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Keith Jenkins Retrospective

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Reviewer:

Alexander Macfie

In his principal books on the philosophy of history, in particular *Rethinking History* (1991), *On ?What is History??* (1995), *Why History?* (1999), *Refiguring History*, (2003) and *At the Limits of History* (2009), Keith Jenkins, the noted postmodern philosopher of history, displays a remarkable constancy of approach, involving a thoroughly sceptical/postmodern critique of the subject, designed to reveal its ineffectiveness as a vehicle for the discovery of ?truth? about the past, or indeed any knowledge of the past. Not that Jenkins?s conclusions regarding the implications of the supposed ineffectiveness of history have remained unchanged throughout. On the contrary, as he explains in the introduction to *At the Limits of History*, in the late 1970s, when he first became acquainted with the postmodern critique of history, he chose merely to distance himself from those historians who ignored or challenged it. Later, for a while, he argued the case for a ?postmodern? history that might replace conventional academic history (with which he was mainly

concerned). But finally, in the late 1990s, he came to the conclusion that we should let 'history [and ethics] go' (Jenkins, 1999, p. 2). Henceforth, we should simply wave goodbye to history, and look forward to a future unburdened and unspoiled by the historicised/historical past. (History here stands for histories: in Jenkins's opinion there is no such thing as mere 'history'. Postmodern/postmodernism refers to the influential currents of critical thinking generated by a group of mainly continental anti-foundational thinkers in the second half of the 20th century).

It would be presumptuous to envisage this article as some kind of summing up or evaluation of Jenkins's contribution to philosophy of history studies, but the fact that he has only recently decided to write nothing more on the subject does enable the reviewer now to treat his works as something complete, something that has attained to what the postmodernists sometimes mysteriously refer to as closure.

Not surprisingly, Jenkins's increasingly powerful assault on conventional history provoked many strong reactions. The outcome was an at times furious and prolonged debate, in which there were numerous accusations of insane individualism, solipsism, fantasy-mongering, left-wing posturing and hectoring authoritarianism – a debate which no self-respecting historian could easily ignore; though it has to be said that many did.

Jenkins, it might be remarked, was according to his own account (given in an inaugural lecture on his appointment as Professor of Historical Theory at the University of Chichester) brought up in the 'idyllic' conditions of a working-class home in a remote Derbyshire village. The house in which he grew up, according to Jenkins, had 'no indoor toilet, no running hot water and no electricity', a fact that he still finds surprising in a village in the heart of England in the middle of the 20th century. Educated at a local primary school and a secondary modern (where he was not entered for any public examinations), he then spent several years training as a more or less professional cyclist and working at a series of jobs, before taking a correspondence course in 'O' level GCE (he quickly acquired 5 'O' levels), qualifying as a teacher at a teachers' training college (passing out with distinction), graduating in Medieval and Modern History at a local university, and completing a Ph.D. in the political thought of Nietzsche, Freud and Sorel (a subject of 'formidable difficulty?'). It was no doubt this last qualification that eventually led to his appointment as a lecturer in history at Chichester. But not, one would suppose, to his self-appointment as one of the leading sceptical, relativistic and 'disobedient' philosophers of history of his generation. This, it seems, came about later as the result of a close reading of the works of Marx and an early commitment to left-wing history and politics, followed by a 'revelatory' course of reading in Camus, Nietzsche ('the death of God?'), Lukacs, Adorno, Foucault, White, Ankersmit and Rorty (and many others) – a group of mainly continental thinkers whom Jenkins later characterised as probably 'the greatest clutch of cultural theorists the world has ever seen' (Jenkins, 2009, p. 16). In the space of 30 years or so, he believes, these (and many other) thinkers so deconstructed the foundational and essentialist presumptions of the Western tradition as to leave it entirely bereft of all intrinsic meaning and value.

