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Proportions or Perspectives? Didactic Medievalism – Moving the Body to the Fore in Czech History Textbooks

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Today, history textbooks make only partial contribution to the historical consciousness of young people, in tough competition with, for example, family memory or media images of the past. Nevertheless, as a source of historical culture, they still have an important place – especially with regard to the formal approval by the Ministry of Education, they present an opportunity for a direct reflection of the state policy of memory and of the intentional (at best research-based) formation of national identity. Almost every citizen is exposed to them to a greater or lesser extent.¹ In this study, based on a close reading and comparison of all relevant textbooks available on the Czech market, I will present a series of representative inquiries, serving as a critical introduction to the topic. It is not intended as a synthesising overview, but rather as a presentation of a few, until recently typical, didactic situations. My aim is to show how history textbooks currently in use in Czechia deal with the “body,” gender and connected issues in pre-modern history.

The idea of the historicity of the human body, of its changing notions, significations and borders plays a very important role at a time of so-called culture wars and transformation, not only in Central Europe, of views regarding the relationship

¹ Zdeněk Beneš, “Učebnice dějepisu” in *Sondy a analýzy: učebnice dějepisu – teorie a multi-kulturní aspekty edukačního media*, eds. Zdeněk Beneš, Blažena Gracová, Jan Průcha *et al.* (Praha: ÚIV – divize nakladatelství Tauris, 2008 [i.e. 2009]), 5.

between society and nature (due to adaptation to pandemics and the climate crisis), and with regard to the role of history as a tool for education for tolerance, identity formation or a shared basic narrative in inclusive national communities.² As is becoming more and more apparent, medievalism leaves a deep imprint in contemporary political culture, effectively combining distance (the absence of contemporary witnesses and the low level of critical reflection in current Central European memory politics) with the illusion of proximity (the argumentative support of conservative politics, the popularity of fictional treatments in fantasy, films and computer games, etc.).³ Bearing this in mind, in the following pages I will focus on textbook representations of the body and its contingent functions and constellations in pre-modern European history (given the chronological structure of all textbooks to date, these will be publications intended for the seventh grade of primary school, most often used by twelve year olds).

An initial example of the following considerations is the conception of a particular topic which is one of the most stable and most stably treated in the history of Czech (or Czechoslovak) textbooks: an aspect of the reign of the emperor Charles IV (1316–1378). This historical figure has been paradoxically monumentalised in the textbooks produced in the liberal and free-market system after 1989. From the didactical point of view and compared to other medieval topics, Charles IV has become considerably petrified in a quasi-synthetic concept that does not seem to motivate students to analyse and criticise sources. As the historian Kamil Činátl has shown, this stabilisation resides in the overall treatment of the topic, in the repetition of a similar composition of the expository text, in the use of a uniform way of representation, and in specific formulations.⁴ One of the attributes that invariably accompany the textbook representations of the “Father of the Homeland” is the gallery of Charles’s wives.

For example, in the textbook published by Fraus (Pilsen, 2015), a paragraph on “Charles’s family life” is inserted into the traditional narrative account of the emperor’s reign, listing four of his wives.⁵ In a separate paragraph we learn that Blanche of Valois (1317–1348) gave Charles two daughters, that thanks to Anne

² I am referring here to, for example, Bruno Latour’s search for new forms of sustainable communities, Bruno Latour, *Où suis-je?: Leçons du confinement à l’usage des terrestres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021). See also Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2016), 72–76.

³ Andrew B.R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017).

⁴ Kamil Činátl, “Zobrazení Karla IV. v učebnicích dějepisu” in *Karel IV. stále živý: odkaz státníka v historiografii a historické paměti*, eds. Jaroslav Šebek, Blanka Jedličková (Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR, 2017), 161.

