

# 'The Moloch of Details'? Cycles of Criticism and the Meaning of History Now

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Paul Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2006; pp. 218; ISBN 0 7190 6956 4/0 7190 6957 2 (pb)

Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005; pp. 301; ISBN 13: 978 0 472 09904 7/ 978 0 472 06904 0 (pb)

Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (eds), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006; pp. 520; 13: 978 1 4051 4961 7/ 13: 978 1 0 631 21714 5 (pb)

Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2005; pp. 339; ISBN 0 226 67543 2 (hb) Margaret Procter, Michael Cook, and Caroline Williams (eds), *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, Chicago, The Society for American Archivists, 2005; pp. 345; ISBN 1 931666 15 6 (hb)

Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2005; pp. 222; ISBN 1 57181 624 0 (pb)

Jürgen Straub (ed.), *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2005; pp. 280; ISBN 1 57181 777 8 (pb)

Ian Tyrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2005; pp. 348; ISBN 0 226 82193 5/0 226 82194 3 (pb)

Chris Wrigley, *A.J.P. Taylor: Radical Historian of Europe*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2006; pp. 439; ISBN 10: 1 86064 286 1; ISBN 13: 1 86064 286 9 (hb)

**In a recent review of Tim Blanning's *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648–1815* (2007)**, Keith Thomas marvelled at the author's range, given that 'the volume of specialised writing has grown immeasurably since the 1950s' and because 'the subject matter of history has expanded and its younger practitioners are intensely specialised.'<sup>1</sup> Such observations are not new. More than a century ago, William Milligan Sloane offered a similar sentiment, but more colourfully, when lamenting that history had been 'immolated by the Moloch

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<sup>1</sup> *Guardian*, Review Section, 9 June 2007, 9.

of details'.<sup>2</sup> The specialization which Sloane inveighed against increased in the subsequent years, with the expansion of the university-based history and the growing emphasis upon specialist knowledge. At the same time, the discipline fractured into more and more sub-specialisms, thus amplifying the problems which Sloane encountered in the 1890s. As historians strengthened their dogged faith in the power of the sources and in their powers of scientific deduction, many of the works they produced became divorced from a general reading population.

In recent decades, the self-confidence of practitioners has been shaken by a number of important challenges. Key theoretical foundations of the flowering social history of the 1960s, which for a while became the most fashionable sub-disciplinary area, were seriously threatened by the decline of the once-dominant, overarching, theoretical perspective – Marxism. Cultural history, which grew up in the place of a fading social history in the 1970s and 1980s, still produced recognizably empirical practitioners, but a fetishism of the documents was less noticeable in an area dominated by relativism and the explanatory force of language. The main driver for this changing emphasis in historical practice has been labelled as postmodernism, an amalgam of philosophical ideas which for a while did more than compete for sub-disciplinary ascendancy. Instead, it emerged to question the very essence of the discipline — not only the nature of the evidence which underpinned the historical method, but also the essential narrativism of the historian's presentation of the past. Despite the criticisms which historians encountered through postmodernism, the range and dynamism of history has never been greater than it is now.

Regardless of the challenges presented to historians and their discipline, very few practitioners of the subject reflect consciously upon history. Instead, the terrain is left to philosophers of history and theorists from other disciplines. Curiously, this does not mean that historians have no interest in the meaning of their subject. The intensity of responses to Richard Evans's *In Defence of History*, which sought to defend history, as the practice most historians recognize and desire in their own work, against the incursions of postmodernists, was so virulent in some quarters that it suggested quite the contrary: a very great deal of interest.<sup>3</sup> Much of it was not, however, derived from 'traditional' historians whose methods and philosophies Evans sought to defend. Instead, the onslaught simply confirmed that philosophers, theorists and those long since seduced by the linguistic turn were most likely to take up their pens against what they saw as an attempt to update, correct and improve the classic reflective texts of the 1960s. Evans's book tried to demonstrate an accommodation with the critics of history, thus showing how far we have come even in the decades since Geoffrey Elton, himself responding to E.H. Carr's early

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<sup>2</sup> This was: 'History and Democracy', *American Historical Review*, 1 (October 1895), 9, cited by Tyrell, 26.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/evans.html> (accessed 11 June 2007).

statement of relativist intent, championed the notion of history as an intellectually unique enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

In a more general way, exchanges between historians and their critics, and between disciplines and ideologies in respect of the past, are not so surprising. After all, for generations historians have borrowed freely from other disciplines and so have encountered the lure of divergent theories and epistemologies. Correspondingly, other disciplines also engage with their own historical dimensions, exposing themselves to historical debates and contributing their own methods, assumption and skills to our retrieval of the past. History today is a crowded house; but what does all this mean for our attempts to uncover, represent, or reflect upon the past?