In *Rethinking History* (1991), a remarkable bestseller, much translated, Jenkins argues compellingly that the conventional view of academic history – that it enjoys the benefits of a uniquely effective epistemology and methodology which enables it to discover from historical facts, properly established, some sort of historical truth, a truth, moreover that can be conveyed to a willing audience by way of historical narrative – is fundamentally flawed. Even the most perfunctory understanding of conventional historical method, properly analysed in a postmodern way, will show that the historian, no matter how well trained he might be, can never really know the past, as the gap between the past and history is an ontological one, one that in the very nature of things cannot be bridged. Nor is it possible for the historian to attain to some kind of methodological objectivity, free from prejudice and bias. No amount of skill or expertise will make that possible. Conventional history, despite all its extraordinary pretensions, is basically just a contested discourse, an embattled terrain, on which people, classes and groups construct essentially autobiographical interpretations of an imagined past to suit themselves. Any contemporary consensus can only be arrived at when one dominant voice or set of voices silences others, either by means of overt power or covert incorporation. History, in short, in Jenkins's view, is not an epistemology but an aesthetic literary genre, incapable of making claims about the truth. Debates about history are debates about meaning, and meaning

is no more entailed by facts than values are by discourse.

In *On 'What is History?'* (1995), (*What is History* being the title of a well-known book on the philosophy of history, published by E. H. Carr in 1961) Jenkins compares and contrasts the thoughts and opinions regarding history of Edward Carr (no longer a credible modernist) and Geoffrey Elton (passé, backward looking, no longer good enough) with those of Richard Rorty (original, seminal, ironic) and Hayden White (thought provoking, stimulating, wide-ranging). This he does in order to expand and elaborate the arguments regarding the fallibility of history outlined in *Rethinking History*. Thus, according to Jenkins, history remains what it has in fact always been, namely a narrative prose discourse, of which, as White famously remarked, the content is 'as much imagined/ invented as found' (Jenkins, 1995, p. 134). In order to appear plausible any such discourse must normally look simultaneously towards the once real events and situations of the past and towards narrative-type myths common in all social formations. Moreover, history cannot recover that past, but only such evidence of a past as remains in accessible traces. These traces are then transformed into written histories by means of a series of theoretically and methodologically disparate procedures (ideological positionings, tropes, emplotments, argumentative modes and so on); which historiography may then be made subject to a series of uses, logically infinite, but in practice for the most part the product of social power. Histories, that is to say, are invariably fabricated, without any real foundations beyond the textual. Far from being 'objective?', as claimed by the conventional historian, they are invariably subjective 'i.e. positioned, constructed in someone's interest.

In *Why History?* (1999), on the other hand, Jenkins analyses the inadequacies of history by way of a series of case studies of Jacques Derrida (one of Jenkins's favourites), Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Evans (in Jenkins's opinion the archetypal conventional historian), Hayden White (again) and Frank Ankersmith; with added chapters on Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth and David Harlan. In this way he once again shows, as he puts it in the introduction to *Why History?* that certain postmodern ways of thinking almost certainly signal 'the end of history?' (Jenkins, 1999, p. 1). At the same time, in particular in the chapter on Derrida, Jenkins explains how, by way of the 'undecidability of the decision?', postmodern thinking also leads to the end of all traditional (rule-based) ethical systems. This is because for a decision to be ethical it must first pass through a moment of radical 'undecidability?' (Derrida's *âporia*). Otherwise the ethical choice made will be merely formulaic, one intended to obey the rules of a previously worked out system or code. Postmodern thinking will, therefore, lead inevitably to the end of all rule-based ethical systems, in much the same way that it led to the end of history.

It was at this point, it may be noted, that Jenkins finally concluded that we should forget history, let it go, learn to live in new ways of timing time. We, the inhabitants of this new, postmodern world, now no longer need history to 'place ourselves?' in present time, think about the future and articulate identities and programmes appropriate to a reflexive, emancipatory politics, 'without foundations?' (Jenkins, 1999, p. 202).