⁵ Collective authors, *Dějepis 7: pro základní školy a víceletá gymnázia* (Plzeň: Fraus, 2015), 75. All translations by M. Šorm.

of Bavaria (1329–1353) he acquired the Upper Palatinate, that Anna of Świdnica (1339–1362) gave birth to his successor, Wenceslas IV (1361–1419), but died a year later in another childbirth, and finally that Elizabeth of Pomerania (1347–1393) was reputedly so strong that she could bend iron horseshoes. This main explanatory text is accompanied by a supplementary didactic apparatus in the form of research questions, which try to instigate contact with the reader and shift from the informational authoritative monologue to a dialogue, apparently intending to activate the students. This element would be didactically certainly welcome – if it was not rather a formality, as it appears to be the case: The last of these questions asks: “Deduce from the fate of one of Charles’ wives what was a common cause of death for women in the Middle Ages.”

This might come as a surprise given that the answer to such a question cannot be formulated based on any of the information provided in the textbook. The causes of a structural phenomenon cannot be deduced from one example. This is an illustrative case of a situation in which the authors and editors of a textbook hint at the history of the body as an attractive topic (constituting in fact an integral and essential part of human history), but where the textbook includes the mention only as a non-functional gloss, which is not integrated into the main interpretation, but rather runs against it. Neither does the referenced textbook further develop issues related to maternal mortality before the development of modern medicine in the following volumes. Thus, students are only offered a series of unanswered – and more importantly, based on the texts and other elements in the textbook, unanswerable – questions such as, what was the pattern of maternity care and risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth in medieval society – and why was this so? Why is this question presented rather as a curiosity instead as the most important piece of information associated with the history of the fourteenth century for children in the twenty-first century, perhaps far more significant than the political actions or personal life of a single monarch? Was there bad medicine in medieval Europe? Was medical care better for example in China or Iraq at the time? Were women forced to give birth too early, or too often? Were contraceptives unknown or just not allowed to be used? Was the mortality rate of medieval queens higher than that of female factory workers in the nineteenth century? How – and in what countries – are pregnant women at risk today?

In short, it may perhaps seem that the concept of the history of the body is naturally and inevitably remote from the possibilities and interests of school history. However, when looking at traditionally conceived textbooks, it appears that even there, the history of the body is somehow present and can provoke critical reflections. The principal problem is that it remains at the margins of the canonical narrative and is not used to develop the key competencies associated with historical thinking (unlike some topics in political history, for example). So, what is – and what should be – the place of the history of the body in textbooks for primary and secondary schools? As I will try to show, for the most part the authorial and

editorial teams of Czech history textbooks in prior decades apparently did not ask themselves this question, although they incorporated the corporal history into their explanatory narratives plentifully – in an unreflective manner, thus implicitly naturalising their own views and imposing them on students.

The Czech educational system since 1989 and 1993 has in the long term been very liberal; there is not even a detailed curriculum – the Ministry of Education publishes just a so-called “Framework Educational Program” (*Rámcový vzdělávací program*), which is currently being reformed (seemingly with a tendency to blur even further the boundaries between particular taught subjects).⁶ The Framework Educational Program does not focus on facts to be learned but on developing “key competencies.”⁷ Hence, surprisingly and contrarily to what the textbooks may attest, there is in fact no necessity to teach the event-oriented political history of the Middle Ages (it is probably just a certain inertia that leads to the repetition of chronological political, nationalistically framed history, where pre-modern history in particular is often associated with “traditional values” and monumentalised places of memory).⁸ The area covering history and civic education in the ministerial programme is called “Man and Society” – its content is linked to “citizenship,” which touches on many issues from the environment through the economy to, for example, family, responsible sexuality and gender roles. From this vantage point, Czech school history would not be intended to educate future historians, but to prepare active citizens accustomed to critical thinking and the protection of the freedoms and rights of a democratic society. There are also cross-sectional basic themes mentioned in the programme which should appear in education – e.g. sexual education, which should be present in all possible subjects (hence including history), where the ministerial methodologies recommend that the competencies acquired should be appropriate to the maturity of the pupils.⁹

The last years and suffering of Anna of Świdnica could thus legitimately and functionally play a key role in Czech history textbooks, while the fact that it was Charles IV who fathered her children would only make it easier for the authors and editors to include her experience and the topic of the care of women’s bodies in an elementary didactic material. The Czech state-issued prescriptions, in their explicit form, do not prevent a shift of attention within medieval history from one topic to another. Nor do they prevent a change in the proportions of the content of the textbook (e.g., from historical changes in the state system or biographies of

⁶ *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání* (Framework Educational Program for Elementary Education), <https://tiny.pl/dl122>, accessed on 30 March 2023.