Over the past three decades there has been a particular build-up in the number of scholars — most of them not historians — who have pitched in against the notion that the historical method produces realist, representational, objective and scientific-empirical modes of enquiry. What we might term the anti-history viewpoint most consistently expressed under the banner of postmodernism has questioned the ability of historians to do the very thing which historians have always claimed to do: write truthfully about — perhaps even represent — the past. For postmodernists, historians cannot recover the past because it is dead, gone and beyond their grasp; thus they certainly cannot construct a truthful account. In this schema the disconnections of both time and place which separate object from subject fatally undermine the project of the historian. The postmodernist position is, however, based upon a misreading of the nature of observation, evidence and hypothesis; in other words, it misconstrues science. After all, the palaeontologist is no nearer the sources than the historian.<sup>5</sup> Whereas historians traditionally ascribed quite clear scientific value to their separation of the historian and the historical record, they no longer do so with quite the confidence of earlier forms of historical enquiry. In part, the shifting position is accounted for by the postmodernist declaration that history is an elaborate fiction produced by the human imagination: the past existed once, but we can never know it now, so we essentially make it up.

Whilst this assault upon history has developed in intensity for more than a decade prior to Evans's defence, postmodernism has since receded into a kind of sub-disciplinary silo of its own. The creation of a specialist journal, *Rethinking History*, to reconfigure the essential structures of the historical discipline, mostly houses the work of scholars who talk among themselves. By contrast, several of the titles considered here stress that a more accommodating kind of theorizing has achieved purchase. Moreover, they challenge some of the bleakest conclusions of postmodernism. Jörn Rüsen, in particular, moves the debate on significantly from the position assumed by critics of the

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<sup>4</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* 3rd revised edn ([1961] Basingstoke 2001); Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History*, 2nd revised edn ([1967] Oxford 2001).

<sup>5</sup> This issue is examined in a sharp comparison of history and the historical sciences in the final chapter of Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (London 1997).

historical method, such as Keith Jenkins.<sup>6</sup> Rüsen re-reads Hayden White on poetics and Ranke (whom he portrays as Hegelian) and promotes a new appreciation of the role of human reason (essentially the historian's reasoning role) in the methodologies of history and the intentions of historians. Moreover, Rüsen re-empowers the historian by arguing that the dichotomy of choices — representation-versus-interpretation — is unhelpful because historians use both in the process of writing history.

Other scholars considered here also deal with subject matter which greatly affects the position of historical enquiry. Blackledge, for example, resurrects Marxist history (a theme he shares with one of the contributors to Kramer and Mazer's excellent collection of essays).<sup>7</sup> His argument derives its energy from a deep understanding of Marxist scholarship (and its enormous influence over years). Present geopolitics also encouraged his argument that Marxism is still relevant. The once-popular belief, modish during the early 1990s, that the fall of communism and triumph of the West had brought an 'end' to history, appears daily less relevant in a world riven by new polarities in the wake of 9/11.<sup>8</sup> Blackledge is the latest in a growing list of scholars keen to explain how Marxism can provide answers to the new problems of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Rüsen and Jürgen Straub show there are multiple ways of reading and presenting the much-maligned narrative construction of history.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, narrative (re)/(de)construction is one of the most revealing and challenging elements in the philosophy of history, and it clearly affects how historians see their craft.<sup>11</sup> Rüsen reminds us that, since Nietzsche, scholars had distinguished humans from animals by stressing humans' historical consciousness and understanding of time.<sup>12</sup> Further, Rüsen suggests that as humans have lost their natural instincts, 'the burdening chain of memory has become a fundamental condition of human life' (1). The burden requires humans to form their own ways of understanding time; because of the role of contingency and chance, the degree of predictability is relatively slight and certainly less easy to negotiate than a life lived by mere instinct with no understanding of the consequences of

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**6** An interesting outline of Jenkins's views is found in a heated debate with Perez Zagorin in the journal *History and Theory*: Zagorin, 'History, the Reference, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now', *History and Theory*, 38(1) (1999); Jenkins, 'A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin', and Zagorin, 'Rejoinder to a Postmodernist', both in 39 (May 2000).

