

## At the Limits of History. Essays on Theory and Practice

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Martin Davies

‘We are most of us governed by epistemologies that we know to be wrong’: Gregory Bateson’s observation summarizes what motivates Keith Jenkins’s latest book.<sup>(1)</sup> In this collection of essays written and published over the last 15 years (including not only a foreword by Hayden White and an afterword by Alun Munslow, but also responses from Perez Zagorin and Michael C. Coleman repudiating the postmodernist thought-style) ‘wrong epistemology’ defines the cognitive routines and disciplinary practices that produce historical knowledge. To anyone familiar with Jenkins’s books the import of these essays will not be surprising, particularly since, both in brief comments helpfully contextualizing each essay and the particularly incisive introduction, ‘History limited’, he himself indicates their common synergy. Even so, precisely as a collection of occasional pieces evincing an unwavering conviction, *At the Limits of History* provides an occasion to reflect on the dispute between the modernist, historicizing mentality and postmodernist strategies of differentiation, and on what in this confrontation exactly is at stake.

Hegemony, the social and cultural dominance of the cognitive norms evinced in history-focussed behaviour, the practices producing historical knowledge; authority, the self-entitlement to credibility always already politically and culturally invested in the historian-function, in what it is to be a historian and to do history: these are consistently in *At the Limits of History* the targets of Jenkins’s critique. This critique is ‘crucially’ indebted to Nietzsche – particularly to his insight that knowledge is inherently pragmatic, an expression of will-to-power, and to Lyotard – suggesting his findings that under postmodern conditions knowledge is validated only in performative terms (p. 169). Given, as Ernest Gellner remarks, that ‘norms of knowledge provide a court of appeal for normative issues in other spheres’, so that ‘what ethical, political, economic and other norms are found to be acceptable, depends in the end on ... which cognitive norms are held to be compelling’, the epistemological critique of the hegemony and authority of historical norms cannot but turn

political.<sup>(2)</sup> This explains why in the 1994 essay, 'Marxism and historical knowledge', Jenkins vindicates a non-historicizing conception of Marxism by stressing that society, being rather 'an incessantly mobile set of discursive (and thus contingent) relationships', is hardly a 'stable object' underpinning 'accumulating /lasting knowledge' (p. 25); why in the 2003 essay, 'On disobedient histories', he rejects a 'credible authoritative or authoritarian historicized past that one has to defer to over one's own personal history', derogates from the 'currently stultifying academic/professional *doxa*', and would 'prise open the mental strait-jacket of modernist historical thinking' (p. 151); why, too, in the 2004 essay, 'Modernist disavowals and postmodern reminders of the condition of history today: On Jean-François Lyotard', in order to counter 'the acceptance of conformity, a deadening of thought', he endorses Lyotard's conclusion that postmodernism should "leave itself open to the unfamiliarity of whatever may occur to it, and make [up] rules in the absence of rules" (p. 173).