In *Refiguring History* (2003), described by Hayden White as a 'small masterpiece?', Jenkins attempts, somewhat paradoxically it must be said, to breath new life into history by refiguring it as a discourse that gratefully accepts and elaborates the inevitable failure of all historical representation. This he does by trying to promote in history the endless openness advocated by Derrida and other postmodern philosophers. Endless openness, logically unavoidable, he argues, will allow for new, disrespectful, contentious radical readings and rereadings, writings and rewritings to be produced. As for the new histories thus produced, they will be useful, even emancipatory, contributing as they almost certainly will to a radical, 'disobedient?', counter-hegemonic politics, of the sort that Jenkins, apparently depressed by the failure of the Modernist experiment known as the 'Enlightenment Project?', deems most desirable (Jenkins, 2003, pp. 3-5). Such, it seems, is the ultimate purpose of *Refiguring History*.

Finally, in *At the Limits of History* (2009), a collection of essays on the theory and practice of history written in the period 1994-2008, Jenkins covers a wide range of subjects ranging from time to Marxism, the ethical responsibility of the historian and the works of Hayden White and Sande Cohen. Yet it is evident throughout that his main interest lies in the exposure of (what he sees as) the inherent inadequacies of conventional history, as essays on 'Why bother with history?' 'Postmodernity, the end of history and Frank Ankersmit?',

and 'The End of the Affair; on the irretrievable breakdown of history and ethics' show. For, as he remarks in his introduction, history depends not on the past for its current existence, but on its (present) representers (historians) and their representations. No representations, as he puts it, no past. Loosed from the past, history floats free, such that, undetermined, historians can make the past 'historical' in any way they like, that is to say, in their own image. History, in short, having no *object* of enquiry, being able only to figure forth proposals, is merely a sort of rhetoric (a category in which Aristotle placed it over 2,000 years ago), inescapably aesthetic.

Readers of *At the Limits of History* might like to consult the essay 'Nobody does it better: radical history and Hayden White' for a sort of summing up of Jenkins's thoughts on history and its inadequacies. There he outlines 'somewhat skeletally, impressionistically', what he refers to as some of the ontological presuppositions and axioms of his position. These (very much condensed) are: That the universe (matter, stuff, materiality) exists. That we human beings, of whatever culture or denomination we happen to come from, can never really *know* that matter, stuff or materiality, whatever it might be. Moreover, what little we do know about such things, either by way of intuition or by their representation, is radically contingent, dependent always on the circumstances of their production, that is to say, the way we access them. In particular, meaning and truth are not 'out there'. Rather, they are created, constituted by our human discourses, which are 'about' but do not correspond to that to which they 'refer'. The world, in other words, as we know it, is inescapably ours, inescapably human, real only in so far as we make it 'real'. Language (meaning), far from corresponding to the world, is simply imposed on it, initially by way of what is in effect an act of violence. And as language (words, such as history) cannot escape indeterminacy (being always subject to interminable re-description) we shall never know what such words mean. We shall never know, that is to say (speaking now of history), what History/history 'really is'. Its putative aim 'the truth' is thus an impossible myth, yet one which continuously energises historians' production. It is such conventional history (histories) that in the future radical histories, written specifically 'for us', might replace.

In another essay in *At the Limits of History*, on 'Living in history, but outside ethics', Jenkins reveals the surprising fact 'if it is a fact' that postmodernism, of the sort he habitually espouses, is (historically speaking) little different from the anti-foundational and sceptical sophism of the pre-Socratic philosophers, while Platonic essentialism might similarly be seen as the precursor of a series of later 'stabilising fantasies', such as God, nature, the categorical imperative, spirit, dialectical reason and class. Given how many such reified projections there have been, he adds critically, one might have expected them to have been seen for what they patently are, mere expressions of human desire. But apparently they were not so seen. Rather people merely concluded that they had somehow discovered 'truth' or some such other metanarrative 'fix'.

