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Can History Be True? A Review Essay

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Philosophy and theory of history is currently experiencing one of its periodic boom periods. For this we have largely to thank the challenge of what is variously referred to as the "linguistic tum", deconstructionism, post-structuralism, or the New Historicism (appropriately capitalised), all of which can be summed up in the term I shall mostly use, postmodemism. These primarily literary and cultural critiques have generated a renewed, at times acrimonious debate over the status of historical knowledge. The three books I shall examine in this essay do not just contribute in different ways to this debate: t\vo *(The Truth of History* by C Behan McCullagh[1] and Alun Munslow's *Deconstructing History)*[2] stake out diametrically opposed extreme positions. The third *(Real History* by Martin Bunz1)3 offers a tentative philosophical resolution of some of the issues that divide McCullagh and Munslow. Since each of the first t\vo rejects virtually everything the other stands for, rather than contrast them I prefer to deal with them in tum and try to show where I think each is wrong. I shall then tum briefly to Bunzl for some suggestions for a middle way.

In writing *The Truth of History,* McCullagh has, like certain others,[4] sought to slay the postmodernist dragon, rather than attempt to tame it. The very title is a slap in the face to postmodern historians like Munslow.[5] McCullagh is not writing about truth *in* history: he is out to establish nothing less than the truth *of* history. In doing so, however, he has written a book that has a curiously old fashioned flavour about it. I mean this in an only partly pejorative sense. McCullagh writes clearly and simply: there is a straightforwardness about his style, which is mercifully free of jargon. But there is a certain ponderous and dogged quality too. Truth is important

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1 London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

2 London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

3 Subtitled *Reflections on Historical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

4 For example, Keith Windshuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is being Murdered by Literary Cn·tics and Social Theorists* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 1994).

5 Whose comment on the title of Joyce Appleby, Lyn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), is that it suggests the authors "are mustering an arbitrarily contextualised, constructed and historicised narrative which imposes a particular set of signifying relationships on the past". Of course, it all depends on how "history" in the title is understood - as the past or as the discipline - though this does not seem to have occurred to Munslow.

for McCullagh; so is History. He is prepared to explain things patiently for those who wilfully refuse to recognise that one can be found in the other. One senses a thoughtful mind, but one with strong convictions not easily shaken. What gives the book its old fashioned feel are the way it echoes earlier debates (for example, on historical explanation which McCullagh takes up again); its mode of philosophising (this is essentially an exercise in analytical philosophy of history); and the way it avoids engaging postmodernism head on (Foucault's name does not appear in either the philosophical and reflective, or the historical sections into which the bibliography is divided).

McCullagh mounts his defence of what is essentially a realist-empiricist, almost Rankean view of history.[6] l'or McCullagh the historian first critically examines the evidence, and from it formulates true statements about a past that not just existed, but can be known. One has little sense in this book of historical knowledge as the product of a continuing discourse about the past: historiography itself seems to possess no historical dimension. Indeed, one has very little sense that postmodernism poses any real challenge to "established" historical practice. McCullagh is not interested in any relationship there might be between historiography and power, or in the sociology of historical knowledge. His is a benign view of the historian as detached intellectual in a world that accords her both professional space and respect - and even that is rather old fashioned.

McCullagh identifies *the* two crucial issues facing philosophers of history today as "the question of the truth and objectivity of history" and "the reality and importance of social structures and general processes of social change" (p. 1). While the latter touches mainly on explanation, it is the former that is more a matter of current debate, and on which I shall focus. Overall McCullagh's argument is close-knit and sustained, with few diversions and not too much repetition. A strength of the book is that frequent reference is made to historiographical examples to drive home points McCullagh wants to make.

McCullagh begins by establishing the epistemological basis for the truth and fairness of historical descriptions and interpretations, whether these be of events, the lives of individuals, or societies, and goes on to argue for the truth claims of historical generalisations and classifications, even metaphorical ones, in the face of three lines of attack: the postmodern argument that the conventional nature of language undercuts any confidence we might have that historical descriptions can refer unambiguously to past reality; that the cultural prejudices and ideological commitments of the historian can never be eliminated; and that rhetorical expression, particularly the use of metaphor, cannot by its nature be judged true or false. In doing so, McCullagh carries the argument inside the very fortifications of the postmodernist camp by arguing both that historians can recover the true meaning of historical texts, whether "basic" or "secondary", and that even "literary interpretations" of history (as tragedy, romance, etc.) can still be objective.

