



ANCIENT SKIES

"Come Search With Us!"

Official Logbook of the Ancient Astronaut Society

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THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOPIC

BY PETER KASCHEL*

I teach German language classes in a high school in Marl, Germany. In 1992, I decided to try an experiment in my classes to expose my students to the subject of extraterrestrial intelligence. My aim was not to come up with a "just-for-fun" presentation, which teachers usually love so much to demonstrate their alleged progressiveness - like the music teacher who adores Bach and Beethoven and who discusses some Beatles-album just to please the kids. Oh no! I much rather wanted to meet an educational challenge. I intended to create a teaching pattern that is open to new ideas altogether. To be precise, I wanted to establish the topic of extraterrestrial intelligence as a required subject.

The topic of extraterrestrial intelligence ought to be an integral part of both high school and university teaching, not just to juxtapose any fixed mental schemes and patterns, but because the whole realm of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence represents a scientific sector which, even though dealing with the past, is aimed at the future, while at the same time trying to comprehend the origin of mankind.

There just had to be someone to attempt courageously to confront his school and his students with downright several-week-projects, rather than to have a bashful flirt with the ancient astronaut theory. Such a provocation was to shake the foundation of the educational system as such in order to establish the basis for new realities. At the beginning

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of such a venture I knew there would be pioneering work, pedagogical tightrope walks and the confrontation with various harrassments. To go beyond a merely superficial approach to the extraterrestrial question, I realized that the following requirements had to be met: (1) personal motivation (intrinsic); (2) outside motivation (extrinsic); (3) courage and definite powers of endurance; and (4) complete command of the curriculum.

As for intrinsic motivation: not many people can claim what I can - to have had a fantastic time at school, thanks to a number of very gifted teachers, of whom each and every one was a real personality both in human as well as in educational terms. The only exceptions, however, were my history teachers. My probing questions were usually answered in a superficial, even childish manner. This lasted for years on end and led to my permanently receiving bad marks in a subject that I was originally strongly interested in. When I was 12 years old I read C.W.Ceram's Gods, Graves and Scholars, an "unscientific" story of archaeology, which motivated me beyond compare, twelve years before I ever got to reading Erich von Daniken's Chariots of the Gods? Still it was my history classes with all their trivialities that made me recognize one thing: history cannot have happened the way our history books try to make us believe. Strangely enough, it turned out that it was my history classes that eventually led me in the direction of the ancient astronaut theory even ten years prior to the foundation of the Ancient Astronaut Society.

I received my extrinsic motivation through all the works that somehow question the traditional approach to history in one way or another. It started with books by or about Heinrich Schliemann and Thor Heyerdahl and has been continuing until now.

By the same token I consider it essential to state that I do not simply believe in the concepts of the Ancient Astronaut Society, but that, despite some criticisms I might have, I am deeply convinced of them. This is the reason why I was determined to tell myself: "As a teacher you must not keep this conviction, which doubts the traditional conception of the world, to yourself only, no matter which subject you teach. On the contrary! In this mental prison of narrow-mindedness called 'school' you are compelled to teach new values, findings, perspectives, options hidden under the overall question whether or not things might have been completely different from what we have been taught."

What right do history-book scribblers and other people of their trade have to claim that they are the only ones who possess the truth? As a teacher, I feel strongly obliged to open a new world to my pupils, despite all cynicisms from my colleagues. I do not wish to question our traditional concept of our origin; I rather want the pupils to do so themselves.

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As for personal courage, which such a new undertaking requires, I could rely on previous experiences with unconventional projects which has already gotten me a specific "reputation", or even ruined it to some extent.

My former principal would frown at my style of teaching, but my current, fairly young lady principal was delighted by the idea of the project about the ancient astronaut theory. My project surprisingly met the strong approval of this open-minded woman. Yet still to be convinced were my school superiors in the administration and about fifty of my fellow teachers. I said to myself: If Erich von Daniken has been fighting the rest of the world, I might as well put up with this bunch of mental blockheads who had allied themselves in a striking symbiosis of ignorance and arrogance.