Jenkins's relentless assault on history, in *At the Limits of History* and elsewhere, provoked a number of positive responses, most significantly that of Hayden White, considered by many to be the font of all wisdom in the postmodern garden. In a foreword to *At the Limits of History*, White remarks that Jenkins, who is inclined to 'follow a thought to the end of the line', should be seen as a revolutionary, a visionary, a utopian, a kind of Blakean man of the Left who had, once upon a time, fallen among the custodians of the proper and is now trying to awaken from the slumber of 'what goes without saying', 'the heart of the matter', the obvious, the right thing, what everyone knows, and all of the other commonplaces that substitute for thought (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 1-3). Nevertheless, he [Jenkins] really is quite commonsensical, rational and measured. He knows what he knows and argues it forcefully, clearly, plainly, cogently and authoritatively.

Negative responses to Jenkins's critique were, however, much more common. The authors of these argued variously:

1. That Jenkins is not qualified to comment on the discipline of history, as he does not himself write history (Zagorin, Waites).
2. That the postmodern critique (commonly associated with Jenkins) must be inconsequential as it has made little or no impact on the way historians write history (Cannadine, Zagorin).
3. That Jenkins's analysis is contradictory and self-defeating as he himself frequently employs an

historical methodology to undermine history (Evans, Waites, Mellon, Palladino).

4. That the historian has the ability to discover something about the past, if not everything about it (Anchor, Connelly, Roth, O'Brien).
5. That though truths about the past are not absolute, they are yet somehow attainable (Appleby, Hunt, Jacob).
6. That historical investigation, theoretically informed and subject to a collective, professional judgement, might yet enable the properly qualified historian to discover something about the past (Fulbrook, Elton, O'Brien).
7. That the insights associated with postmodernism are for the most part ancient, cyclical and repetitive. As such most historians have already taken full account of them (O'Brien, Himmelfarb).
8. That the postmodern analysis of history is itself merely the product of a particular historical phase, reflecting the decline of the West, a collapse in belief in progress and a disillusion with science (Tosh).
9. That despite the many valuable insights that postmodernism has provided, on pragmatic grounds alone we cannot do without the concept of (historical) truth (Southgate).
10. That in certain circumstances a mass of ascertainable facts may yet determine an overall interpretation (Friedlander).
11. And, finally, that history is, not so much a philosophically-based subject, founded on sound reason, as an activity, based on the everyday language of collective experience (Oakeshott).

Three responses to Jenkins's end of history thesis (along, no doubt, with many others) may be considered fairly typical: those of Perez Zagorin, Karl O'Brien and Michael S. Roth. Zagorin, in an article in *History and Theory* (1), launched a wholesale attack on the postmodern critique of history, in particular that represented by the articles contained in *The Postmodern History Reader* (2), a collection of articles recently edited by Jenkins. In his article, Zagorin explained at some length that American history had for some time been threatened by mainly continental postmodernism and relativism. But in the end, thanks largely to the strength of American (mainly analytical) philosophy, it had succeeded in resisting the assault. As a result, most American historians, convinced that knowledge of the past, as a vanished reality, is attainable, have continued to write history based on the principles of rationality, logicity, objectivity and truth. As for Jenkins's contentions that only theory can constitute what counts as a fact, and that historians write history merely in order to promote some immediate practical and political interest, these are misplaced and ridiculous. Jenkins is simply unable to conceive the viability or value of an historical effort to restore to comprehension a vanished past.