6 There is no indication that McCullagh has revised the defence of empiricism he offered in *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 1-8.

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McCullagh is prepared to concede that a number of "constraints" do influence historical writing, including the historian's "conceptual framework" (world-view), cultural beliefs, personal interests and values, and the conventions demanded by "professionals in the field" (p. 4). To this extent history is subjective to a degree, but McCullagh denies this is enough to invalidate claims to either the truth of historical descriptions, or the objectivity of historical judgements (p. 35). Moreover, he is not prepared to concede to the postmodernists that significant constraints are imposed by language itself or by the use of literary devices to present historical knowledge to the reader, even though these form the core of the postmodernist critique.

The basis on which McCullagh mounts his defence of the truth of history as he sees it is what he calls his "correlation" theory of truth. Here he makes an encouraging start. McCullagh concedes that there are problems with the nai've realist correspondence theory of truth that simply accepts that our descriptions of the world unproblematically mirror reality. Our perceptions, he admits, provide us with information about the world that is unavoidably influenced by the above "constraints": we can have no unmediated access to a reality free of such influences. But for McCullagh this does not mean that we are thereby forced to fall back on a coherence theory in the light of which descriptions remain in some sense arbitrary constructs depending for their validity on a prior system of beliefs (world-view, Collingwood's absolute presuppositions) not grounded in any necessary relationship to reality.

McCullagh does admit that the truth of any description of the world "depends upon the truth of the whole theory of the world of which it is a part" (p. 18), but he maintains that since any description of the world carries with it testable implications, we can, through action and observation, subject the "whole theory" to critical test. If the theory survives such testing, we can say that our description of the world correlates in some essential functional way with the world as it is. We can, in other words, take it that the world in reality has features that are the counterparts of our descriptions of them. In McCullagh's words, we can take it that "all our possible experiences of the world art: such as they would be if the world had those features we attribute to it" (p. 19). It is not that our descriptions mirror reality, but that they are such that we can act upon them as if the world they describe is as they describe it in some essential correlative way. And that is the extent to which we may be confident that our descriptions are true: not that they correspond precisely with the way the world is, but that they correlate to a high degree with the way the world works when we interact with it. As McCullagh says, there is a correlation "between the causal processes at work in the world which can produce human perceptions of it, and the theory which implies such perceptual experiences. The correlation is between their functions, if not their content"(p. 19).[7]

[7] In a later definition of correlation theory, McCullagh makes no mention of ftmctional equivalence. He characterises correlation theory as stating that "a description of the world is trne if it is part of a coherent account of the world, and if the observation statements implied by that account could be confirmed by people of the appropriate culture and with the appropriate interests" (p. 307).

Now this amounts to an experiential, instrumentalist, pragmatic theory of truth that goes beyond suggestions that coherence in some way "yields correspondence".[8] It sits well with our intuitive conviction that our perceptions do give us a pretty good idea of how the world is. Moreover, though McCullagh does not mention it, there are good evolutionary grounds for believing that some such close correlation holds, otherwise we would not have survived as a species. So from the point of view of common sense and experimental science, McCullagh's correlation theory of truth looks promising. Such a theory accords well with the way science gains knowledge about the world, for it entails a dynamic process of testing over time which conceives of truth as something scientists, as a professional body, work towards through interacting with the world. Such a theory is thus of particular interest for historians, providing both the processual and consensual dimensions are brought out in applying such a correlation theory of truth to those present aspects of the world that constitute historical evidence. Some of this comes through in McCullagh's subsequent discussion, but despite the processual dimension implied by testability (through interaction with the world), McCullagh's conception of truth remains essentially static: he wants to show how correlations can be established that hold across time, rather than how they are established through time. Ultimately his is a Platonic notion of truth, not a Socratic dialectical understanding.

As for rationally based consensus on the part of professional historians, McCullagh rejects this entirely as a basis for truth claims on the grounds that it confuses "what warrants us thinking an historical description true, and what is meant by saying it is true" (p. 55). Descriptions of past events could, he says, "be true by chance, without any rational consensus" (p. 55). Well, yes, but this is beside the point as no-one would ever know that they were true. McCullagh goes on to state that "The truth of historical descriptions does not lie in agreement about [consensus over] their assertibility, but depends upon whether the world was as they describe it" (p. 55). But how would we ever know that the world was as we now describe it? It does not help for McCullagh to state that: "To call a statement about the world true means that if someone were in the relevant position, they could perceive the events it describes, or perceive evidence from which the events could be inferred" (p. 56). This may work for simple observation statements, but it will not do for interpretive descriptions of complex historical events where no-one could ever have been in a position to observe what was going on simultaneously in numerous different situations. That is why historians interpret events differently from any contemporary observer of them.