**7** Walter L. Adamson, 'Marxism and Historians' Thought', 205–22.

**8** F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *National Interest* (Summer 1989) began the discussion of this version of 'endism', an argument he developed more fully in *The End of History and the Last Man* (London 1992). One of the best early sustained critiques of Fukuyama came from a Marxist perspective: Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Oxford 1997), ch. 1.

**9** Another excellent example is Matt Perry, *Marxism and History* (Basingstoke 2003).

**10** Both titles appear in Jörn Rüsen's Berghahn series, 'Making Sense of History: Studies in Historical Cultures'.

**11** A very useful exposition upon narrative from the deconstructionist perspective is Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke 2007).

**12** In *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York 1985), 5, cited by Rüsen, 1.

time's passing. From this basis, Rüsen offers his fascinating definition of history:

[H]istory is time which has gained sense and meaning. History is meaningful and sense-bearing time. It combines past, present and future in a way that human beings can live in the tense intersection of remembered past and expected future. History is a process of reflecting the time order of human life, grounded on experience and moved by outlooks on the future (2).

From Rüsen's position, the idea of the individual making sense of history — not as historian, but as actor in the process itself — becomes important. In this context, historical narration reflects the subjectivity of the process of making sense of history in all its facets. Rüsen also offers hope to historians for whom the flight from the comforting certainties of objectivity has been difficult. He argues that the proponents of the linguistic turn, who have done most to pro-pound the subjectivity of history, failed to appreciate the 'truth claims' of the historical method. For historians do not simply place themselves in relation to history as individuals do; instead they claim truth through their interpretation of the order of the past. In this sense, Rüsen's notion of truth, which emphasizes reason, seems to offer a challenge to the notion of truth utilized in much postmodern thinking, which is largely literal.

If narrative assumes an intense importance for philosophers of history, then the way in which the human mind orders these narratives is bound to be additionally important. Jürgen Straub's collection takes the consideration of historical meaning in a different direction, drawing together a collection of experts in psychology to examine the nature of historical consciousness: individual, collective, historical and contemporary. In Straub's volume, it is the narrator's relationship to the narrative which is important. The collection is, however, varied — both in focus and in its relevance to historical research. Some of the offerings, including Straub's own, are extremely valuable; others, while interesting, seem to have very little to say about history itself (even allowing for the Magpie-like proclivities of historians, who have always sought inspiration from other disciplines).

Some of the same issues of narration and the narrator appear in Popkin's examination of historians' autobiographies and in Wrigley's biography of one of twentieth century Britain's leading historians, A.J.P. Taylor. Both authors amply demonstrate the importance of the individual and narratives. Neither Popkin nor Wrigley claim *all* historians are valuable as narrators of their own lives, nor as subjects of biographies and contextualizing works such as these; but by selecting important practitioners (Taylor, Edward Gibbon, Henry Adams and others) they show convincingly that there is much about the historian, or his/her autobiography, that adds to our understanding of the process of historical enquiry. Popkin also deftly matches historians' autobiographies with key moments in time, notably in a very effective chapter on historians who escaped the nazis.<sup>13</sup> These works provide extremely interesting

**13** The subject has cropped up before in other important works on émigré historians. Like those

contextualizing material to supplement the authorial voice behind the historical work. There is, however, a significant gap between using historians' autobiographies and using autobiographies more generally.<sup>14</sup> For one thing, we might ask: is the historian interesting or important as a historical actor? Both Popkin and Wrigley, by the very nature of their tasks, present historians both as subject matter and as the makers of the subject matter, creating a double layer of interactions between history and the historian. What Popkin's book demonstrates most clearly is the increasing role of memory — empowerment through the collection of individual memories and personal narratives — in a variant upon the first linguistic turn which, again, challenged the hegemony of the historian: but not, as we learn from Rüsen, fatally or absolutely.

The sheer range of criticisms of historical practice has been enough, at times, to make beleaguered historians feel their livelihood is in some sort of terrible crisis. However, there is some good news: Ian Tyrell, in his excellent dissection of the continual crisis of history in the United States, contends that the discipline is not under quite the intellectual and political assault which the historians themselves imagine.