⁷ Hana Havlůjová, Jaroslav Najbert, “Hledání nového konsensu: Učíme dějepis ve veřejném zájmu?,” *Historie – Otázky – Problémy* 10, 1 (2018): 15–31.

⁸ In this context on the example of Charles IV see again Činátl, *Zobrazení Karla IV.*, 160.

⁹ *Doporučení MŠMT k realizaci sexuální výchovy v základních školách* (Recommendations of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of Sex Education in Elementary Schools), <https://tiny.pl/dl126>, accessed on 30 March 2023.

individual rulers towards the history of the body or gender identities) – but as I will try to show, a change in perspective, not proportions, might suffice.¹⁰

Let us now turn to how some other authors of textbooks of pre-modern history have approached the subject of the history of the body in the last twenty years. It is also worth noting the ways in which (as in the case of Charles IV's wives) they have tried to integrate marginal aspects of the history of the body into what the perceived primary didactic content.

In the traditional narrative-centred approach, basing the quality of the textbook on an authoritative and monological narration of a story appealing to the reader, it is both the precise formulations and the hierarchy of information that matter. This may produce some predictable pitfalls connected most often to strong presentist assessments;¹¹ in the textbook written by historians Ivana Čornejová, Petr Čornej and František Parkan (SPN, first published in 2009), for example, the chapter on Baroque art contains statements that may well represent the subjective attitudes of the authors, but which can in no way have a positive effect on the self-perception of the students: “Rembrandt van Rijn and Peter Paul Rubens are usually considered the pinnacles of Baroque painting. Rubens’ famous ideal of lushly plump female beauty (*bujně kyprá krása*) seems somewhat inappropriate (*nepatříčně*) today.”¹² The position from which such an opinion (or promotion of anorexia?) is formulated is nowhere specified. Characteristically, no illustration accompanies or supports this value judgement on Rubens and on female bodies – only Rembrandt’s depiction of a female nude, which can be seen on the opposite page.

Some issues of family politics in this publication are approached similarly inadvertently – with strong opinions expressed, but without a broader and transparent conceptual framework. We can observe that the wives of Henry VIII are as comparably stable and popular a topic as the wives of Charles IV. Thus, a page devoted to sixteenth century England in this textbook is divided into two parts with four paragraphs of expository text – evenly distributed between the policies (or rather fates) of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.¹³ Both of these monarchs are also portrayed on this page. A special information box discusses Henry’s six wives and details

¹⁰ On the didactic need to instigate shifting perspectives in the context of the (re)construction of identities see Jaroslav Pinkas, “Identity ve výuce dějepisu” in “*Nechtění*” *spoluobčané. Skupiny obyvatel perzekvovaných či marginalizovaných z politických, národnostních, náboženských i jiných důvodů v letech 1945–1989*, eds. Jaroslav Pažout, Kateřina Portmann (Praha–Liberec: ÚSTR – TUL, 2018), 190–191.

¹¹ On the dangers of this in school history see *idem*, “Hodnoty a hodnocení v dějepise,” *Historie – Otázky – Problémy* 9, 2 (2017): 57–71, here 66.

¹² Ivana Čornejová, Petr Čornej, František Parkan, *Dějepis pro gymnázia s střední školy, 2, středověk a raný novověk* (Praha: SPN, 2001), 150.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 118.

the circumstances of each marriage, divorce or execution. Even in the brief text on Elizabeth I, considerable space is devoted to her “personal life” – her alleged virginity and her many lovers (“She was also called the Virgin Queen because she remained unmarried, although history knows the names of her distinguished lovers...”). We could perhaps explain this as a manifestation of a certain tabloidisation in the liberal approach to the development of didactic materials, or a traditional (almost fairy-tale) attempt to refresh late medieval political history through love-adventure stories of personal relationships. In any case, it is a typical example of unreflective insertion of the history of sex and the body into the interpretation of political history, which from a didactic point of view does not develop critical thinking about the topic, but rather serves as a diversifying curiosity.

