

Revisionist Histories

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History is never the final word; we are too empirically sensitive these days to think otherwise. It would be fair to say that since the days of Karl Popper historians have been acutely aware that what they write or utter is never the final statement concerning the historical record. Their assertions are provisional, liable to a degree of tinkering. Revision, in other words, is very much in; it goes almost without saying that '[h]istories are written and revised around the clock' (p. 89). 'Historians,' notes Marnie Hughes-Warrington in her latest book, *Revisionist Histories*, 'revise' (p. 1).

Despite this apparent ubiquity, though, there is some debate as to how to appreciate this common sense attitude to revisionism. When flagging up revisionism in history, does one simply mean the belief that all statements pertaining to truth in historiography are subject to future contestation? Or does one mean something a bit more subjective and social; namely, the revisionist tendency of certain generations of historians to omit and prioritise events and phenomena on the basis of bias? In the worst case scenario, revisionist historians could be engaged in 'acts of *churn*' (p. 89), recycling clichéd, partisan pictures of the past. Or is embracing the ubiquity of revision in historical circles a confirmation that, to use R. G. Collingwood's phrase, 'respectful attentiveness' (1) to the facts has been definitively put to one side by our generation of post-empiricists and modernists, that the archetypal historian is appreciated far more as a *maker of* rather than *reactor to* history?

In *Revisionist Histories*, Hughes-Warrington hones in on these types of questions. 'The primary aim of this book', she makes clear, 'is to unpack the ways that history makers — a term I use to refer to anyone who

makes a history — have explained and made judgements about revision in history’ (pp. 2–3). Primarily, she draws attention to how revising history involves a lot of related endeavours. It is commonsensically the replacing of the outdated with the new (in the field of the history of political philosophy, I think of Peter Laslett’s celebrated conclusion that John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* were written before, not after the Glorious Revolution of 1688), but is also an indicator of how individuals and groups conceive their history, the Kuhnian paradigms which frame their accounts of past. To sympathise with the latter conception naturally problematizes the former’s linear underpinning that we correctively add to and make less obscure our histories, free from *a priori* inclinations. Into this mix, one can also add something Hughes-Warrington is keen to include: the ethical reconstruction of history by history makers. This challenges the idea of neat narratives, where the story is seen to be inching towards mimesis, and the conception of collective, particular historical consciousnesses. For Hughes-Warrington what ought to be underlined is the way in which individuals and communities come to terms with the past, a past that they recognise and identify with, but which is doomed to escape, like an apparition, their total comprehension.

It is a feature of Hughes-Warrington ‘meta-ethical’ (p. 3) turn that, in her Derrida-influenced discussion, the terms of debate that she brings to the fore — ‘rewritable’ (p. 110) or “‘interruption”” (p. 119) — are *sub judice* and there to prompt reflection as much as anything else. It is hard to say she has a profound and marked argument when she is so committed to ‘an open-ended learning experience’ (p. 17). In suggesting that history is an intervention of sorts, with neither the comfort of claiming apodictic certainty nor of needing a strong commitment to view from somewhere, Hughes-Warrington does not merely do away with the crude Hegelian linearity that she disfavours. She is in *Revisionist Histories*, I would argue, more a stirrer of the pot than a tribune of something called ethical history: revision understood as silence, a moment at which a contested interpretative battleground is settled, should be put to one side; ‘the tumult, dynamism and troubles of a textual world’ (p. 120) headlined.

Hughes-Warrington’s contribution to what one might call the fledging field of historiographic revision studies is threefold. Firstly, she aims to give the field a higher profile: ‘[s]ome ideas command the attention of historiographers. Revision is not one of them’ (p. 8). Secondly, she seeks to move away from linear, passive notions of revision: writers and readers are random and interventionary. Hughes-Warrington’s third reason for taking up revision is to bring the ethical dimension entwined in historical reconstruction to disciplinary prominence, via a host of salient points and examples which pungently give her historiographical discourse a particularly eclectic vim.