What makes debates about history particularly engrossing is the fact the discussion is not conducted by historians alone. The encroachment of politicians and the pronouncements of non-specialist commentators tend to make historians cavil. Procter, Cook and Williams, for example, in their detailed, important study, paint a typical picture of political pressure upon the archives which archivists and historians will recognize, whether they reside in New Zealand, where, till 1966, the census enumerators' books were systematically destroyed, or work in the repositories of the former USSR, whose opening has vivified historical research. From scholars outside history to politicians (with their nation-building agendas in an age of anxiety about mass migration), everyone feels at liberty to question the content and method of historical research. Whilst the net result is a subject under some pressure, it can also be said that any discipline discussed at Cabinet tables or in the news media must feature prominently in the consciousness of nations and peoples. Tyrell gently soothes concern about these interventions by explaining that they have been ongoing for over a century.

It is by no means certain that all the texts here, taken as a whole, present history as a strong and singular entity; but there are enough shards of historical connection between them to demonstrate internal coherence — a real sense of the discipline. There is no doubt, however, that great changes have

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more illustrious fields science and music, history too benefited from the work of practitioners who escaped nazism. See Peter Wende and Peter Alter, *Out of the Third Reich: Refugee Historians in Post-War Britain* (London 1998); and D. Snowman, *The Hitler Emigrés: the Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (London 2002).

**14** Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT, 2003), a brilliant investigation of the reading culture of working-class people in Britain, demonstrates emphatically how the autobiographies of mostly ordinary people are revealing about their worlds.

occurred: with each passing generation, history has become a thing of greater compass and complication. At the same time, the once-unquestioned belief in empiricism and objectivity has created a problem: how to reach a general audience when the core method of the practitioners makes for narrow monographs and articles whose general appeal is limited.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, just as postmodernism sought to downgrade the type of narratives historians produced, a more accessible, even-more narrative, style become yet more popular. The popularization of history through the mass media has thus presented an additional layer of engagement for historians. It has also presented quite specific challenges to university-based historians for whom academic history sits in uneasy proximity to popular culture. Popular history is market-driven and supported by an enlarged, history-conscious retired population who have particular interests in the past. Many of their needs are met by cable and satellite TV channels, the growth of recreational historical and genealogical research, and the heritage industry. Each of these areas has changed popular notions of what history is. In response, many historians have followed A.J.P. Taylor's lead by exploiting outlets of popular culture and so becoming household names. It may be no coincidence that, given the overly-schematic nature of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise, two of the most popular TV historians in Britain, Simon Schama and David Starkey, are not employed in British universities.<sup>16</sup>

If popular history poses a challenge to history, scholars in other disciplines also present challenges to historical enquiry of the sort imagined in universities for a century or more. Such challenges lie at the heart of many of the books considered here. We are all familiar now with the cultural and linguistic turn, and the more general banners of postmodernism, not least because so many scholars have assiduously ignored anything which might present history as something other than either a rough approximation of science or a process for creating a non-fictional likeness of the past. Historians of the old school are not exactly in a minority today, even if they sit alongside practitioners whose scholarship is quite different from their own. Blackledge, and more than half of the scholars collected together by Kramer and Maza, deal with this very issue: changing historiographical modes over time, in particular the emergence of a culture-dominated paradigm.

We can, of course, read these changes through the historians themselves. A.J.P. Taylor developed a wide portfolio of writings; not all of them by any means were academic books and articles. But Taylor was not exactly modish; he did not succumb to fashion; and his work really is not a prism through which to refract the changes of emphasis and method going on around him. He sought to improve his reading of issues such as the Habsburg Empire, though he wrote more widely than that; he worked prodigiously in archives; and he possessed gifts for summary and encapsulation beyond the abilities of many

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<sup>15</sup> This is one of the important themes of Tyrell's book (see ch. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Schama is based in the USA, which has no research measurement apparatus of this type, and Starkey gave up his university post to become a full-time media researcher and presenter.

around him. An enduring interest in his works derives from the brilliance of his style and a tendency to trenchant judgment. Taylor, as Michael Foot once noted, was connected to Macaulay and Carlyle as a great narrative historian — in this sense, in the current climate, his approach is ‘old fashioned’. Despite the postmodernist criticism that all history (indeed all writing) is narrative, as though this was so final and damning a criticism, story-telling narrative in the style of the great chronicles, which Simon Schama invoked in his study of the French Revolution,<sup>17</sup> and which Taylor embodied, remains immensely popular. But these narratives are not merely synonyms for fiction, as both Straub and Rösen amply demonstrate.