Even in many partial formulations it seems that the authors of this textbook apparently considered it appropriate to discuss topics of the history of the body in a significantly emotional way, while a somewhat male chauvinistic perspective seems to be the leading narrative point of view. This is also evident, for example, in the account of monasticism and celibacy; this deals with sexuality, but only male, and does not consider it in relation to reproduction etc., but only as a source of sensual pleasure: “They (monks) thought that the Christian principles necessary for the salvation of the soul were best observed away from the sinful world and by leading a strict life, free from all pleasures and temptations (*radovánky a pokušení*), among which they also counted women.”¹⁴

On the subject of medieval celibacy it might be well demonstrated that a topic from the field of the history of the body can be conceived in many ways – from the not entirely appropriate, emotional and value-tinted to the relatively neutral and descriptive. The latter is the case of a textbook produced in 2016 by the publisher Nová škola. Here, as opposed to the previous example, the text comments on the spread of celibacy among nuns and monks in the late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages in a rather objectively explanatory way: “The original mission of the monks was a pious life of the total renunciation of almost everything – from food to sex life.”¹⁵ This textbook, however, reveals somewhat different problems. These can be summarised as the results of a non-systematic approach that introduces into the interpretation some residual knowledge elements that reinforce in the users of the textbook a certain modernist ideological framework, rather than reflecting accurate scientific knowledge or critical thinking: For instance, in the chapter entitled “Slavs in our lands” (with the self-conscious illusion of ethnocentric historical continuity) the authors mention their ideas about the distribution of gender roles in the context of the interpretation of the agriculture, economy and religious life of the Slavs: “Families were initially self-sufficient, that is, they made their own tools, clothes and utensils (women spun flax and

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 34.

¹⁵ Collective authors, *Dějepis 7 – Středověk, počátky novověku* (Brno: Nová škola, 2016), 44.

wool, wove cloth, men wove baskets, carved wooden tools, etc.)”¹⁶ This casual and hardly verifiable mention of a gender-based division of labour is isolated in this textbook, which makes comparisons with other cultures or epochs impossible (even ignoring that the described fact is itself marginal in terms of school history teaching, and above all poorly documented in terms of historiography). There is a great risk that the only thing such a claim achieves is a misleading petrification of historical gender roles.

This approach, using clearly random pieces of information, appears elsewhere in this textbook too. As was mentioned above, unlike the one published by SPN, these references do not function as a lascivious diversion, but seem closer to a thoughtful development of historical knowledge regarding the history of the body. However these appear only in the form of isolated statements, lost in the flow of the expository text (focused on traditional event-oriented political history) and not following one another; accordingly, they cannot fulfil the considered critical or motivational function very well. Other illustrative examples can be seen in the chapter on the thirteenth century and the kings Ottokar II and Wenceslaus II. In the rather detailed biography of Ottokar II a brief mention is incorporated of more general information about medieval society: “In the Middle Ages, children could also marry. However, the spouses lived separately until the age of 14–16.”¹⁷ Similarly, within the description of the life and politics of this king’s son Wenceslaus II, the authors add a socio-historical curiosity, which (again unsystematically, but at least descriptively, not in evaluative language) complements the chronologically constructed narration: “The separation of young children from their mother and father was not uncommon among wealthy people in the Middle Ages. Immediately after birth, the child was cared for by a nurse, a woman who nursed the child in addition to her own.”¹⁸

In both cases, we could ask why these more general statements about historical social structures and interpersonal relationships did not become the core of the expository text. Such bodily-centred interpretations could still be illustrated here and there with examples from the canonical story of national history, based on the catalogue of dynasties, princes and kings which now forms the traditional but somewhat self-evident axis of narration. From this point of view, a conscious personalisation of structural issues would present a welcome approach, using the students’ and teachers’ foreknowledge of the political-historical narrative to explain subjects of a more comparative and interdisciplinary didactical potential. The textbook published by *Nová škola* instead separates this biographical narrative from independent chapters on “society,” where stories about the lives of rulers are not used in any way. One – in many aspects characteristic – two

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 54.

pages¹⁹ on “medieval society” thus contains paragraph-subchapters on the topics of “guilds,” “clothing,” “family life,”²⁰ “women”²¹ and “taverns and inns.” Typically, there is no separate paragraph devoted to medieval “men,” which makes it unfeasible to convey any basic and functional understanding of the topic of gender.