The curricula of the individual federal states of Germany do not differ greatly from one another as regards didactic questions, subject matters or contents. The German curriculum of Northrhine-Westfalia (where I teach) is divided into three units according to each school year of high school. First: speaking and writing skills; second: analysis of texts; and third: talking about language. This also applies to the lower grades and junior high, which means 11 to 15 year olds. This is where I conducted three projects dealing with the topic of extraterrestrial intelligence - of ancient astronauts.

While the school administration imposes strict requirements and topics upon the German language teacher, this stands in sharp contrast to the unprecise and confusing language in which these claims are expressed in the curricula. For example:

"The personality of the child and the adolescent has to be taken seriously; this applies to their perception of a creative viewing of the world as well as to their creativity and imagination."

"The students must be able to give rationales for their views and attitudes and must learn to stand up for them. They must learn to tolerate views and attitudes and convictions of others."

"To deal with the basic structures of civilization...with its cultural traditions and hermeneutic categories is one aim of subject teaching."

"Topics of teaching and its methods may be subjected to alternation owing to progress in scholarship. The students ought to be aware of the influence of scholarship and science in today's societies and ought to realize the limits of scientific approaches."

I could go on and on with more examples of such meaningless and abstract regulations. I deemed it my chance and duty to fill these hollow and meaningless phrases with concrete and precise meanings, especially since the former reminded me of the mysterious darkness of ancient history itself. Is there a better vehicle than the theses of the Ancient Astronaut Society to show the students the limits of scientific approaches?

My first project rested upon the following curricular requirements:

First: "The German classes are to help the students to develop critical views and individual determination in order to lead them to developing their own self-reliance."

Second: "A vital part of the German classes are the manifold skills of arguing and appealing. The German classes are to enhance the students' awareness of how opinions are developed." (This awareness is what I intended to enhance, indeed!)"

Third: "Texts that enjoy a high cultural appreciation have to be dealt with as a matter of priority."

This, of course, is where the teacher's heart begins to beat faster, especially if he has the courage to use his own reason, as expressed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. All it takes now is to put two and two together: Erich von Daniken's books have been classic pieces of world literature for

almost thirty years. Their high cultural and educational value to me is unquestionable.

The initial debate, which is an important introductory form of a complex text analysis in the upper school (senior high) is difficult as such: The students must deal with diverging standpoints both orally and in a written form. They have to develop their own opinions about the topic given. To differentiate between the pros and cons calls for a great amount of individual mental activity.

THE FIRST PROJECT - I finally commenced the project in a tenth grade class, that is with 15 and 16 year olds. The introductory periods were subtitled "The Debate-Strategies to Develop Arguments". I unexpectedly confronted the students with the question:

"COULD YOU POSSIBLY IMAGINE THAT THE HISTORY OF MANKIND AND THE ORIGIN OF MANKIND IN PARTICULAR MAY HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT SCHOLARS AND HISTORY BOOKS HAVE BEEN TEACHING US?"

Thus, the project started with 19 girls and boys sitting and staring flabbergastedly and confused without a word for several minutes.

I returned to the question of whether or not the history of mankind may have taken a different course than generally alleged, and I consequently proposed the following title for the upcoming project:

"Erich von Daniken - pros and cons."

It did not yet seem odd that the students could not make much of this name, so I gave them the following assignments to work on:

- Forget all spare time activities for the next two weeks! Go forth and research! Go to bookstores, to libraries, museums, archives; ask relatives and friends; telephone about and read books by Erich von Daniken and about him! Read about the Stone Age and ancient Egypt in children's history books. You will soon find that their approach of "that is how it was!" leaves nothing to doubt!

- Read your own topical history books. See how positively and self-assuredly they produce dates and facts from very ancient times. (I said "produce" rather than "lead to believe" in order to stay neutral. I want to see your results in two weeks from today!