The hegemony of history as a discipline, the authority inherent in the historian-function: these may well be Jenkins's targets; his critique may well expose them as instruments of political power, but it does not on these grounds alone reveal why they are targetable. Addressing this issue, *At the Limits of History* reveals a further facet of Jenkins's thinking: its deconstructive point. For the historian-function does not repudiate either the hegemonic status of the discipline or its social and political authority: it just legitimizes both by insisting that they are predicated on truth, itself predicated on the past; it just denies that they are merely proxies for current political ideologies and their remorseless social and economic implementation, – as Jenkins observes in the 2008 essay, "Nobody does it better". Radical History and Hayden White': 'the historian's referent is "nothing" but the product of their inferences based upon their existential (personal, ethical, public, ideological ...) condition' (p. 263). The result is: the historian-function proves to be both self-deceptive and duplicitous. It might style itself as a clerical vocation representing a theologically conceived, comprehensive Truth about an unseen, omnipotent Past, the transcendental Maker of the Present; it actually operates as a technical expert, a resources manager, a bureaucratic administrator, integral to the technocratic elite and their institutions (for example, the university) that construct and affirm government policy (as, for instance, the *History & Policy* initiative, 'connecting historians, policy makers and the media', confirms). A reader of, for example, Derrida's *De la grammatologie* and Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux* <sup>(3)</sup>, Jenkins is already aware that logocentrism discloses *logos*, '-ologies', the metaphysical 'Word' that was in the Beginning to be expressions of the dominant order, of the order domination, political and theological alike, imposes; that writing was ever allied to cognitive norms, bureaucratic administration, and state regulation. Accordingly, what the historian-function consecrates as *the* truth about *the* past, what, in the 1997 essay on the work of Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, offers itself as "the metanarrative in Western discourse", Jenkins reduces to cognitive and discursive conventions predicated on received behaviours, to constrictive disciplinary 'strategies that fold corrosive scepticism into scholarly caution and empirical facticity' (p. 43; pp. 57, 156). So, to expose the political employment of history's disciplinary hegemony, he focuses in the introduction on the 'politico-institutional locations and practices of historical cultures' and stresses their 'discursive practices and professional/ peer-approved standards which determine and regulate what passes for proper civilising and identity providing histories – "roots", "traditions", "contexts", "identities" of a predominantly liberal, bourgeois kind' (p. 10); he examines, in the 1997 essay 'Why bother with history?', the system of public demands history generates, the fact that 'we demand that it gives us ... trajectories, meanings, legitimisations, "practices" and ethics that we can learn from and so "place ourselves" in a past backed-up-present (and future)' (p. 57). Similarly, to expose the political-ideological authority of the historian-function he insists, in the same essay, that the historians' injunction to "learn lessons from the past / history" boils down to coercing the recognition of historians themselves as "moral guides' [...] and as providers of and legitimators of our identities' (p. 61). But he then locates in the 2008 essay, 'Sande Cohen. On the verge of newness', what is nothing but the affirmative function of historical understanding that, being 'understanding', implicitly encourages acquiescence in the way things happen to be: why, in view of the spectacle of desolation the world offers, historians 'cannot ... , as privileged intellectuals, do something other than think backwards' (p. 275). So he stresses in the 2004 essay, 'Ethical responsibility and the historian. On the possible end of a history "of a certain kind"', that 'the strictures so embedded in the "training" of historians and the profession's "maxims of prudence"', anaesthetizing any sense of obligation to a 'committed intellectual position' (exemplified here by Edward Said), default to

implicit collusions with the prevailing regime (pp. 99, 202, 205).

The hegemony and authority of the historian-function: *At the Limits of History* repudiates them, needless to say, by a critique based on a close reading and detailed discussion of contemporary, mainly postmodern thinkers (cf. pp. 16, 107, 148, 218, 234). A short review, like this, cannot trace the *minutiae* of its arguments, but it must examine why they have to be agonistic. Their combative character acknowledges a fundamental feature of modernist thinking behind postmodernist positions: the ‘ideological shift’ (according to Gellner) that, with (e.g.) Descartes and Kant, makes ‘the foundation stone of ... our world and identity, ... not some ... reverence-inspiring object or being out there’ in the world, but, instead, ‘our cognitive equipment, ... our criteria of sound knowledge’; – which means that knowledge of the world is established ‘no longer by an appeal to the nature of things, but ... by an appeal to the inner necessities of our cognitive apparatus’; – which, since the world can be seen only ‘*within* knowledge’, since knowledge is no longer just ‘one thing or process amongst others within a wider world’, results in a ‘historical situation’ wherein ‘we do *not* know just which world we inhabit’.(4) Its implications are summarized by Nietzsche’s observation, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* and in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (5), that, if one denied the world were pure appearance or fiction, its truth would also disappear, since human beings discover truth only through appearance, through ‘picturing’ it. Here lies the *aporia* to which Jenkins’s deconstructive critique keeps returning: does historical truth produce correct transcriptions and credible representations of *the* past? Or does correct transcription (as *transcription*), credible representation (as *re-presentation*), produce what is called historical truth? Either way, argues Richard Rorty whose thinking Jenkins here endorses, epistemologically it comes down to ‘choosing objects to be compelled by’.(6) Decisive now is what constitutes knowledge, what informs a decision at a decisive moment: what makes factors compelling, what makes the decision they induce decisive. Thus in postmodernist thinking this ‘radical *decisionism*’, dispensing with ‘transcendental signifiers’, ‘deferring for ever total/totalitarian closures’ (pp.1 54, 246, 249), ensures its openness, the openness Jenkins here insists on and – with good reason – fully exploits.