A similar approach – focusing attention not only on the narrated transmission of the canonical story but also on some important structural issues – can be observed in the textbooks written by Veronika Válková. In this case all pages in the textbook are specifically visually structured – we read a traditional political-historical and biographical narrative in the middle of each page, while separate columns with information on general (or literally marginal?) structural themes are placed along the sides. Thus, for example, beside a narration about selected western European nations and states we find a box on “children in the Middle Ages” (with brief comments on the relationship between work and play, on perceptions of time and early adolescence, and on the restriction of education to narrow social classes),²² and similarly, information on the rule of the Jagiellonians and Ferdinand I in Bohemia is accompanied by information on “women in the Middle Ages” (on the structural inequalities expressed by courtly culture and on some powerful women who, as exceptions, prove the rule).²³ Again, men are not given comparable separate attention – as in other cases, their position in history is identified with that of the movers and shakers of history in the central expository text. Despite the generally monological narrative style, this textbook ought to be highly appreciated for its unusually comprehensive information on the structural and anthropological topics including body-connected themes of gender, race, socio-economic groups, etc., which often go deeper than is the case in other textbooks of this explicative type (that is not, for example, concentrating on asking questions or encouraging research).

A textbook published by Prodos (2012; written by historians Linda Mikušková, Lenka Doová, Petr Odehnal and Tomáš Somer) provides another good illustration of the wider trend – authorial teams often failing to integrate

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 92–93.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 92: “In the middle and upper classes, wealth played a large role in marriage. From this point of view, poorer people had more freedom of choice when choosing a partner. [...] The father had a decisive position in the family. [...] Compare the life and position of the members of a medieval family with that of a contemporary family.”

²¹ *Ibidem*, 93: “The status of women in the Middle Ages was not equal with that of men. Childbirth was a common cause of death for women in those times. Widows were freer in their activities when, after the death of their husbands, they did not marry and continued to run their trade. How would you explain the concept of equality? Compare the position of women in ancient, medieval and modern times. Name countries where women are still subordinate to men today. [...] Society tried to curb marital infidelity with drastic punishments. [...] Women in particular were judged very harshly...”

²² Veronika Válková, *Dějepis 7 pro základní školy. Středověk a raný novověk* (Praha: SPN, 2014), 78.

²³ *Ibidem*, 114.

the commentary on specific social groups (be it minorities or those defined by gender or age, for example) into the larger narrative, which is given priority. Thus, they usually devise separate paragraphs or even full chapters about women, Jews, Roma, children, etc. on the one hand, and about “medieval society” (where the three social classes, feudalism, burghers – in all cases typically from an adult male perspective – are discussed) on the other. Nonetheless the team behind the Prodos textbook to a certain extent successfully managed to blur the optical boundaries between the general and the particular, i.e., between partial politico-historical narratives and commentaries on social structures concerning the history of the body.

The right- and left-hand pages of this textbook can appear like this: on the right we find a chapter devoted to “the territorial development of the Czech state in the thirteenth century” and on the left “the life of women in the Middle Ages.”²⁴ Again, let us pass over there being no chapter devoted to the life of men in the Middle Ages in this textbook but rather focus on the concept of this gendered chapter. The top half of the page begins with a brief commentary on the nature of medieval patriarchal society (mentioning some exceptional noble women or the prominent positions of widows and heiresses). Attention is concentrated on abbesses – Hildegard of Bingen is highlighted in a separate banner. Subsequently, the bottom half of the page presents what is in fact a traditional account of the life and significance of Agnes of Bohemia, the equivalent of which is not absent from the other textbooks examined. The difference is that while usually the discussion of Agnes forms part of the interpretation of the Bohemian lands and the Přemyslids in the thirteenth century, here it is functionally inserted as an illustrative element in the debate about the class-defined potential of one gendered social group in the given epoch.

