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A History of History

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The postmodernist phase of historical theory has all but drawn to a close.(1) Nonetheless, there are still pockets of resistance and for some strange reason Britain has been one of the strongholds. With the recent retirement of Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow is now the incontestable doyen of British postmodernist historical theory: a position that the unkind might say is equivalent to being the captain of the Titanic. Nonetheless, the true believers soldier on: following on from 2010?s *The Future of History*, Professor Munslow returns to the lists with *A History of History*. It is a strange book in many ways. Its title would suggest some kind of concern with historiography: has Munslow attempted to historicise historical epistemology in order to show that the values the historians possess are to a large extent contingent? Well, no. We do get occasional references to something that happened around 1700 which had some kind of large consequence for historical epistemology; but it is never really elaborated on.(2) Instead, *A History of History* is largely a retread of most of Munslow?s other work: an attempt to convince of the virtues of viewing historical theory largely through the work of Hayden White. One can only half-jokingly suggest that the book should have been entitled something like *These Things I Believe*. There is much repetition in its pages, and the phrase about not having to eat the whole egg to know that it is not quite right came to mind more than once. Such is the reviewer's lot.

There is much in *A History of History* that supports Alexander MacFie?s remark that there is a large body of assertions that practising historians and postmodernists agree on, and that the differences only really start to assert themselves when it comes to the conclusions they draw from them.(3) At various points in *A History of History* Munslow is at pains to assure us he is far from the caricature of the raving idealist that postmodernist theorists are sometimes portrayed as: ?I am not sceptical about the possibility of knowing what probably happened in the past? (p. 44); ?I believe the past once existed and that we can hold a substantial range of justified beliefs about it? (p. 45); ?what I define as my multi-scepticism is not to deny that factual knowledge about the past is possible? (p. 95); and ?[a]ll we have in history narrative is ?the balance of quoted evidence?, which to be fair, is often pretty good? (p. 107). Indeed, at one point he even feels compelled to distance himself from one of his mentors, Keith Jenkins: he cannot ?go as far? as Jenkins in completely abandoning the past (p. 68).

Despite conceding all of the above however, Munslow still believes that it is ?highly desirable to re-think history by rejecting the definition of the historical consciousness that has been the consequence of the manifold errors and omissions committed by historians of a particular kind over the past three hundred years or so? (p. 171) (Incidentally, the term ?historians of a particular kind? is a recurring term (of abuse?) in the book, used to describe the poor misguided souls who have yet to cross the Rubicon and start practising the ?new? history). The view of history as what historians do in *A History of History* we might describe as variations on a theme of Hayden White. Historians might be able to find out a lot of ?true? things about the past, in the sense of single-sentence propositions: ?Neville Chamberlain flew on a plane in 1938?, ?King Charles I prorogued Parliament in 1629?, and so forth. Once we try to weave these into a narrative however, we are doomed. There is no such thing as inherent meaning to be discovered in the past-in-itself; and even if there were, the distorting effects of narrative ? the need to emplot ones ?data? (the term ?data? crops up in places in *A History of History* where we would normally use the term ?facts?), the need to utilise tropes - mean the idea that we can present a transparent picture of the past is a nonsense.

One of the key failings in not only *A History of History*, but which also dogged Munslow?s previous work *The Future of History*, is a failure to recognise a) the existence of various mechanisms that underpin the discipline of history, and b) the fact that the kind of change he wants to occur needs to come at a disciplinary level. He seems to acknowledge that the current disciplinary practices of history were rooted in the time of Ranke: but doesn?t take this realisation further and investigate how this disciplinary mechanism could potentially be overthrown / replaced. If it is the case that historians ?fail to recognise? the fact that their discipline is a fictive construction etc., then wouldn?t Munslow be better off trying to examine the machinery that is in place to prevent them from throwing off these Rankean shackles? In Munslow?s brief examination of Frederick Jackson Turner, Munslow once again seems to arrive at the point that certain exemplary works of history set the tone for a generation of scholars: but rather than pursuing the point, once again he draws back into the familiar incantation of ?historians cannot access the past as it was?. Recently reading Daniel Dennett?s book on Darwin, I was struck by the lines ?Darwin appreciated that only a relentlessly detailed survey of the evidence for the historical processes he was postulating would ? or should ? persuade scientists to abandon their traditional convictions and take on his revolutionary vision, even if it was in fact ?deducible from first principles??.(4) There is much in Bernard Waites's remark that ?If Jenkins wants to persuade a generally sceptical academy of the virtues of the radical history he envisages, then his best strategy would be to write some? ? a comment that could equally apply to Professor Munslow.(5)