With this sort of preparation of the project I had complied with two central requirements of the curriculum: "to analyze the structure, intention and effect of texts;" and "to employ informative texts in their function as secondary literature." To prevent the class from feeling lost and helpless I handed out copies of the three theses of the Ancient Astronaut Society: (1) our planet was visited by extraterrestrials in pre-historic times; (2) our current technological civilization is not the first one on this planet; and (3) a combination of the first two.

In less than a week after my giving out the assignments I was called into the principal's office:

"It is my obligation to inform you that a number of your colleagues (representing the subjects of German, History, Religion, and Biology) has complained to me about your denying the classic guidelines of our humanist high school and that you have been attempting to bring up the students against the present conception of the world by introducing trivial literature into your periods. May I ask for your explanation?"

My answer was the following: "Those 'colleagues', as such people - funnily enough - are strangely termed, do not even have the guts to approach me face to face. Their anonymous action only goes to show how poorly these people behave. Not to mention their ignorance, their prejudices and their concept of the enemy."

After the first week the class had not read any works by or about von Daniken. They had, however, thumbed through a number of books and by reading secondary literature gained a pretty good understanding of the matter and found that there existed

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a stereotyped set of ideas regarding the subject of ancient astronauts. They had found in diverse texts that Erich von Daniken's views were not to be taken seriously. Only three students uttered that their parents had not only read von Daniken's books, but also sympathized with his theories. With the help of several diagrams on the blackboard, we tried to exemplify the results of the students' findings. We noted that it had not escaped the attention of three students that no history book ever questions any event or date or development it describes. Preconceived opinions, prejudices and taboos of allegedly suspicious reflections a la von Daniken were clearly not in favor of the author.

The project became more precise during its second phase, in which the intention was to sensitize the students for the topic of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence. The class was divided into five study groups, each of which was assigned to read the authors' works from different angles of approach, to summarize them and to interpret the intentions and leanings of the author or authors of four books in the ancient astronaut field. They also had to analyse the contents and the language of five Ancient Skies editorials in which the conventional conception of history is strongly doubted.

One evening I received a phone call from the editor-in-chief of a local newspaper who asked if he would be permitted to attend my class once and if he could conduct an interview. The project had somehow become the talk of the city of Marl and, to him, an interview seemed appropriate. The reporter came and asked his questions; the class and their teacher willingly answered. The students assured the reporter that their commitment had been steadily growing and that they were not the types to ingratiate themselves with the teacher. Some of them frankly admitted that their conception of the world had been subjected to a more detailed reflection since the start of the project.

"Why Erich von Daniken?" the reporter asked of me. Struggling for a neutral position (I had hitherto not yet revealed to anyone that I was a member of the Ancient Astronaut Society), I merely stated that my profession was compelling me to be permanently innovative. I told him that I was very sorry about the lack of support from my colleagues. The project did comprise several subjects, after all, such as history, religion, biology and philosophy, and I would really appreciate my colleagues getting involved even if they opposed von Daniken.

The following day I read in the paper of:

- an excited class,
- a group of students that worked more than they were assigned to do,
- extraterrestrial visitors in Marl,
- a weird fighter for new ideas (this time it was not von Daniken who was meant, I'm afraid),
- a wide educational spectrum and "petty" colleagues whose comments were not helpful and were nothing but cynical remarks.

The public had been aroused. My class had become a topic and carried on working as if in a trance. This was too much for the faculty, especially since the lady principal had so far made no attempt to officially criticize me, the heretic. I was subjected to all sorts of attacks and reproaches, before I ever got a chance to explain things at a conference. My statement was short: "I will proceed to fight against the self-adulation that is so common among some of you. I will fight for an open-minded teaching which accepts the ancient astronaut topic, which you so vehemently refuse to understand, as an educational imperative. Maybe you will understand the following lines: "Small is the world, but wide is the brain." (Schiller, the great German classic dramatist). "The world is wide, but the brain is small." (Erich von Daniken).