Wrigley’s justification for another biography of Taylor is modest: ‘perhaps in the centenary year of his birth, there is room for a third’ (vii). But do historians, however talented, deserve full-blown biographies; or are we better served by the contextual vignettes which help us to understand their political and social contexts without crowding us with every detail of their rather quirky middle-class northern-English lives? Upgrading the historian from the writer to centre stage raises an important issue about the nature of biography itself: when does a historian become historically important? Many historians have wrestled with the essential question of whether or not biography is history, or if it is something altogether different. Where social historians, such as Kershaw, have tackled much larger and more obviously important historical actors (in his case, Hitler), then there can be no questioning the need for a full biographical treatment. But how does a biographer portray the man and also the context in which he resided and worked? In the case of Hitler, even the most powerful and grotesque individual requires the social historian’s skill to illuminate the limitations which (as with Karl Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*) structural conditions place upon the individual, however prominent.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Taylor, Geoff Eley’s life and work demonstrates an acutely sensitive reflection of changing modes and emphases. His life of passionate thought about the subject has resulted in a remarkably energetic interaction with a great variety of the most current thinking in his discipline. Eley’s captivating *A Crooked Line* tells the story (partly in historiography, partly through his own intellectual genealogy) of the historian’s journey from frustration at the irrelevance of the Cambridge curriculum, and the discovery of Marxist British social history and German *alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life), to a gender-sensitive cultural history. *A Crooked Line* is a fascinating discussion of the recent historiography of social and cultural history, as well as a

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<sup>17</sup> As Schama wrote: ‘*Citizens* returns . . . to the form of the nineteenth-century chronicles, allowing different issues and interests to shape the flow of the story as they arise, year after year, month after month’: *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London 1989), xv.

<sup>18</sup> The introduction to the first volume of Kershaw’s two-volume biography, *Hitler, 1889–1933: Hubris* (London 1998), 1–10, explores the problems of uniting the individual and the structures of history in a thought-provoking way.



personal intellectual memoir. The book, which began life as a series of lectures, is not a work of pure theory, nor a simple survey of trends. Instead, it is a discussion of the points of confluence and departure between social and culture historians. For Eley, the disagreements are:

a journey through a politics of knowledge defined by certain primary and abiding questions in their various forms: of base and superstructure, being and consciousness, structure and agency, material life and subjectivity, the 'social' and the 'cultural' (x).

The unifying themes of his discussion are many; but the most important one is Eley himself. The journey from the social to the cultural is one he himself has taken over the past 30 or so years. To follow Eley on his journey is to walk in the footsteps of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Pogge Von Strandeman, Charles Tilly and a number of other leading scholars. Eley's interaction with many major names in social and cultural history shows that his own personal narrative is a developmental one, framed in his early captivation by Williams's brand of cultural Marxism, which explains ultimately why the journey from social to cultural forms was possible for someone professing commitment to Marxism.<sup>19</sup> For others formed of less flexible brands of Marxism, the journey *from* the social has been impossible. But Eley's intellectual development is not about changing spots or switching sides; it would be wrong to imply that. His natural aim has been to build upon old knowledge with new knowledge, in the sense once described so brilliantly by the late Peter Munz, whose definition of new knowledge was that which answers new questions *and* deals with old problems.<sup>20</sup>

Eley's approach explains the problems, old and new; therefore, his journey is developmental not destructive. His continual engagement with different, sometimes related, schools of thought, methods of enquiry, and theoretical perspectives is stylishly evoked. Those familiar with the British Marxism that first influenced the young Eley at Cambridge and Sussex (where many like him were taking interdisciplinary approaches to a then, in British terms, unique level of involvement) will find a lucid exposition on the value of that approach to him. Others, who know his early work alongside, and against, dominant approaches in German societal history, will again see how the layers of experience added to the work of the maturing scholar. Finally, there also resides an accommodation, first through gender, but later in a broader sense, with cultural forms of enquiry within a still essentially 'social' understanding of the past. The turn to culture, 'the linguistic turn', affected Eley early, just as it had another pioneer, Gareth Stedman Jones, whom Eley rightly recognizes as a

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<sup>19</sup> Blackledge, for example, describes David Blackbourn and Eley's *The Peculiarities of German History* (London 1984) as 'one of the most powerful restatements of the classic Marxist interpretation of the bourgeois revolution' (133).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge: Popper or Wittgenstein?* (London 1985).