In some respects, Professor Munslow?s stance reminds one of philosophers of science prior to the historicist turn in that discipline: he concentrates on the individual historian, and fails to address the fact that the historian is part of a disciplinary culture. Again, he comes tantalisingly close to doing so towards the end of the book when he writes about the fact that ?high-end university and doctoral and post doctoral research of a particular kind? (there?s that phrase again!) is a kind of academic ?dead man?s handle? (p. 175). But once again, he tails off into what historians in his view *should* be doing. I suspect that ultimately, Munslow fails to address the disciplinary mechanisms of history because he would be forced to admit that his and his cohorts' attempts to persuade historians ?of a particular kind? to change their ways have largely been a failure. To an extent, and without wishing to have the Lakatosian ?mob rule? charge levelled, historical

epistemology is largely what the majority of historians say it is. Ultimately, a discipline legitimates the methods it uses, and the problem that Munslow has is that the epistemology he is arguing for is one that by and large historians have not taken up. Munslow talks of the ?rather hazy? concept of professional judgement (p. 118), but there is nothing hazy about it: the whole purpose of training historians is to instil them with the epistemic values which are promoted and accepted by the profession. Every historian is a product of socialisation into their discipline, and until Munslow realises and addresses this to some extent, he will be condemned to go around in circles, writing for an every decreasing band of postmodernist fellow-travellers. And here we come to the heart of the problem: historians ?ought to consider forms of historying that are not produced exclusively and in accordance with classic empirical-analytical-representational thinking? (p. 98). But the fact is until the majority of the profession is convinced to do so ? with the accompanying shift in training and values ? this will not occur. And the fact is that postmodernist historical theory has singularly failed to inspire such a change.

In a sense Munslow?s strategy in *A History of History* is brilliant. By insisting that everything we know about the past is compromised once we incorporate it into a narrative, he avoids having to address thorny issues such as reference or meaning in any great detail. For instance, when meaning is briefly dealt with in this book, we get no references to Quine or Davidson; it is simply enough to state that there is no ?definitive? meaning to be found in the past and then move on. But there is a lacuna even in this strategy; one would expect a discussion of the works of Louis Mink and/ or David Carr with regards to the idea of inherent narrative in historical events (as indeed, Frank Ankersmit does in his most recent work *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*). But alas, it is not to be found here. The other thing about the idea of the distortion of narrative is that to accept it is largely a matter of faith based on agreement with the work of Hayden White; and conversely, if one doesn?t accept it, then one can be written off as one of those historians ?of a particular kind? ?who just doesn?t get it?.

Speaking of Ankersmit, he is the only contemporary theorist of history to be addressed in *A History of History* in any great detail; although there are what amount to puffs for Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, Robert Rosenstone and Sande Cohen respectively.(6) Ankersmit has always posed somewhat of a problem for postmodernists: they would desperately love to co-opt him into their camp, but he has generally resisted attempts to do so. *A History of History* adopts the strategy pursued in a recent book on Ankersmit by Peter Icke (himself a student of Keith Jenkins).(7) Munslow posits the existence of two Ankersmits ? the early/good Ankersmit, whose *Narrative Logic* espoused views most postmodernists could agree with, and the later/bad Ankersmit who took as his starting point the fact that historians were quite successful at what they did, and tried to develop a philosophy of history to account for this. I will come back to this at the end of this review.