However, this relatively innovative approach to structuring the text has not been applied consistently by the authorial team. In other chapters, the same principle is used that we have encountered before – the insertion of fragmentary information about social roles based on age or gender as a curiosity in an interpretation oriented decidedly towards the political history of individual European nations, dynasties, and states. So when reading about the early medieval British Isles and Scandinavia, we come across a visually distinct message: “Nordic women were almost equal to men; we find them in the roles of early colonisers, traders, craftswomen, and warriors.”²⁵ In the chapter on Poland in the fourteenth century, a mention of Queen Jadwiga prompts the authors to include a similar banner about women among the lay elite (“Medieval society was a society of men, and in many languages there were no terms for «female ruler». Words like «queen» or «princess» referred to the wives of rulers. [...] If the writer felt the need to point out that it [the ruler]

²⁴ Linda Mikulenková, Lenka Doová, Petr Odehnal, Tomáš Somer, *Dějepis 7 – Středověk* (Olomouc: Prodos, 2012), 86–87.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 39.

was a woman, he used the term «woman king»²⁶).²⁶ In both cases the same rearrangement of information would be possible as in the chapter on women (or on Agnes of Bohemia), which would make the historicity of the gender roles the focus of the interpretation. As in so many cases mentioned before, this proposal would not imply a change of proportions (which could perhaps discourage some teachers or parents) or increasing the volume of the subject matter (which is unrealistic and counterproductive in terms of teaching practice), but a mere structural reassessment and a change of perspective.

I have given here some examples of stimulating, not always fully realised tendencies in the process of shifting attention from canonical narratives – oriented towards stories of social elites, national entities, and themes of historical state and law – to the historicity of perceptions of the human body, gender and its associated relations and cultural functions. Alongside the results of these more or less elaborate approaches, however, there are, of course, textbooks that not only fail to reflect the topic, but use history with considerable intensity to reinforce (or naturalise, i.e., suppress the historicity of) modern conservative cultural positions.

One such example appears to be a textbook published by Scientia in 2002 (authored by historians Michaela Hrubá and Václav Drška). A major role in achieving this apparently unintended ideological effect is played by illustrations, the selection and didactic use of which (along with their descriptions) are often greatly underestimated (this tendency was also evident in the aforementioned SPN textbook by Ivana Čornejová, Petr Čornej and František Parkan). On one page, for example, we read a narrative about the Bohemian principality in the eleventh century (concerning Prague's relationship to the Holy Roman Empire and events connected with Břetislav I), while no less than half of the page is occupied by a painting by Biedermeier artist Antonín Machek (1775–1844), depicting an erotic scene of the meeting between Břetislav's father Oldřich and the low-born laundress Božena.²⁷ A caption retelling this story based on the medieval Chronicle of Cosmas takes up another quarter of this same page. Generally, in the pursuit of attractiveness, authors and editors can easily end up filling the space of the textbook with irrelevant or misleading pieces of information which, due to the inappropriate combination of sources, do not develop knowledge of early medieval society, nor of the aesthetics or historical consciousness of the first half of the nineteenth century (which the picture could otherwise encourage).

In what can also be regarded as a common trend among the textbooks and exercise books analysed for this study, many of them still visually present women, without any apparent didactic intention, mainly in the form of naked bodies from early modern and modern artworks; clothing and jewellery are also too often

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 61.