The third part of the project consisted of the well-known analyses of the texts in both linguistic

respects and respects of content in order to pave the way for a test. The text to be dealt with was an excerpt from Ernst von Khuon's "Were the Gods Astronauts?"

The quintessence of the project can be summarized as follows: After initial opposition and a certain lack of orientation the class showed a growing interest in the topic and in the end appeared to be quite fascinated by it, indeed. There was, by the way, not a single protest from the parents' side. A number of them had rather become interested themselves.

Both the highlight and conclusion of the project was - or should I say "was meant to be" - the showing of the films "Chariots of the Gods?" and "Message of the Gods", both based upon Erich von Daniken's books. The topic of extraterrestrial intelligence had gained a delicate foothold; yet, had it been but a unique school project it would soon have lost its credibility and might have backfired against its initiator. Therefore it appeared essential to carry on with further teaching projects immediately.

THE SECOND PROJECT - Standing still means stepping backwards, so, to remain credible and to enhance the ancient astronaut topics at our school, I had to approach the next teaching project, lest the major First Project be forgotten. A major requirement in the eighth grade (14 year olds) is to acquire a greater knowledge of the medium "newspaper". Students are asked to write their own articles about thrilling and exclusive local events, such as a visit to the zoo, a call of the fire-brigade, an accident on a zebra-crossing, a theft in the super-market, and similar "earth-shaking" incidents. The class that I taught imagined itself in a time machine and, after an abundance of information from me, produced reports and interviews of dramatic appeal like the following:

- An eye-witness report about the discovery of the palace of Knossos on the Island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea; an interview with Sir Arthur Evans.

- A report about the opening of the burial chamber of Tut-Ankh-Amen in Egypt by Howard Carter.

- An interview with Maria Reiche about her research on the Plain of Nazca in Peru.

- A live report about Erich von Daniken during his first visit to the memorial slab in the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque in Mexico.

- An eye-witness report about the journey of the Gantenbrink robot through one of the narrow passages leading from the Queen's Chamber in the Great Pyramid in Egypt.

I deliberately dealt with major archaeological events and ancient astronaut sensations on the same level. There again followed biting remarks from my colleagues and a very strong reaction from a fellow teacher, who teaches both German language and history and who at that time was teaching history in that eighth grade. He maintained that my German language classes, if they deserved to be called so, were thwarting his history classes. He wanted to know what I wanted to achieve by my highly irregular methods and topics which were making the pupils insecure. "That's exactly what I have in mind", was my retort. "And besides, 'every man has the right and the liberty to show his opinions in public through teaching.'"

My colleague was furious: "That's not in the curriculum!" I agreed: "Right! This is paragraph 18 of the General Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in 1948 by the United Nations!"

There is an old German proverb which says: "He who has a lot of enemies, has a lot of honor!" There were adversaries all over the place, but no solidarity in sight from anyone. In such moments I found inspiration from the German satirist and philosopher Kurt Tucholsky who said: "Nothing in life is

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more difficult and calls for more character, but to stand in open contrast to one's contemporaries and to loudly say 'NO!'

THE THIRD PROJECT - I teach German in almost all grades and I am also the class teacher of a sixth grade (12 year olds). The curriculum requires that we deal with ancient mythologies in the sixth grade, and one not familiar with the school's curricula might think it would be easy to find ways to simply link the requirements with those of the Ancient Astronaut Society. In other words, if one is clever enough he can interpret and manipulate curricular imperatives in favor of extraterrestrial questions and thus open the school doors to our topics. It is not so easy as that! First, there are the "obligatory requirements", which narrow the teacher's possibilities considerably. Then there are the school's own curricula, which means that all teachers of one subject, such as German language, must establish a curriculum which will guarantee that all topics and themes can somehow be compared and correspond between individual classes. This is done through the "faculty conference", which functions as a "sword of Damocles" (always looms large) when it comes to limiting the teacher's freedom to the question of "how" to plan, introduce or carry out teaching sequences.