Although Munslow will undoubtedly bridle at being told he has something in common with historians ?of a particular kind?, like many a historical theorist he seems to have a fairly bad grasp of what constitutes contemporary philosophy of science. The second chapter in this book, ?History and/as science?, mentions no philosophers of science, but bizarrely does include excursions on Marx and Nietzsche. And what are we to make of sentences such as ?by studying atoms and stars, one can establish how the physicist and astronomer figure out how they should be investigated? (p. 44). What does this mean? That in order to understand how scientists investigate objects we should study the objects themselves? Surely not. Let us chalk this up to a careless editor, and state that what he means is that the scientist him/ herself studies an object in order to determine how it should be investigated. But this is almost equally ludicrous, as a quick perusal of any primer on the philosophy of science will tell you. I think what Munslow is trying to say here is that objects such as stars are available to direct perception, whereas the historian directly constitutes his/her objects of study: ?the historian ... creates their objects and makes all the decisions by creating general statements as to cause and effect? (p. 44). So although things-in-themselves existed in the past, such as kings, queens and so forth, as soon as the historian tries to pin any sense of meaning to them, he/she comes unstuck. The problem is however, that what Munslow is ascribing to the historian here sounds remarkably like what scientists do, in the sense that they impose taxonomic categories upon ?the-world-in-itself?, which subsequently ?cut the world up in different ways?. History ?is *always an imposition* on the past dictated by the narrative

understanding of the historian.? (p. 99) We could say something very similar about science: science imposes a conceptual structure upon the world in order to make sense of it.(8) Like many ?historians of a particular kind?, Munslow seems to be working from a fairly outdated concept of the philosophy of science here.

Ultimately, one of the reasons that a postmodernist philosophy of history has largely failed to make much of an impact is its refusal by and large to examine what it is that historians actually do, preferring instead to concentrate on *a priori* literary theory ? favouring prescription over description. Herman Paul has recently argued for something like a ?performative turn? in the philosophy of history: focusing upon what historians actually do as opposed to looking at the finished product.(9) And as we have seen, Frank Ankersmit quite sensibly argues philosophers of history need to take what historians actually do as their starting point, and move on from there. Complain as he might that historians are failing to take the writings of Jenkins et al. seriously, Munslow doesn?t seem to understand that as long as he continues to produce prescriptions which are far divorced from the actual practise of history, he is fated to become something like a Priestley of historical method; clinging to phlogiston theory while all around him move on.

Notes

1. See Michael Roth, ?Ebb tide?, *History & Theory*, 46 (2007), 66?73, and George Iggers, ?A search for a post-postmodern theory of history?, *History & Theory*, 48 (2009), 122?8.Back to (1)
2. Incidentally at one point Munslow argues that historical understanding has not evolved since 1700, a quite frankly bizarre claim (p. 42). The most charitable explanation of this might be that Munslow has misunderstood what ?evolves? actually connotates. If he is saying that the idea that historical epistemology is moving towards some fixed point in the future ? i.e. Actonian ?Ultimate History? ? needs to be jettisoned, then I agree. But evolution implies a process driven from behind, reacting against what has previously gone before. Therefore, the idea that historical epistemology hasn?t made *some form* of progress since 1700 is absurd.Back to (2)
3. See Alexander MacFie, ?On the defence of (my) history?, *Rethinking History*, 14, 2010 (p. 210).Back to (3)
4. Daniel Dennett, *Darwin?s Dangerous Idea* (London, 1996), p. 49.Back to (4)
5. Bernard Waites, ?In defence of historical realism?, *Rethinking History*, 15 (2011), pp. 332?3.Back to (5)
6. Incidentally, Munslow tries to defend Cohen?s impenetrable prose by stating that ?Cohen cannot blamed for being difficult. Thinking at a high level is always likely to be difficult? (p. 146). However, Richard Rorty was always able to write about the same subject matter as Cohen in an easy and engaging style; or for that matter, if Bohr and Feynman to name but two can write about quantum mechanics in an engaging manner, I fail to see why the same cannot be done for historical theory.Back to (6)
7. Adam Timmins, ?Review of *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience*, (review no. 1245) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1245 [2]> [accessed 5 November 2012].Back to (7)
8. See the work of Thomas Kuhn for example.Back to (8)
9. Herman Paul, ?Performing history?, *History & Theory*, 50 (2011), 1?19.Back to (9)

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