O'Brien, in an extended contribution to the Institute of Historical Research History in Focus website entitled 'An engagement with postmodern foes, literary theorists, and friends on the borders with history?' (3), argues that a majority of historians (a majority of those he happens to know at least), whilst welcoming the efforts of Jenkins and his supporters to reduce the philosophical writings of a set of mainly continental philosophers to textbook-level surveys and readings, may yet find most of their work redundant, as most theoretically-aware historians have already absorbed the implications of their findings in their work. In any case, most historians never have made the claims to absolute knowledge that Jenkins and his like suppose they make. They have always been aware, or should have been aware, that historians are human beings, potentially incompetent, biased, fallible and subjective; that the significance of facts is not embodied within the facts; that sources need to be contextualised; that languages and the vocabulary of documents require careful translation and critical decoding; and that any correspondence between historical sources and a lived past is at best tenuous. Some part of history may be linguistically constructed, but historians for the most part remain resolutely 'realistic' in believing that things 'matter', as do style, metaphor and rhetoric. Most historians admit that they construct, configure and shape their texts by story, discourse, and emplotment. Nevertheless, they cling to the belief that collective and disciplined endeavour will in the end enable them to construct a plausible narrative about, or model of, some aspect of the past that will justify their claim to tell a plausible story about it; even though that story will always remain conjectural, provisional, tentative, and open to future disagreement, refinement and ultimate obsolescence. Most historians, in short, share common political and cultural concerns with their eloquent antagonists; but they do not for the most part, engage seriously with the linguistic turn that would suggest that nothing real or objective exists outside language ? a

proposition that would lead to the destruction of history.

Finally, Michael S. Roth, in a review of *Refiguring History*, published in *History and Theory* (4), argues that, despite his determination to remain strictly postmodern in his approach to history (which Roth identifies as an attachment to an 'Old-School postmodernism' already somewhat out of date) Jenkins, and the postmodern canon that he dips into so enthusiastically has actually little to say about history specifically. And what he has to say is not particularly convincing. How, for instance, is the by now conventional linguistic scepticism 'that we can never know anything for certain because the language we use for knowing never can convey or contain stable meaning' relevant to historical studies? And how is Jenkins's metaphysical scepticism 'that there is nothing in the past to be found and that the things held by historians to be intrinsic to history (historical facts, structures, periods and meanings) are actually only ascriptions' relevant? Certainly, historians impose meaning on the past, but it cannot be said that they find in the past only what they are looking for. Bringing their own values and preconceptions to their study of the past does not prevent them from being surprised, any more than the fact that physicists use a common methodology or paradigm prevents them from finding disconfirming evidence. Or, no more than the fact that we speak our own language prevents us from communicating with someone else. Jenkins does not consider in *Refiguring History* David Carr's argument that the world is experienced in narrative form. Nor does he consider Hans Kellner's notion of a sublime 'outside' of history. Why should not the disciplinary conversation of history (and other practices) be sufficient to produce all the grounds for decision making we ultimately need? Anti-foundationalism no more justifies historical and literary experimentation than it does its opposite. Without foundations to destroy, in short, and (impossibly naïve) adversaries to attack, Jenkins's postmodernism has not much to say about the conversations historians continue to have, the histories they continue to write, and the art they (along with artists and writers) continue to make. Jenkins would do well to recognise that the new (postmodernism) has now grown old. It is time to write its history.

What is the conventional historian to make of the extraordinary conflict (debate, dispute) between Jenkins and his opponents? Is some sort of compromise possible, or are the two points of view irreconcilable? Probably they are. But before considering the possibility of a resolution, I would like to challenge a few of the points made by Jenkins's opponents that seem to me to be either unconvincing or out of place. These are as follows:

1. It is clear (to me at least) that Jenkins does not have to write history to comment on the subject's validity. He is concerned with the philosophy of history, not its practice.
2. It is also clear that the inconsequential impact of the postmodern critique is not a measure of its validity. Impact is not a measure of validity (truth).
3. That Jenkins occasionally uses an historical methodology to debunk history (i.e. that he appears at times to be contradictory and self-defeating) does not mean that the whole of his argument is contradictory and self-defeating. His use of historical explanation is, as he frequently remarks, merely rhetorical.
4. That the postmodern approach to history is, in all its essentials, ancient, cyclical and repetitive does not necessarily invalidate the postmodern argument, any more than longstanding doubts regarding the existence of essential substance or some such invalidates the conclusions of modern physics.
5. That the postmodern analysis of history is itself the product of a particular historical phase should be seen as strengthening the analysis, not as weakening it.
6. The fact that most historians have already taken into account many of the implications of the postmodern critique of history should again be seen not as weakening Jenkins's case, but as strengthening it. It merely suggests that historians are not very logical.
7. And, finally, the proposition that, in certain circumstances, a mass of ascertainable facts may entail a certain interpretation of them can be considered valid only if the interpretation is already presupposed in the mind of the observer.