In terms of the first aspect, the book is an assembly of relevant names and arguments, insights and texts that Hughes-Warrington nominally responds to. Ernst Nolte, Arthur Marwick, David Hackett Fischer, Michel Foucault and Gabrielle Spiegel represent historiographic revision theory; philosophical critics Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas loom large. Regarding seminal texts, Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* is discussed in relation to the way historical revisionism delineates (pp. 24–5), thus setting up one of the Hughes-Warrington’s key concerns: the spatial understanding of revision. One of the most fraught topics when it comes to historiography’s relationship to revision, the retelling of the Holocaust, is also discussed. This a subject area, endowed with meaning by ‘filmmakers, novelists, museum curators, journalists and web designers’ (p. 60), where revision is less a part of the historian’s craft, more an ideological practice to reproof. Strikingly, in this work, Hughes-Warrington concentrates on a range of source material that suggests the new profile of historiographic revision studies: chat rooms (pp. 71–2), murals in Northern Ireland (pp. 41–5), reader annotations and interpolations in history texts (pp. 94–107). Here we have messy, extreme examples of revision at work in the form of history makers grappling with the burden of the past, removed from the belated attempts of sophisticated historical scholars to dispense with the superannuated.

As for challenging linear, passive notions of revision, Hughes-Warrington promotes ‘boundaries, space and orientation’ (p. 27). For her, ‘[s]patial imagery and language are used to construct temporary textual spaces in which rival historiographies are excluded and readers are encouraged to navigate to a new vision of history using the entry and exit points and signposts of the writer’ (p. 34). Rather than relying on the vestiges of Hegel’s dialectic, ‘history proceeds as a succession of amendments’ (p. 8), or seeing revision as to some extent determined by chance, say, the historian’s commitment to winning patronage in academic institutions,

being revisionary is a question of history-makers trying desperately and often without great clarity to put their past in the right place. Revision is not, after Roland Barthes, ‘a referendum’ (p. 108).

In Hughes-Warrington’s topography of case studies she suggests how space precludes and accommodates. In the case of the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, there is a panel which depicts a father-narrator sitting in front of a past *mise-en-scène*, whilst his son-listener sits behind (p. 48). The past is both in the wake of and governed by the present recollection of a past generation, albeit partially (the father-narrator does not dominate the picture; he is only occupying a tiny fraction of the foreground). Furthermore, in acts of what for some would be vandalism, notes and doodles in history books, readers are not caught up in ‘a dialogue of correction’ (p. 107) with the authoritative historian, but rather, either position themselves in the margins casting aspersions or dramatically impose themselves upon the text through large-scale graffiti. On the page, the hierarchy of space, the author’s designated beginning running to the declared end, becomes more like, quoting Barthes, “‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’” (p. 108).

With regard to the ethical dimension, ‘[h]istory is an ethical obligation to be open to the ways in which past, present and future “others” haunt us and disturb our sense of the world’ (p. 73). History is not a collection of ‘hermetically sealed non-places in which alignment with generic conventions, let alone surrender or forgetting, is perfectly achieved’ (p. 60). Hughes-Warrington contends that it is because history is out of order but saturated with meaning for us — she uses a term borrowed from Derrida, “‘*metaphysical*’” (p. 16) — that ethical agency is of import. This is not a question of methodology. It is our reckoning with past happenings, *our* being as open a denotation as *their* past deeds and misdeeds, with a past that is so transitory yet identity defining and decoupling, that makes revision so frightening yet vitally important. This is not to be construed as “anything goes, your truth is your truth, mine is mine”, thus leading to the ultimate anathema of denying the Holocaust. Instead, for Hughes-Warrington the past must be come to terms with constantly: there is no present or waiting-to-be-exposed history — it is strived for. To say that history is stable, we have our story and only facts or interpretations can cause us to doubt it, is a form of repression. Whereas one common decisive and thoroughly professional historiographic problematic might be the final judgement of right and wrong, one should not eschew one’s responsibility to get stuck into the ethico-interpretative melee of history making, free from the prop of finding conclusive answers to set questions.

