedience to authority. Finally, attention may turn to bystanders: Why did people report hidden Jews to the authorities, not only in Germany but also in collaborator countries such as the Netherlands? Students may refer to fear of punishment, concern for their families, social pressure, self-interest, or conformity.

These examples illustrate the type of questions students can encounter when asked to step into the historical perspective of historical actors, and again approximate common classroom practice. As empirical studies demonstrate, similar dynamics recur in multiperspectival teaching. For instance, consider the answers gathered in a study of Dutch students discussing their learning of multiple perspectives: a student in the study by Bartelds et al. (2020) describes an approach in which "you have to imagine [that you] have a Jewish background, or [that you are] a German soldier, and then you try to imagine what it was like to be a German soldier or what it was like to be a Jew in the Netherlands" (p. 541). Similarly, another example from a student named Ward in the same study illustrates how this process unfolds: "I think that if you make a clear emotional connection with a German person who first had no bread on the shelf and suddenly had money after the arrival of Hitler, and see that his country and everyone around him is doing well [...] I can empathize much better with a German person who voted for Hitler" (Bartelds et al., 2020, p. 537).

One might argue that there is nothing wrong with Ward's statement. Emotional engagement with a historical actor's circumstances can be pedagogically valuable: it helps students see that ordinary Germans faced real economic hardship, and that Hitler's rise cannot be explained without understanding this context. Empathy of this kind can make historical understanding more complex rather than less. But this response raises a question that multiperspectivity, as currently taught, does not clearly answer: at what point does explaining why someone acted a certain way shade into justifying that action? Ward's comment moves from economic circumstance ("no bread on the shelf") directly to voting for Hitler, without pausing to distinguish between explaining that choice and justifying it. Nothing in the classroom exercise, as described in the study, indicates whether or how a teacher would address this tension, or help a student separate understanding a perspective from justifying it.

Part of the difficulty here is a fear for presentism, that is, judging the past by today's standards (Bartelds et al., 2020; Huijgen et al., 2017). Historians typically warn against judging past actors by today's moral standards, since those actors did not have access to the knowledge or norms we now take for granted. Yet moral evaluation is difficult to avoid entirely. As Vann (2004, p. 12) argues, some degree of presentism and anachronism is built into any historical judgment, since we cannot fully set aside our own moral framework when interpreting the past. This creates a real tension: teachers are asked to encourage historical empathy while also avoiding anachronistic judgment, but are given little guidance on how to do both at once. One consequence, visible in Ward's response, is that multiperspectivity risks placing fundamentally unequal forms of agency on the same moral plane, a perpetrator's choice to support a regime responsible for mass persecution and murder, and a victim's experience of that persecution, treated as parallel "perspectives" to be understood in similar terms.

This flattening has a further effect: empathy can slide into implicit justification when the exercise offers no structured space for moral evaluation, and when it does not push students beyond the categories of victim and perpetrator toward questions of differential responsibility. Concretely, this means students may struggle to see that not all forms of suffering are equivalent, even when they are, in some emotional sense, interchangeable. The risk, well documented in the literature (Gensburger & Lefranc, 2020, pp. 52–53; Teeger, 2015, p. 1195), is that structural violence, such as the systematic killing of a people, becomes reframed in individual terms, for example, "German civilians also suffered hardship, so they also suffered." This statement is not factually false. German civilians did experience hardship. But treating that hardship as morally equivalent to that systematic persecution, simply

because both involved suffering, erases the differences in degree of historical responsibility students need to grasp to understand the Holocaust properly.

The article now turns to the final example, the history of slavery, to examine a third risk associated with multiperspectival teaching: the tendency to treat historical injustice as though it were a closed chapter, rather than a process whose consequences continue to unfold. This risk can be described as mischaracterizing ongoing historical processes as "concluded."

Multiperspectivity encourages students to understand historical actors within their contexts (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019), and to explain their actions in light of the constraints, beliefs, and circumstances of their time (Bartelds et al., 2020; Grever & van Boxtel, 2014). This contextualization is a core strength of the approach: it allows students to move beyond simplistic judgments and grasp why historical actors made the choices they did. But this same strength carries an unintended cost. By locating an actor's decisions firmly within "their time," the approach can also implicitly locate responsibility for those decisions within that same, bounded time, as though both the action and its consequences belonged to the past alone.