It may well be that a number of Jenkins's more contentious assertions can be challenged further on more serious grounds, as a number of his opponents suggest. But it seems to me that certain of his basic points are now beyond challenge (though many historians and others will no doubt continue to challenge them). These

might include the following:

1. That it is no longer possible to talk, in a meaningful sense, of foundational suppositions and beliefs (God, essence, absolute truth and such like). (We are all Buddhists now!).
2. That history is for the most part, as White remarks, imagined /invented, not found.
3. That history is constructed from the present remains of a putative past, made up of memories, reports, records and such like, that happen to survive in the (lived) present.
4. That history, in its grander realisation at least, is the product mainly of tropes, emplotment, stories, discourses and narratives.
5. That history as a cultural creation differs substantially from memory, which is a natural phenomenon; though there could well be a cultural element in what we remember.
6. And, finally (Jenkins's most persuasive argument), that history has no accessible object of enquiry beyond present remains.

In the light of the above it is evident that the conventional view of history – that the historian, properly qualified, can somehow access (describe, portray, explain) the past, in part at least, by way of philosophical analysis, inferential logic and evidence, appears unconvincing, the more so as we cannot, it seems, access the past to prove or disprove the case. No more can we access the past to prove that the past cannot be accessed (described, portrayed, explained). The position adopted, therefore, both by Jenkins and his opponents, seems to be a matter, not of proof or evidence, but of belief (rather like religious belief in God.) Not that the issue in dispute turns entirely on the accessibility of a real past. As O'Brien points out in his *History in Focus* piece, the debate between Jenkins and his opponents turns also on the question of language. What ultimately divides the two points of view, then, is not only their attitude to (belief in) the accessibility of the past, but also their attitude to (belief in) the capacity of language to describe that past. Jenkins is absolutely clear that language cannot describe the past (or for that matter the present). O'Brien and most other conventional historians are absolutely convinced that it can.

My position on these difficult questions (also a matter of belief rather than evidence) is that, as Jenkins suggests, we cannot actually know a real past, lived or otherwise. All we can know, by a variety of means, is an imagined replica of a once-lived present (all human experience is experience of a lived present, whatever that might be), about which, therefore, we human beings (some of us at least) imagine/invent histories. History then is a sort of self-knowledge, constructed (biologically) from a well-stocked brain, in ways that we do not yet fully understand. Not that it makes much difference. So deeply embedded is the human conviction regarding the existence of a real past that can be accessed, primarily by means of memory (the existential foundation of all history), that it is extremely unlikely that human beings will abandon history, or something very much like it (some sort of claimed knowledge of an actual past). Conventional historians can, therefore, sleep easily in their beds, secure in the knowledge that Jenkins's postmodern scepticism, like the arguments of the Presocratics before him, will slip largely unnoticed into 'history', forgotten by all but a philosophical few. Nevertheless, we (no doubt half-baked) philosophical few have much to thank Jenkins for, not least his persistent and almost always well argued reminders of just how fallible history really is.

Notes

1. Perez Zagorin, 'History, the referent, and narrative: reflections on postmodernism now?', *History and Theory*, 38 (February 1999), 1-24. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London, 1997). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Patrick O'Brien, 'An engagement with postmodern foes, literary theorists, and friends on the borders with history?' <<http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/discourse-postmodernism/obrien-paper> [6]> [accessed 4 April 2012]. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michael S. Roth, 'Review of *Refiguring History*, *History and Theory*', 43, 3 (2004), 372-8. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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- Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, (London, 1997).
- Robert Anchor, Review of *Why History*, *History and Theory*, 40, 1, (2001), 104-116.
- Saul Friedlander, 'Probing the Limits of Representation?' in *The Postmodern History Reader*.

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[6] <http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/discourse-postmodernism/obrien-paper>