Throughout Hughes-Warrington’s exposition of these points, there is a brusqueness regarding detail that I find off-putting in her prose: I have already mentioned the word *sweeping*. In *Revisionist Histories*, her incantatory recital of names and examples hardly gives the reader time to establish the connexion in any line of argument. For example, summarising her analysis of murals, she concludes:

Davis Street is literally a transit corridor. While many of the images on that street contribute broadly to a republican view of the Troubles, they hardly liberate us from the complexities of the past. Images are refreshed on a short cycle, and set down connections between local events and either perceived global freedom fighters or the activities of local taxi companies. We may use linear models to explain the operation of revision in history making, but the examples in this chapter suggest that we are yet to “tame”, as Foucault puts it, “the wild profusion of existing things” ... It remains to be seen, though, whether that “wild profusion”, like the stable spaces of history non-places, also renders us susceptible to ethical surrender. In the next chapter, we will consider this point further by considering whether digital histories are a “prison” or a “café” that we use to escape the burden of confronting the ghosts of the past that haunt us.(pp. 53–4)

Another particular feature of Hughes-Warrington’s style is a kind of indeterminate giving with one hand, taking with the other. For instance, no sooner does she suggest ‘[h]istory making might be seen as a form of pausing’ than she immediately gives credit in the next paragraph to the openness of any specific articulation (p. 53). Call me old fashioned but Hughes-Warrington’s argument here is not a line of reasoning present and persuasive, but is a sort of flaky deconstructionist flip-flopping. I feel dreadfully epistemological making

such points, an old-fashioned revisionist demanding a new conclusive interpretation to replace the mistaken revisionist doctrine of yore, yet this convulsive type of presentation is dubitable in its effect. *Revisionist Histories* is a hectic tour of an inchoate area of study, on which assertions are flung at the reader and names are dropped from Foucault to Nietzsche to Habermas. A central narrative is missing. The reader is never taken to somewhere, to a point of enlightenment at which something has been shown to be the case

The question that one is left with after reading this book is: where's the beef? If Hughes-Warrington's central contention is that history is 'a bitterly contested battle' (p. 89), then *Revisionist Histories* certainly reinforces the point. The work never fails to leave the impression that historians are nothing but artful and manipulative (terms in this context which do not necessarily have negative connotations), and that their texts are sites of constant reception and intervention. Indeed, the band of brothers and sisters called historians take a back seat in *Revisionist Histories*; they are not privileged subjects. There is a plentiful supply of non-hierarchical history generators who pitch into the historical process to make history what it is. This essential free-for-all is a sociological picture of knowledge that those who are not minded to err in the direction of a naïve correspondence notion of truth recognise and show approbation towards. But to so labour the point that various histories are essentially floating signifiers occasionally and imperfectly appropriated by history makers (as Hughes-Warrington does over the course of her liturgy to the openness of history) is not an overly constructive entrance into the field of revisionist historiographic studies for the reason that in its constant animation of history's indeterminacy, *Revisionist Histories* does not give any significant insight into the conditions in which *periodic determinacy*, the grounds for revision, are set. 'History', notes Hughes-Warrington, 'is revision' (p. 110). This may be so. But surely it is also a product of certain revisionist frameworks which are fixed according to certain truth-making practices. While history making is an ethical struggle, it is also a technical, often institutional craft that establishes facticity. As a reader of *Revisionist Histories*, I did not feel challenged to rethink revision along the more thought-provoking lines, for example, of the historico-epistemological approach (that is the neo-Kantian tradition of delimitating how we as subjects perceive and order our *datità*) of Kuhn (who Hughes-Warrington mentions but does not do justice to), or of the archaeologically-minded Foucault. Both individuals were fascinated by how truth comes to be, and both, in their intellectual bequest of paradigms and discursive practices respectively, gave insightful theoretical accounts of truth-telling and the acceptable and unacceptable modes of rejecting that account: '[s]o, why are some debates noticed, and others not?' (p. 119).

Revisionist Histories contains a wealth of examples of history's plasticity, but Hughes-Warrington does not convincingly outline any means to establish the rules of these morphing games. By ephemerally iterating a list of case studies that demonstrate history somewhat speaks to epistemic items outside its 'traditional' academic purview, *Revisionist Histories* does not so much deliver a case for the prosecution or defence of historiographic revisionist studies as make an opening statement – history is tractable – again and again and again.

Notes

1. R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History* (Oxford, 1999), p. 24.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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