²⁷ Michaela Hrubá, Václav Drška, *Dějepis 7: středověk a raný novověk* (Praha: Scientia, 2002), 64.

discussed in relation to women.²⁸ Similarly, there can appear affirmations of simplistic and misleading ideas in the incidental references to the traditional family, which are more indicative of the current worldview of the authorial or editorial teams rather than attempting to convey contemporary historical knowledge in this respect to students in the most comprehensible form. A textbook published by Taktik (2017), for example, in a brief box entitled “The Family in the Middle Ages,” states unequivocally: “Roles in the medieval family were divided according to established customs – the man provided for subsistence and military defence, the woman took care of the offspring and the household, but also performed some agricultural work. Children did not go to school, so they started working as adults early on (from about the age of 14, a man was considered an adult). People therefore married and started families at this age. Overall, they lived to a younger age than today.”²⁹ Declarations of this kind seem rather as explicit translations of the modern conservative ideal of the traditional family into a medieval setting. From a methodological and didactic point of view, a non-functional imitation of interactivity and communication with students is also remarkable. Underneath the monologic interpretation (like the initial example of the concept of the theme of Charles’ wives in the Fraus textbook), several questions/instructions appear at the end of the page for students to answer/respond to. The last one urges them to “Describe the status of women and children in medieval society.” The correct solution to such a task, based on the materials provided in this textbook, cannot be done otherwise than by repeating verbatim a nondescript sentence about the “division of roles according to established customs.” As a resulting effect, the textbook guides its users to the abolition of history and the conflation of medieval complexities with nineteenth century bourgeois morality.

In the current range of history textbooks for primary schools in Czechia, a new approach has recently been applied – the research method. It is based on the principles of the development of historical thinking, the aim of which is not to conceive the textbook (or other teaching material, see, e.g., the project *HistoryLab.cz*) as a repository of stories and authoritatively communicated facts, but as a set of questions with resources that facilitate their answering.³⁰ The aim here is to learn

²⁸ This is also the case of the materials published in the collection of *Nová škola*; more generally on the problem of inadequate or stereotyped representations of women’s bodies in national historiographies see Jitka Malečková, “Where are women in national histories?” in *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 171–199.

²⁹ Collective authors, *Hravý dějepis, 7. Středověk a raný novověk: učebnice pro 7. ročník ZŠ a víceletá gymnázia* (Praha: Taktik, 2017), 14.

³⁰ For the didactic concepts of historical thinking see Peter Seixas, Tom Morton, *The Big Six. Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*

historical thinking in terms of causality, change and continuity, the importance of multiperspectivity, constructivism and the role of history in the individual and collective memory and in public space. The recent, award-winning textbook “Contemporary History” for the ninth grade of elementary school, prepared by an authorial team coordinated by the Department of Education at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and published by Fraus (2022),³¹ is representative of this trend. While volumes on medieval and early modern history are still in preparation,³² some chapters of the published volume, covering mostly topics from the twentieth century, demonstrate how such an approach translates into the didactic rendition of the history of the body.

For example, the chapter titled “Labour in Stalinist Czechoslovakia” presents a collection of textual and visual sources that should lead students to answer the question “How did labour change after the Communists came to power?”³³ One of the sources is a caricature thematising the changing role of women, connecting ideology, emancipation and modernisation. Another source – a painting of the time – draws attention to the forceful engagement of nuns in manual professions. The sub-questions this lesson asks are, e.g.: “What do you think the drawing of the nuns in the factory is supposed to communicate?” or “Reflect on the difference between women’s labour in the 1950s and today. Can you think of a question that hasn’t been asked about women’s labour yet?” The aim is clearly to draw attention to the historical fluidity of gender roles and to changes in social status in relation to gender, but also to ideological changes in the perception of the human body at work and beyond. Instead of a chronological historical narrative, questions are asked about the historicity of issues that are perceived as current and pressing today.

This brings us back to the beginning. If a mere fascination with the Biedermeier dream of fairy-tale love at first sight between a prince and a low-born girl, or a disjointed mention of the endangered bodies of the wives of a medieval emperor is insufficient, how can school history (in the very limited form of printed didactic materials – textbooks) shape historical consciousness about pre-modern and contemporary bodies? On the selected examples I have tried to demonstrate that substantial change could often be achieved with just the help of rearranging and

and Other Unnatural Acts. Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). As applied in teaching materials (digital and printed) for Czech contemporary history, see Hana Havlůjová, Jaroslav Najbert, “Proměna cílů historického vzdělávání v časech nových médií” in *Promýšlet dějepis v 21. století. Digitální aplikace pro práci s prameny HistoryLab.cz* (Praha 2017), <https://metodika.historylab.cz/>, accessed on 30 March 2023.