Consider, as an example, how this dynamic plays out in a concrete national context: the teaching of Dutch imperial history, and specifically the Dutch involvement in transatlantic slavery. When students are asked to consider the perspective of a slave trader or colonial official, they are typically guided to reconstruct the economic pressures, social norms, and limited alternatives that shaped this actor's choices (Nimako & Willemsen, 2011; Weiner, 2014; Wekker, 2016). This is a reasonable historical exercise, and a slave trader operating within an established transatlantic economy did face a different set of incentives and norms than we recognize today. The problem is not this contextual reconstruction itself, but what tends to happen after it: having explained the trader's actions as a product of "their time," the lesson often stops there, without asking what, if anything, connects that historical structure to the racial and economic inequalities that descendants of enslaved people continue to face today.

This is where the risk becomes concrete. If slavery is presented primarily as something that happened, explained by historical actors responding to historical circumstances, then its effects are understood the same way: as belonging to the past and, in effect, resolved by the passage of time. What gets lost is that transatlantic slavery was not only an event but the foundation of economic and social structures, from racialized wealth disparities to institutional discrimination, that did not end when slavery was formally abolished but were carried forward and reproduced. Treating slavery as a matter for historical debate, to be understood, contextualized, and ultimately filed away as "their time," obscures the fact that its effects remain active in the present. The result is that classrooms may equip students to explain why slavery happened, while leaving them without the conceptual tools to examine what it continues to produce, including systemic racism and enduring social inequality, and how these contemporary structures connect to that historical process.

These three case studies show that the identified risks are not merely theoretical: multiperspectivity, while valuable for cultivating historical consciousness more broadly, cannot be assumed to translate unproblematically to the teaching of sensitive histories given the practical constraints of the classroom. The three interrelated risks discussed above, namely (1) the suspension of moral judgment, (2) the flattening of moral distinctions, and (3) the mischaracterization of ongoing historical processes as "concluded," suggest that teachers are already navigating these tensions in the absence of more specific normative guidance for this particular category of the past. Building on this analysis, the next section proposes three normative considerations intended to inform a more reflexive application of multiperspectivity to sensitive histories specifically.

4. Normative Considerations for Multiperspectivity

The previous section argued that multiperspectivity, when applied to sensitive histories, can generate three specific risks: the suspension of moral judgment, the flattening of moral distinctions between perpetrators and victims, and the mischaracterization of ongoing historical processes as concluded. These risks do not warrant abandoning multiperspectivity altogether, since the approach remains valuable for the cultivation of historical consciousness more broadly (Bartelds et al., 2020; Grever & Adriaansen, 2019; Nygren et al., 2017). What they do warrant is a clearer normative and moral framework for its use in this specific context. Accordingly, this section advances three normative considerations for a more reflexive implementation of multiperspectivity in the teaching of sensitive histories. These considerations are not intended as a comprehensive solution, but as an initial step toward guidelines that address the limitations identified above.

The first consideration concerns the role of neutrality in the classroom, and specifically, the argument that it actually constitutes a counterproductive and unhelpful principle to pursue as a guiding pedagogical stance when it comes to sensitive histories. Although this point may appear self-evident, it is frequently overlooked, or actively resisted, in classroom practice. Teachers often experience institutional pressure, from school administrators and parents to maintain neutrality when addressing contentious historical events. This pressure is reasonable, and the tendency to default to neutrality and suspend moral judgement should not be read as a shortcoming on the part of

individual teachers. It points instead to a gap in the approach itself: multiperspectivity, as currently formulated, offers limited guidance on how to avoid the pitfalls of neutrality, or on how teachers might be supported in safely moving beyond it to guide argumentative and reasoned discussion among students. Taking a stance, if conducted appropriately and in a non-propagandistic manner, could support students in developing their own balanced and reasoned judgments. Moving beyond neutrality does not imply indoctrinating students or imposing a particular political position; it entails actively guiding students toward independent, well-reasoned evaluations, instead of withholding such guidance altogether. Something that negatively impacts their capacity to critically think about the past and its connections to present society.