In confronting the hegemony and authority of history, *At the Limits of History* is anything but theoretical. Rather it is an agonistic work with a pragmatic ‘*cutting edge*’ (p. 19), enacting the commitment that sustains it, performing the utility of its thinking. It needs to be:

*epistemologically speaking*, because with only knowledge positions available, what makes one position more compelling than another becomes urgent. In arguing with others, with other readers, the author clarifies his own arguments. Hence, (for example) the recourse to the first person (‘Now I had been moving towards this position for several years ...’ (p. 16)), to characteristic self-correction (‘Obviously I could go on describing the characteristics of such a meta-narrative history for some time’ (p. 56)), to critical thinking as an obligation for both author and reader (‘And so let us think again. Let us begin again.’ (p.1 60, cf. pp. 152, 159, 164)), to ensuring – a typically Kantian imperative this – that his thinking is correctly orientated (‘Now, at this point ... I underwent something of an experience of my own ... And it took me a while to put my finger on what was worrying me. Then, slowly, I began to get it.’ (p. 311), and, (e.g.) in recommending Sande Cohen’s work, to emotive inflections directly involving the reader (‘And I would urge readers ... not to succumb to feeling shy about being ... *enthusiastic*’ (p. 290));

*regarding history’s disciplinary hegemony*: because, since ‘the past is utterly promiscuous ... and will go with anybody’ (pp. 60, 216), it will easily accommodate theory, appropriating it for its own affirmative designs (cf. Actor Network Theory in social history). As Alfred Sohn-Rethel argues, the pure thinking sustaining theory, deriving from the abstract principle of monetary equivalence sustaining commodity exchange and configuring social relationships, *ipso facto* endorses existing structures of political and economic domination.(7) So, where theory drifts towards complacent abstractions, or where, in representing the past, historical texts aim ‘to *settle*, to *solve and resolve* and thus to *control* that which is represented’, close reading demands ‘the performance of rupturing events out of all residual contexts and predictable contexts-in-waiting’ (p. 156; p. 178). Its deliberate intention is to do what historians ‘all too rarely fail to do’: i.e., ‘*damage* the present *status quo*’ (pp. 15, 275). So, where historical knowledge under its own inertia “‘must somehow fit with what is already known’” (p.7 9; cf. pp. 156–7), deconstructive practice envisages something different, a ‘desedimentation’ of discursive strata, a reductive ‘hyperanalysis’, the repetitive re-

reading that generates something new.(8);

*politically speaking*: because, if history does help to ‘strengthen the ties that can bind people to place and past’, to ‘cement the individual into a broader historical lineage’, Keith Jenkins would never have become a philosopher of history!(9) In the candid, 2005 inaugural lecture “‘Once upon a time’: On history’ he describes the effort it required to cut the ‘ties’ and shatter the ‘cement’ that would have confined him to modest (albeit ‘idyllic’) social and educational circumstances (pp. 210–1). *At the Limits of History* thus proves topical now, when a parliamentary report has just confirmed Britain as ‘one of the least socially mobile countries in Europe’.(10) Its agonistic attitude, its demonstration of the performatively constituted subject (p. 221), its disruption of the political-intellectual *status quo* confront historians who implicitly discourage social mobility with historicized thinking as its concrete impediment, as a constraining ligature. No wonder Jenkins advocates disobedience, sides with marginal intellectuals, and seizes on postmodernism’s ‘guarantee of perpetual, perspectival openness’ (pp. 155, cf. pp. 166, 203);

but, centrally, *ethically speaking*: because informing these essays is a reflective ‘principle of recalcitrance’ towards established norms and disciplines, towards any kind of dogmatically academic or politically authoritarian pre-emption of thought or action (p. 166). Jenkins keeps returning to its textual location in Derrida and Badiou where cognition and action, self-realization and ethical commitment intersect, – thus, in a postmodern culture of uncertainty, certainly orientating himself with reference to those articulating its uncertainty. For once all transcendent signifiers (like ‘History’, ‘Reason’, etc.) prove to be human artifices, once the religious, political or literary text is no longer sacrosanct (he argues), received *a priori*s vanish, nothing is decided: the subject finds itself in unprecedented circumstances. To produce meaning, it resorts to the perpetual interrogation of the signs and texts it encounters, finding from its own cognitive resources in the decisions it enacts, decisions that always keep presenting themselves, the inventiveness they demand (p. 152). The objection that truth cannot be made up like this fails: as *inter alia* Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche demonstrate truth has only ever been made up like this. Hence, in the 2007 essay, ‘The end of the affair. The irretrievable breakdown of history and ethics’, Jenkins argues (with Badiou) that, as instances of disorientation, designating catalysts that void usual situations and affinities, (historical) events demand ethical deliberation, create, without excuses or alibis, opportunities for truth: to rely instead on custom, precedent, tradition, or duty – in other words, to invoke the lessons of history, history as a *magistra vitae* – would be, if not an intellectually lazy compromise with received ethical values, at least a derogation from personal responsibility, the very avoidance of ethical concern (pp. 250–2).