If McCullagh is unbending in his Platonic view of truth, he is equally so in his transparent referential view of language. For McCullagh language "can successfully refer to and describe the world" (p. 42), and that's an end to it. The question is, however, whether it can equally successfully refer to and describe a world (the past) that no longer exists. On this McCullagh states:

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8 This is Donald Davidson's solution to the correspondence-coherence conundrum in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", in Ernest LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 307, quoted by Mccullagh, p. 47.

> Sentences about the past mean, among other things, that there was something such that, if you had been there to perceive it, you would have had experiences of certain kinds. So when historians refer to past events, they are not merely expressing a concept. They are telling us something about the real world. Historical descriptions are true if it is the case that, had anyone been present, then things in the world would have produced the perceptions which the sentences imply (p. 39).

This statement raises far more questions than it answers, however. As I have already noted, no-one could have had experiences described by many of the sentences historians construct. Moreover, such sentences are not telling us about the real world as **it** presently exists, but about a past world we believe to have once been real. More to the point, if the truth claims of historical descriptions rest on the presence of hypothetical observers, then they can only be hypothetical. And this is what I would maintain. Even a simple observation statement inferred from an historical record left by an actual witness remains hypothetical (the account could be inaccurate or biased), or, which amounts to the same thing, only true within a certain probability (depending on how much credence we give the witness). McCullagh concedes that even "well-supported conclusions about the past" may be false, but argues that "[i]t is not irrational to believe certain things true of a subject just because there is a slight chance that those beliefs are false" (p. 61).

It turns out, however, that McCullagh is interested only in defending a constricted notion of truth. In his introductory chapter he states that "although historical conclusions are always fallible, when they are well supported by evidence they deserve to be believed very probably true, that is, as telling us *something* true about the world" (p. 5, italics added). Moreover he argues that there can be more than one "true characterization" of an historical event or period, and that the "variety of historical interpretations does not exclude the possibility of their truth" (p. 2). While the former claim does not discount the possibility that some "historical conclusion" (description, interpretation) is true (or false) in *toto,* it does suggest that historical truth, in McCullagh's view, can be partial, even divisible in some way. The latter claim appears to go a step further to concede that truth is perspectival. It even implies tha·t truth as presented in the form of any particular interpretation can legitimately, indeed must, depend on the purpose of the historian. I doubt that McCullagh means to imply all this, but what seems quite clear is that he wants to avoid defending an absolute sense of historical truth. He even goes so far as to make the point that: "Historical descriptions, be they singular, general or causal, are all *meant* to be true " (p. 57, emphasis added). This would appear to open the way to an assessment of truth claims by reference to methodological practice and professional consensus, but as already noted, McCullagh declines to go down that route.

Instead McCullagh fleshes out his case for the truth of historical descriptions with the notion of fairness. By a fair description he means one that is not misleading, one that is balanced and reliable in that it provides all the relevant information about a person, or event, or situation necessary for the reader to gain an adequately informed understanding. Fair descriptions are not minimal ones, but they are not necessarily comprehensive ones either. But who decides if a description is fair? Fair descriptions are surely decided on epistemic criteria adhered to by the profession, which assesses

them critically in retrospect. Similar criteria would apply to both singular and general descriptions, which, McCullagh says, must generalise fairly in terms of the cases they cover. Historians who do all this produce true and fair historical accounts. And this can be, and has been, done by every well-trained historian. So McCullagh's notion of truth in history applies essentially to what individual historians do, rather than to a process over time to which individual historians contribute.

Even when McCullagh does acknowledge that historical accounts may be "abandoned" for "more accurate" ones (for example, when based on "inappropriate" preconceptions, that is, theories or models), he fails to see any epistemological problem with this. Some new general interpretation \vill be forthcoming which, if it fits the facts, "will not be misleading, indeed [it] will provide a true description..." (p. 87). So it is with different competing accounts of the same event (McCullagh cites interpretations of the French revolution). Not only can all (or most, or many) be true, but McCullagh is prepared to claim that "historians' preconceptions are not allowed to distort descriptions of past societies" (p. 87). Different ways of describing societies simply '·suit different cognitive interests" of historians (p. 103). They do not stir any epistemological doubts, because once those cognitive interests have led historians to adopt some "general model" of (theoretical approach to) the society they are studying "then they are anxious to produce a true and fair description of it" (p. 106). And so, of course, by and large they do. The only problem McCullagh can see might arise is when "a whole community of scholars shares a particular bias" which leads them to be unfair - like leaving out all reference to indigenous peoples when writing the histories of settler societies; or leaving out women. "Communal bias is the most difficult to guard against" (p. 110), McCullagh concedes, but even this does not apparently prevent historians communicating some kind of truth.