³¹ Collective authors, *Soudobé dějiny – badatelská učebnice dějepisu pro 9. ročník základních škol a víceletá gymnázia* (Plzeň: Fraus, 2022).

³² Disclosure: the author of this paper participated on work for the connected exercise book for the seventh grade of elementary school, paying special attention to medieval sexuality (*Dějepis 7 s nadhledem 2v1*, Plzeň: Fraus 2021, 56–57), gender and conceptions of living in a family or as single (*ibidem*, 44–47).

³³ Collective authors, *Soudobé dějiny*, 66–67.

restructuring the themes and motifs commonly chosen for interpretation. Of course, a change of perspective will also prompt changes in specific formulations and necessitate the addition of partial sources of information, just as a reorientation from authoritative narrative monologues to sources and research questions will facilitate critical thinking instead of passive transmission. Experiences with research teaching on the example of contemporary history also show that from a didactic point of view it is advantageous if a critically (self-reflexively) conceived contemporary perspective becomes the starting point, rather than an embellishing addition to the construction of textbook chapters.³⁴

The materials for pre-modern history in elementary school history textbooks have so far stuck to rather authoritative, monologic interpretations, with an emphasis on the affirmation of the canonical national or civilisational story. Phenomena such as medicine, beauty and ugliness, family, childhood or gender roles thus find themselves (often literally) on the margins, and their treatment tends to reproduce a) the illusion of corporeality/naturality, in the sense of ahistoricity (nature and body presented as a given; the changing cultural and semantic dimension of the human body is suppressed), or b) the myth of phased evolution. When body-connected issues are more functionally included in the historical narrative, it is mostly in the sense of progressive development (in the fields of science and human rights), while the possibility of comparisons at the global (or at least continental) level, structural deviations, regressions, and also cultural, paradigmatic changes, are basically not taken into account. Particular attention should undoubtedly be paid to the aspect of intersectionality – the interconnectedness of different opportunities and barriers in access to health care and control over one's own body, the possibility of starting a family (in its various historical forms and conceptions) or, for example, freedom in sexual life with regard to gender, social status and economic conditions.

Taking everything that has been noted above into account, other practical questions arise – if the intertwining of pre-modern history with sex education and civic education is also seen as recommended and necessary, shouldn't history teaching be adapted to the age at which the topic of sex education or civic education is discussed with students? Does a chronological approach to the past then make sense at all, retelling history sequentially from prehistory to the present?³⁵ Wouldn't it be more functional to focus on different body-centred themes – according to the age and readiness of the children – and then to elaborate them on different examples in their historical, biological, civic and other dimensions?³⁶

³⁴ Jaroslav Pinkas, "Učitelé dějepisu a badatelská výuka na příkladu testování učebnice dějepisu pro 9. ročník ZŠ," *Historie – Otázky – Problémy* 13, 2 (2021): 97–112.

³⁵ See the recent proposals for other, gradual developments of the particular concepts of historical thinking in the study by Marek Fapšo, "Dokolečka dokola. Cyklický model výuky dějepisu pro základní školy," *Historie – Otázky – Problémy* 13, 2 (2021): 113–128.

³⁶ This publication was supported by the University Research Centres Programme realized at the Charles University (UNCE 204053).

SUMMARY

This paper analyses history textbooks currently used in the Czech Republic; it focuses on how they deal with the issue of the historicity of the body and its related functions, and relations in pre-modern history. It shows that the medieval body is surprisingly present in primary and secondary education, at least through history textbooks. The ways in which it is presented, however, are problematic: it remains at the margins of the canonical narrative and is not used to develop key competencies associated with historical thinking (unlike some topics in political history). In explanatory texts the history of the body is incorporated mostly in apparently unreflective ways. The author argues that a rearrangement of information and changes of perspective (which would make the historicity of the body the focus of the interpretation) would be enough to offer a more complex view of the historicity of the human body in pre-modern societies. He also expresses hope for more research-oriented (thus not just transmissive) teaching materials.