What then *is* at stake in *At the Limits of History*? Nothing less than history’s validity. That history could be an ‘authentic science, ... the primary epistemological basis of human knowledge’, that it had replaced philosophy as the queen of the sciences, the Neo-Kantian thinker Karl Leonhard Reinhold proposed in 1790. This move was already a sophisticated trick, since history still needed philosophy for its coherence, even if that first had to recover from the trauma Kant had inflicted on it.(11) In the meantime, history was a stand-in for certainty, what Jenkins aptly calls an ‘infinite fix’, such as ‘Human Nature’, ‘Market Forces’, ‘Reason’, ‘imaginaries all bearing down upon us with the insignia of Truth’ (p.37). As Jenkins demonstrates, postmodernist strategies expose their factitiousness, – much as Kant’s critical philosophy shattered the surreptitious axioms of rationalist metaphysics: a deep-seated instinct in human cognition seems periodically to require its complete overhaul and re-orientation to pre-empt self-delusion, to ensure its vital, ‘novelty of functioning’.(12) Whether history can thereafter mutate into some postmodernist variant, as Jenkins occasionally maintains, does seem dubious (cf. pp. 15, 166). If the postmodern condition is ineluctable, it has already re-functioned history: its proliferating sub-disciplines and sub-, sub-disciplinary variants, the concomitant generation of micro-spheres of fact and value, both irreducible to a common denominator and unassimilable to a grand narrative, produce precisely the postmodernist relativism historians oppose. In fact, endorsed by, and endorsing, prevailing political and economic regimes, history flourishes in the same old way, except that, in these postmodern circumstances, its persuasive force grows in inverse proportion to its cognitive potential. Hence, as Jenkins confirms (p. 236), it persists not as an epistemologically-based discipline. Instead, it functions as a socialized management-technology, an integral part of the comprehensive technocratic-bureaucratic system governing current existence (cf. p. 202). The technocrat-historians maintaining it with ‘scholarly expertise’, doubling as gate-keepers ever ready to discredit the



‘qualifications’ of their critics (p. 110), evince a typical professional conceit: claiming to be the ‘best qualified’, the ‘best placed’, to speak for the public outside the discipline, they *ipso facto* block external, public back-chat or any view in which they are ‘unable to recognize themselves’ (p. 77).[\(13\)](#) History thus affirms the expert-culture which, if unquestioned, buttresses the present-day risk-society: as Jenkins insists, ‘it is not the laid-back relativist who one ought to be afraid of but people, or institutions ... who claim to know the truth of things at the actually irreducible level of interpretation’ (p.241). Confronting thus the desolation of affirmative historical culture on thoughtful ethical grounds, *At the Limits of History* evinces intellectual resilience and conveys an urgent immediacy – what in the struggle for social hope Ernst Bloch calls the ‘actual experience of being on philosophy’s front-line’.[\(14\)](#)

Keith Jenkins is happy to accept Martin Davies' incisive and generous review and does not wish to comment - except to say thanks.

## Notes

1. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago & London, 2000), p. 493.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 30.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. Vol. 2, Mille plateaux* (Paris, 1980).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, pp. 28–9, 44; (cf. *At the Limits of History*, p. 256).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §34; *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §112.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, 1983), p.160.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Warenform und Denkform. Mit zwei Anhängen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), pp. 96–7, 127 ff.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Jacques Derrida & Antoine Spire, *Au-delà des apparences* (Latresne, 2002), pp. 18, 20, 22, 25.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Tristram Hunt, ‘Feeling a bit dislocated?’, *BBC History Magazine*, 7, 7 (2006), 27; and ‘How does television enhance history?’ in *History and the Media*, ed. David Cannadine, (Basingstoke, 2004), p.97.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Patrick Wintour, ‘Britain’s closed shop’, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2009, p.4.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Carl Leonhard Reinhold, *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie: Band I* (Leipzig, 1790), pp. 14, 29, 38–9.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York, 1968), p.28.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 97, 110, 131, 143.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Ernst Bloch, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), p.147.[Back to \(14\)](#)

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