One could go on in this vein. For McCullagh, although historians may offer quite different interpretations of the meaning of texts, "[t]his does not mean ... that the various interpretations cannot all be true" (p. 155). All that is required is that each fulfils certain truth conditions and provides a "fair" reading. Turning to broader historical interpretations, all Hayden White's concerns over the way these are prefigured in narrative by the historian's choice of rhetorical tropes can be dismissed, for even if historians do make use of figures of speech, such as metaphor, "it remains the case that their interpretation can be true or false, fair or unfair" (p. 128). Only on occasions does McCullagh seem briefly to backpedal. For instance, when he admits that "interpretive histories are at least to some degree subjective with respect to values" (p. 130), for "biased historians may not make sound judgements about the truth, fairness or goodness of their interpretations"(p. 131, italics added). (Here a new criterion is arbitrarily inserted, which is not mentioned elsewhere.) But all is not lost, for their colleagues will generally point out any prejudices!

When McCullagh turns to explanation the same strengths and weaknesses are evident as in his analysis of interpretation. The writing is clear and fluent; the argument disregards too much criticism of the position he adopts; and there is

inadeguate recognition of problems posed by the replacement of one apparently objective explanation by another. That is, there is inadequate recognition that investigating the past is a process that goes on over time. One would have thought that such recognition might have been forthcoming in McCullagh's discussion of the explanation of social change, but no. His focus is on whether search for a general theory of social change should be abandoned (he thinks it should not be), not on how new theoretical insights may lead to provision of more sophisticated accounts (p. 287).

In summary, McCullagh has written a book that, far from bridging the divide he regrets has opened up in the current debate over the status of historical knowledge, will act as a red rag to the postmodern bull. Too much pertinent criticism is just swept aside. And yet his pragmatic correlation theory of truth could, if differently applied, offer real prospects for a more sophisticated analysis of where history now stands, one that does more than reiterate support for an outmoded belief in an unproblematical view of historical truth and objectivity.

Alun Munslow was hardly in a position to respond to *The Truth of History,* but he does take issue with the empiricism of McCullagh's earlier work.[9] Otherwise there seems to be no point of contact between their two books, with the exception that both claim to believe that a real past once existed. But while McCullagh believes historians can, through inference from evidence, gain true knowledge about that past, Munslow believes they cannot - except in the uninteresting form of singular statements of fact - Roosevelt was lame; the Australian states federated in 1901. Once such statements are linked together in the form of narrative accounts, all referentiality to any real past is lost.

The first thing to be noted about *Deconstructing History* is that it is not about how one goes about deconstructing history. It is instead a polemical contribution to a debate in which Munslow is determined to reject any compromise.[10] Munslow, like McCullagh, is a true believer, exhibiting all the fervour of a convert. But while McCullagh argues his case, Munslow has the true believer's touching faith in his chosen luminaries in the postmodern crusade - namely Foucault and Hayden White. Chapters are devoted to each (pun intended), but only after five chapters setting out in appropriately dichotomous terms what Munslow evidently sees as a struggle for the very soul of history, an order that is illogical, for Munslow makes frequent reference to both his authorities well before outlining their ideas.[11]

Munslow begins with a chapter demonstrating how a sequence of intellectual movements (structuralism, post-structuralism, etc.) have culminated in what he calls deconstructionist history - in contrast to reconstructionist and constructionist history, both of which are condemned as hopelessly wrong-headed. (I shall come back to these in a moment.) He then presents four chapters, the first two of which

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9 In *Justifying Historical Descriptions.*

lO As, for example, suggested by Gabrielle M. Spiegel in "History and Post-Modernism IV", *Past and Present* no. 135 (1992), pp. 194-208.