catalyst in the turn from positivism to relativism, especially in social and labour history.<sup>21</sup>

A key theme crossing a number of these works is the role of the individual, not just as historical actor, and not merely as historian, but sometimes as a fusion of the two. The individual as the fulcrum of the historical narrative looms large in some of these works, and this leads us towards another development of the past few decades which presents further challenges to the traditional historical method. Since the 1960s, oral history has attracted a growing band of devotees. In recent times, the role of personal testimony and of human memory has added weight to preference for a non-textual form of historical (re)/(de)construction, gaining a particular traction from the huge growth of Holocaust Studies and, within it, the use of survivor testimony. Historians themselves have been placed in the spotlight in the search for historical truth; but what of the individual who lived through the past in question? Holocaust Studies appears to have had a particular influence in framing questions about the value of personal testimony for reasons which blend historical method, moral questioning and truth-seeking. However, in trying to balance explanation and morality the historian is faced with a seemingly impossible challenge. Rüsen captures this position when he argues that the essential problem of the Holocaust for historians is that 'it has often been characterised as a "black hole" . . . [which] occludes construction of a meaningful narrative connection between the time before and after it', and it is this which makes 'every attempt to apply comprehensive concepts of historical development fail' (189). As a recent review essay in this journal has demonstrated, historians have struggled to make sense of the Holocaust because of the depths of the evils which underpinned it.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, comparative studies of genocide have led to a wider questioning of traditional historical narratives, particularly in countries and regions colonized by white Europeans in the nineteenth century. The question of respect for the victims has sometimes overtaken the quest for historical knowledge; but how, in a case such as the Holocaust, could it be otherwise?

Agonizing about the state of the discipline has been part of the psychological condition of the academy since professionalization in the nineteenth century. In a book of considerable range and deep contemplation, which picks a parallel but not identical path to pioneering works by Novick, Kammen and Bodnar,<sup>23</sup> Ian Tyrell says that there has been a continual struggle within the

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**21** Gareth Stedman Jones, *The Languages of Class* (Cambridge 1981). The very use of the word 'language', and then its plural usage too, reflects the nature of the change from singular orthodoxy (as imagined) to varied and multiple explanations.

**22** Simone Gigliotti, 'History's Dark Sides: Writing Genocide and Post-Holocaust Obligations', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41(4) (2006), 767–78.

**23** Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York 1988); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York 1991); and John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1992). Other works tend to focus on specific issues, periods or events, e.g. The American Civil War.

historical community about the effects of professionalization and specialization. Although the United States is the canvas of this study, Tyrell's observations and conclusions have clear relevance in other national settings. When discussing the 'culture wars' of the 1990s, Tyrell demonstrates how large numbers of historians have assumed a liberal centrist position to criticize the tendencies of both 'left' and 'right' to specialize, although many commentators, despite defending free choice and supporting inclusive, singular national histories, appear rather right-wing in denouncing the fragmentation caused (as they see it) by gender, class and, latterly, ethnic histories.

An interesting distillation of the debates occurred during the early 1990s as a flurry of books appeared in recognition of the half-millennium since Columbus made landfall in the Americas. In some ways, the debate echoed unease in other places about the impact of the present upon the past. According to Tyrell, a debate gathered momentum when historians inserted 'invasion' in place of traditional terms such as 'colonization' or 'encounter'; a backlash resulted. American commentators continued to call for an essentialist American history which included black and white, and a multicultural approach more generally, but all under the umbrella of America's standard national narrative — a positivist story of 'fusion' in Israel Zangwill's 'melting pot' or of happy coexistence in the 'salad bowl' of ethnic variety. Historians who refused to present their work on Columbus, or slavery, or ethnicity, in this way were denounced as left-wingers. The New York-based art critic, the Australian Robert Hughes, whose comments against political correctness in American historiography are cited several times, reckoned, 'It's in the area of history that PC has scored its largest successes'.<sup>24</sup>

Within Tyrell's frame, this is a very American (or Americas') story. But similar debates exist elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Australia's 'history wars' evoked (and continue to foment) considerable debate about the effects of colonization upon Aboriginal peoples. Since Keith Windschuttle first took issue with Lyndall Ryan's figures for the death toll in Tasmania, there has been a protracted struggle.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the struggle is one for the hearts and minds of the Australian people. The defence of a multicultural history in Australia has been led by one of the country's most distinguished historians, Professor Stuart

<sup>24</sup> *Time*, 3 February 1992 (cited by Tyrell, 14).