The reluctance many teachers report toward this kind of engagement is not without cause. The murder of history and geography teacher Samuel Paty, along with other documented instances of violence worldwide directed at educators addressing sensitive topics (De Graaf et al., 2024), illustrates the risks that can accompany this work. Teachers' hesitation is thus entirely understandable, and further underscores the need for a multiperspectivity approach that critically examines this dimension of history teaching, and for that matter, neutrality in relation to sensitive histories and topics. An intervention that requires the joint engagement of school administrators, curriculum developers, teachers, and researchers alike. At the same time, avoiding such discussions altogether does not constitute an adequate response to that risk. Declining to take a position in order to circumvent difficult conversations does not eliminate moral or political judgment from the classroom; it removes it from view while leaving its effects intact. In this sense, the refusal of a teacher to take a position usually constitutes a position in itself, one that leaves students with a limited understanding of the political dimensions of historical events and of how these dimensions persist into the present.

Multiperspectivity, then, need not be equated with moral relativism. It requires a normative reorientation, guidelines that pay explicit attention to the moral and political dimensions of particular historical perspectives, learning activities structured with clarity and social responsibility, and a recognition that neutrality is not a productive principle to pursue in this context, accompanied by clearer guidance on how teachers can move safely and responsibly beyond it.

Turning to the second consideration: multiperspectivity, in its current form, risks placing historically distinct actors on the same plane of moral evaluation, despite their clearly unequal positions, precisely the flattening of moral distinctions identified as a risk above. This issue can be addressed, at least in part, by drawing on concepts better suited to capturing the nuances of accountability, responsibility, implication, and injustice than the categories multiperspectivity currently relies on. As it stands, multiperspectivity operates with a relatively narrow conceptual vocabulary. When determining which perspectives to include in a lesson, it should not remain confined to the familiar triad of "victim," "perpetrator," and "bystander." It should instead accommodate a wider range of positions, including institutions, states, descendants, beneficiaries, and international organizations, categories that more accurately reflect the complexity of these debates. Several concepts could serve this purpose; given space constraints, this article develops one in detail.

The concept proposed here is Rothberg's (2019, pp. 7–9) notion of the "implicated subject." This concept designates individuals who occupy positions within structures of power and privilege without being direct agents of harm. They may contribute to, benefit from, or inherit systems of domination they did not originate and do not fully control. In this respect, they are neither victims nor perpetrators, but participants in social formations that produce both roles, often without occupying either one themselves. Implicated subjects are distinct from bystanders: whereas the bystander is defined by standing outside an unjust event and failing to intervene, the implicated subject is positioned inside the very structures that distribute power and advantage (Rothberg, 2019, p. 41). This structural entanglement means implicated subjects help sustain and reproduce the conditions that enable violence and inequality, whether or not they do so consciously.

Applied to the classroom, this concept could offer students a more precise vocabulary for a position relevant to the legacies of slavery: for example, that of a present-day citizen who neither participated in nor actively opposed the historical practice, but who occupies a social and economic position shaped by it. Introducing this category could allow students to situate such a position between the categories of direct responsibility and non-involvement, without collapsing it into either. This distinction has pedagogical value: without it, a student comparing this position to that of a descendant of enslaved people has no conceptual means of registering that both are connected to the same historical structure, yet in clearly unequal ways. In this way, it extends the conceptual range available to multiperspectivity as an approach to teaching sensitive histories in secondary education.

Addressing the final normative consideration, the article shifts to the risk of mischaracterizing ongoing historical processes as "concluded." To address this risk, the article draws on Joan Wallach Scott's (2020) critique of what she terms the "politics of time." For Scott, the politics of time refers to the idea that how we organize the relationship between past, present, and future is never neutral. Describing something as "past," "finished," "overcome," or as evidence of "progress" is not simply a descriptive statement about when an event occurred; it

carries political consequences, since it determines whether that event is treated as requiring ongoing attention or as settled and closed.

This critique is developed most directly in Scott's *On the Judgment of History* (2020). There, she challenges the assumption that history moves in a linear and progressive direction, as though injustice belongs to the past by default while the present represents its improvement or resolution. Scott argues that this assumption, inherited in part from Hegelian philosophy of history, can obscure the persistence of older relations of power in the present, since it treats the passage of time itself, instead of deliberate present-day action, as the mechanism through which injustice is resolved. Put differently, the belief that things naturally improve can quietly displace the need for present-day action, since a wrong assumed to be gradually resolving itself does not carry the same urgency as one recognized as ongoing and unresolved.