I started the third project by showing the group parts of the biographical film about Heinrich Schliemann, called "The Priamos Treasure". This was supplemented by a presentation of my own photos showing me digging near Phaselis, Aspendos, Ephesos and especially Troy, and last but not least, there were photos of my activities at Catal Huyuk and Nemrud Dag. All of these archaeological sites are in Turkey.

So far as I know there are very few teachers who can show their pupils bits and pieces of ancient ceramics that they found themselves at the coast of Turkey or in Central Anatolia, when it comes to fulfilling the faculty conference's requirements to deal with antique epics and legends. Few can introduce their students to the mysterious ancient world by showing them photographs of their teacher crawling over archaeological sites. And there are probably still fewer teachers (German teachers not history teachers) who can direct their students' attention to the following question: "How do we explain that in ancient times there is so much talk of Gods, divine messengers and objects flying in the sky?"

I asked the children to do research and to find out in what epics such events are mentioned at all. We started off from one of the archetype epics "When Prometheus stole the fire from the sky" (according to our textbook he rode to the skies in a fiery chariot) and the story of "Persephone's rape", in which Pluto obviously employs obscure driving devices.

The young students enjoyed their turning into detectives; they thumbed through books of their ancestors, found more than they had originally expected; even the star of Bethlehem had to serve as a flying object. True, they had read miscellaneous things on Gods and their hovering vehicles, had named Daidalus and Icarus as people who tried to act god-like; yet, why so many signs were directed towards the skies remained totally unclear to the students. I explained to them that "all over the world, around the globe, there are drawings, paintings, sculptures, reliefs, stones, stone circles, parts of edifices and whole buildings from ancient times that are somehow connected in some symbolic form with the skies, for which there are various possibilities of explanation."

I followed with one interpretational approach by showing them the film "Chariots of the Gods?", after which there was total silence. The culture shock had hit with full power!

The next assignment of the third project was for the students to search the daily newspapers for archaeological news. Then after three weeks they were allowed to swarm out with a questionnaire for our teachers with the following questions:

- Do you know Erich von Daniken? What do you think of him, his works, his theses?
- What is your opinion as to dealing with von Daniken's theses in your classroom?
- What does the term "SETI-topic" suggest to you; or the name "Ancient Astronaut Society"?
- What other authors do you know who have written on this subject?

Of the 30 teachers polled, not a single one knew any other authors in the field and none knew anything about the search for extraterrestrial intelligence or the ancient astronaut hypothesis. Twenty-six of the teachers had heard of Erich von Daniken, but only six of them were able to state what his theses were, with the others lost in a mist of Atlantis, astrology and UFOs. As to the question of whether the subject should be used in their classes, the most typical answers were:

- "No comment."
- "It is bad enough for publishers to release such things, but still worse if a teacher wastes precious school time on such 'wheelings and dealings'."
- "It used to be that such books were burnt; your teacher must be nuts."
- "School authorities, principals, parents and pupils ought to go to the barricades, if a teacher carries such stupidities into his classes."
- "Too much is being tolerated today! In my times a teacher would have lost his status as a civil servant."
- The friendliest answer of all was: "I am not interested in the topic."

To sum up, not a single one of the thirty teachers surveyed was mentally able to contemplate whether or not it could or should be possible to be open-minded towards this subject. There was only a spontaneous, harsh rejection!

Again quoting from the curriculum for German:

"The willingness to deal with both literary and cultural traditions and to yield to new, unfamiliar perspectives is enhanced by the experience, which all teaching has to provide, that it is especially the more difficult and unfamiliar texts that stimulate new reflections."

Whoever may be right, either the scientific community or the supporters of the Ancient Astronaut Society, one thing is for sure:

THE TRADITIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IS NOT ONLY WRONG, HYPOCRITICAL AND FULL OF LIES, BUT ALSO WITH EACH AND EVERY NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERY IT IS LED MORE AND MORE TOWARDS ITS OWN ABSURDITY!

I will continue my struggle at school so that more and more open-minded students will wish and say: "Come search with us!"

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