

BOOK REVIEWS

THE KILLING OF HISTORY: HOW LITERARY CRITICS AND SOCIAL THEORISTS ARE MURDERING OUR PAST KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE, 1996

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To call this book conservative would be a misnomer. This book was written as a response to what the author sees as an attack on “traditionally based” historiography by “a relatively new array of literary and social theories” (x.). As such the book is technically challenging to the reader who does not have much background in social science theory. The author (thankfully) does not take it for granted that the reader knows what semiotics, postmodernism, hermeneutics or historical poetics are.

The criticisms made by the author are based upon his own observations of Australian universities (where he is a lecturer) as they have come to adopt new theoretical aspects of “cultural studies”, a branch of multidisciplinary social sciences that have become very popular in Britain and Australia. The book is arranged into chapters that deal with individual theories (structuralism, postmodernism, Marxism, discourse theory, etc.) as they have been applied to the discipline of history.

While the author is not objecting to these theoretical paradigms themselves he does object to their application to history as a science. The exception is the chapter on Michel Foucault in which Windschuttle demonstrates, in my opinion, the contradictory nature of Foucault’s writings as well as the futility of his “obscurantism”. What the author presents through the individual arguments against these theoretical applications to history is that they often are more about pet theories of the historian than the actual events.

Many of Windschuttle's criticisms (39-70) are aimed at the application of moral indignation onto colonial figures such as Columbus and Cortez. While it is true that these explorers were spearheading the eventual genocide of the America's aboriginal population they were far from the villains (or heroes) that historical myth has made them out to be.

The construction of these historical myths is captivating and often carried out without having any reality. These great men (or monsters) are not the facts which led to the eventually colonization of the America's or downfall of the Aztec, respectively. These are cases where multiple factors were involved that caused events to happen, not the Hegelian "great men" found in the biographic presentation of historical events. Such simplifications of historical events are central to Windschuttle's critique.

Windschuttle uses the various interpretations of the mutiny of the Bounty (71-80) to show how historians will interpret an already popular subject, sensationalized in the public conscious, and use it to further a theoretical position. In the critique of Robert Denning's book "*Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty*". He takes Denning's central thesis that Bligh's "misunderstanding and misuse of the rituals and theatrics of authority" (74) is an explanation which uses historical events in order to present "a treatise on historical method and theory...in the form of a parable about the mutiny on the Bounty" (ibid.).

The use of historical events in order to illustrate social theory is not itself a bad thing, but I believe it can result in some bad history. This is well illustrated by Windschuttle's examination of the Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere debate about the fate of Captain Cook in the Hawaiian Islands (80-94). Windschuttle uses Obeyesekere's criticism of Sahlins in order to demonstrate how the structuralist applications of theory can turn Cook being greeted as an equal to the chief (Obeyesekere) into Cook being greeted as the god Lono (Sahlins). In this section he is making an important point about how history should remain a materialist discipline and the danger that can be found in applying interpretation into events without processing all available historical resources. The Obeyesekere interpretations of Captain Cook's fate are more in line with both the culture of the Hawaiian Islands and the primary historical sources, which are quoted extensively in Obeyesekere's book "*The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*" published in 1997.

Windschuttle is also interested in the presentation of history and how it can become problematic, especially in regards to the “poetics of history”. Windschuttle is very critical of the use of literary novelization and other aspects of creative writing as it has found its way into historiography. While one can respect authors such as Gore Vidal for presenting historically accurate narratives about real people, Vidal does not present his books as works of historiography. The problem of presenting assembled narratives as researched history is known to American anthropologists by the embarrassing example of Carlos Castenada. By the very nature of “poetics” one allows gaps in historical resources to be filled with the authors own images and dialogue.

In considering the aspect of history as it pertains to anthropology one should use this book for examples of what not to do. While I disagree with some of the authors attacks on theoretical paradigms he does a great service in using some very good examples of how theory can move from paradigm into cult. The theoretical growth of anthropology (as well as other social sciences) is important but there is a need to make sure that our theories remain tools and not flags of allegiance. For students it is an important book, which can help on remember the importance of empirical data, historical facts and constructive research as the foundation of proper, long lasting social science writing.