Consider the difference this distinction makes concretely. A student who assumes that slavery, once formally abolished, no longer requires present attention, since sufficient time has elapsed, is applying precisely the logic Scott's critique calls into question. A student instead prompted to ask what has changed and what has not, for example, by comparing historical patterns of exclusion to present-day patterns of racial and economic inequality, is being asked to treat that question as open rather than settled in advance. This requires the second student to examine continuity and change as a historical question, instead of resolving it by default assumption. Embracing a critical stance toward the politics of time is therefore proposed here as a normative consideration in its own right: it offers a way to counter the risk of treating certain issues of the past as "done," simply because enough time has passed since they formally occurred. In this sense, multiperspectivity in the context of sensitive histories cannot be concerned only with stepping into different historical perspectives; it must also involve a critical stance toward temporality itself, toward the assumptions embedded in how a historical process is positioned in time, and whether it is treated as closed or as continuing to unfold.

It should be acknowledged that Scott's argument operates at a high level of theoretical abstraction, and that its immediate relevance to a secondary school classroom is not self-evident. This is a fair concern, worth addressing directly. Yet the core intuition behind the politics of time is more concrete, and more accessible to students, than the theoretical language in which it is expressed. Translated into classroom terms, it invites a comparatively simple but consequential question: has time, by itself, resolved this injustice, or does it continue to shape the present, and if so, what would addressing it actually require? In practice, this could take the form of a task as concrete as asking students to compare a historical map of segregation or discriminatory housing policy to a present-day map of wealth distribution, and to identify what, if anything, has changed between the two. This question does not require students to engage with Scott's argument in full theoretical detail; it requires only that they learn to distinguish between a past that has been settled and a past whose effects remain active, a distinction well within reach at the secondary level, and one with applications beyond the specific case of slavery discussed here. Developing this distinction into a fuller guideline within multiperspectivity as an approach, one that translates Scott's critique into classroom-ready activities and materials, is a task better suited to future work bridging theory and practice in multiperspectivity research than to the scope of this article, though such work could prove highly valuable for teachers navigating these questions in practice.

In the context of teaching slavery, this shift in emphasis has a direct classroom implication. Rather than treating slavery solely as a historical event to be explained and contextualized, as discussed in the previous section, multiperspectivity could also allow students to examine whether, and how, its effects persist in the present, rather than treating contemporary patterns of racial and economic inequality as separate, unrelated issues. This link between multiple perspectives and the politics of time thus offers students a more critical engagement with perspectives, one that recognizes the influence of time, acknowledges that some historical processes have present-day continuations, and treats the identification of this continuity as itself a vital part of historical understanding.

The normative considerations elaborated here add to the approach of multiperspectivity a more reflexive and critical basis for confronting neutrality, moral flattening, and false closure in the teaching of sensitive histories. Read side by side, they do not resolve these tensions, but they offer a starting point for a version of the approach that is more attuned, and more cautious to the moral and political weight that sensitive histories demand. A version that is more closely aligned with the real challenges social sciences teachers face in the classroom when taking the concept of multiple perspectives education into practice.

5. Conclusion

This article has shown that multiperspectivity, as currently employed in history education, poses risks, particularly in relation to sensitive histories such as the Holocaust and slavery. Through classroom scenarios and empirical research, it identified three interrelated risks. Teachers pursuing neutrality can end up suspending moral judgment rather than exercising it, leaving morally charged claims unaddressed. Presenting perspectives side by side, without attention to the unequal positions of those who held them, can flatten the distinction between understanding a perspective and treating it as justified. And framing historical actors as products of "their time" can mischaracterize

ongoing historical processes as concluded, disconnecting present-day inequality from the structures that produced it.

To tackle these risks, the article proposed three normative considerations: reconsidering neutrality as a guiding classroom principle, expanding the range of available perspectives through concepts such as the implicated subject, and encouraging critical engagement with the politics of time to question the assumption that historical progress resolves injustice on its own. These considerations could help strengthen multiperspectivity as an approach to teaching sensitive histories. Further research is needed, however, particularly to develop a more systematic account of multiperspectivity that guides teachers through its moral dimensions, and to investigate how such normative guidance can be operationalized in classroom practice. This includes testing whether the implicated subject and the politics of time can extend practically to other sensitive histories, such as colonial violence and international conflicts.

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