<sup>25</sup> A further link here is Robert Hughes, quoted above. Hughes is an Australian who wrote a best-selling book, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787–1868* (London 1987), which marked the bicentenary of Australia's own 'invasion'. Hughes described the treatment of the Aborigines of Tasmania as a genocide, even though it is now acknowledged to have been less genocidal than the killings experienced elsewhere in the Australian territories.

<sup>26</sup> Windschuttle sprang to prominence with a cerebral but blistering attack on the influence of the linguistic turn: Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (Paddington, NSW 1994). This was followed by Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, vol. 1: *Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* (Paddington, NSW 2002). The book he had in his sights was Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (St Lucia, Qld 1981).

McIntyre, co-author of an important examination of the 'history wars', who championed the liberal-left cause in a debate with Windschuttle that was broadcast to the nation.<sup>27</sup> In the process, two opposing sides have emerged, each providing the other with a special moniker: 'black arm-band' versus 'white blindfold'.<sup>28</sup>

The problematic history of colonization which has rapt Australians over the past decade or so is not something which can be viewed in isolation. It connects quite clearly to the histories of other settler societies, including the United States, to New Zealand and Canada. However, a tendency towards multiculturalism has gone through many manifestations and certainly pre-dates the 1990s, as Donna Gabaccia shows in an interesting contribution to Kramer and Maza's collection.<sup>29</sup>

Where does all this discussion of politics, relativism, methodology and the nature of the discipline leave us now? If we return to the market-place, we can see, through popular consumption (whether in TV programmes, book sales or university enrolments), that history is healthy. It is when we look at the internal structures of the subject that we find most cause for concern. Post-modernism has failed to finish off the historians and their trade. Historians refuse to accept the role of fiction-writer ascribed to them by postmodernists, and the wider public (as well as politicians) may fight over what kind of history they want, but they do not question whether history exists. A poll of people on the street would yield a very clear picture of history as what it has always been: the human past and our attempts to write about it.

A naïve, (re)constructionist perspective such as this actually hides a series of deep fissures. The past hundred years have witnessed changes in what is fashionable in history, and areas of interest and specialisms have risen and fallen. There has been, for example, a severe undermining of social and economic history: the former is weakened in the face of cultural history and the latter has mostly evolved into something which fits best into the world's business schools. The flight from social interpretations, which are mirrored in the journeys of Eley's generation and which Blackledge rails against, has been a most serious result of the cultural turn. Universities have more or less abandoned their social and economic history departments; modularization has broken the past up into manageable chunks for the consumption of consumers rather than students; and the once seemingly unchallenged importance of structural explanations of 'big' issues has been replaced by a pick 'n' mix counter of bite-sized bits of culture. The question of what actually explains historical change seems less important in university curricula today than to

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<sup>27</sup> Stuart McIntyre and Keith Windschuttle, debate, broadcast 3 September 2003 [Transcript at: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/s938399.htm>; Video at: [http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/09/20030903ll\\_debate.ram](http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/09/20030903ll_debate.ram)].

<sup>28</sup> For a very useful overview see Patrick Brantlinger's review essay: "'Black Armband' versus 'White Blindfold' History in Australia", in *Victorian Studies*, 46(4) (November 2004), 655–74, and the titles cited there.

<sup>29</sup> Donna Gabaccia, 'The multicultural history of nations', 432–46.

expose students to colourful bits of the cultural superstructure. Overarching theories and explanations may now be denounced as positivist illusions, but many of the expressions of outrage once reserved for meta-historical discourses, such as Marxism (or positivism more generally), could surely apply just as easily to slippery concepts such as globalization and Diaspora.

History has always been a broad-church; moreover, its doors have continually been battered by those seeking a place inside. Never before has history's congregation been so large and varied. It is important to recognize, therefore, that those who question the very essence of the historian's craft threaten disempowerment for all those whom the changing approaches and methods of the twentieth century have sought to include. Meanwhile, the historian must remain true to the idea that evidence means something, and the theoretical works discussed here certainly aid that cause. We must also recognize that the linguistic turn has presented certain advantages. Historians have adjusted to it by largely abandoning positivist causal explanations and establishing distance from pure empiricism. They have also recognized the spectre of hubris lurking behind claims to absolute objectivity. By acknowledging these pressures, but maintaining a faith in the evidence, historians have constructed a more modest and conditional position.

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