11 Frequent reference is made, for example, to tropes as structuring or prefiguring historical narratives, but how this happens is not spelled out until p. 158.

discuss history as reconstruction/construction and as deconstruction, while the second two tell us what is wrong with each. Each is divided into four parts examining the categories of epistemology, evidence, theory, and narrative. Even the chapters on Foucault and White are divided in the same way, as is the concluding chapter. Now in the hands of anyone but a very careful writer, such a structure is almost guaranteed to ensure maximum repetition - and Munslow is not a careful writer. Moreover he makes very little attempt to stick to his categories.

In fact for someone who claims to have taken the "linguistic tum" to heart, Munslow is unforgivably sloppy in both language and argument. One could give numerous examples: two must suffice, both taken from the concluding chapter where one might expect particular care to have been taken. Munslow says "... historical understanding is as much the product of literary artifice as it is a knowable historical reality" (p. 176). But it is nonsense to say that historical understanding is a knowable historical reality. What Munslow means is that historical understanding is as much the product of literary artifice as it is *of knowledge of* a knowable historical reality, stylistically awkward though this is. Two pages on he tells us "The problem is to warn against the belief that we can truly know the reality of the past through its textual representation". But warning is not a problem, though how actually to do it might be. It would certainly be a problem for postmodernists if they all couched their warnings as ineptly as does Munslow.[12]

Munslow's style is both combative and uncompromising, while his arguments are repetitively *ad hominem,* rambling and diffuse. Opponents and allies alike are relentlessly categorised, as "hardened" (unreconstructed) reconstructionists, "sociologically inspired" constructionists and postmodern deconstructionists (pp. 18-19), as pro-narrativists and anti-narrativists (p. 68), as impositionalists, and contextualists, and empiricists (all in a derogatory sense).[13] Most of those referred to are unnecessarily identified - unless Munslow wrote *Deconstructing History* to become a popular undergraduate text. Louis Althusser is glossed as "Algerian Marxist", Giambattista Vico as "Genoese historian-philosopher", and Elizabeth Tonkin as "Africanist historian" to take but three examples (pp. 136, 137, 166). All are either demons (Geoffrey Elton is particularly demonic; so too is McCullagh) or angels (Foucault and White share harps, with David Harlan, F. R. Ankersmit and Joan W. Scott also among tLe elect).

As for Munslow's style of argument, this consists in marshalling quotations from the works of historians and philosophers of history on both sides of the rec nstructionist/constructionist-deconstructionist divide and marching them out agamst each other to do battle, in confusing and repetitive forays. But not for Munslow_ any resolution other than victory for deconstructionism. The thoughtful compromises advanced by Appleby, Hunt and Jacob,[14] Gabrielle Spiegel,[15] or

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Some m?y be uncomfortable m the pigeonhole to which they have been assigned. Jorn Riise fo e ampl , sits oddlym e deco_ns ctionist camp given his constructionist views on theon, ii: ; ry,)m pp. clh5a-4p7t er2 of his *Studies m Metahistory* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research coJicil,

[14] In *Telling the Truth About History.*

David Carroll[16] are rejected and their authors denounced as "practical realists", or even worse "moderate reconstructionists" (pp. 38, 94).[17] Yet they, like many other historians, have already appropriated much of what is intelligible and applicable in postmodernism and the deconstructionist approach to the writing of history. For Munslow, however, that is not enough. Spiegel is condemned for having an "undiminished reconstructionist urge" and of displaying an "embryonic deconstructive consciousness" (p. 107). And this sort of language goes on throughout the whole book.

But let us turn to more substantive matters, and try to sort out what it is Munslow is trying to say (one can hardly say "prove"). I will do this by taking Munslow's own categories. But first he distinctions he wants to draw between his three approaches to history are as follows. Reconstructionist (contextualist) history seeks to reconstruct the past as it actually happened, and believes this is possible because the past **was real** and language is transparent. Source criticism (Munslow insists on referring to it slightingly as *Quellenkritik)* is all that is necessary for historians to put together true accounts of the past. Constructionist history, by contrast, attempts to test sociological laws against historical evidence as, notoriously, Marxist historians do. It shares with reconstructionist history acceptance of historical realism and linguistic referentiality, but what Munslow particularly objects to is the idea that hypothetical constructionist historical accounts based on pre-conceived explanatory theories could in any way be verified by reference to historical evidence. Deconstructionist history, by contrast, embraces radical relativism and accepts the opaque reflexivity of language. Historical meaning derives not from access to a real past, or from the structure of theory, but from the relationship between the content and the literary form of historical narrative. As Munslow puts it:

> Deconstructionist historians tend to view history and the past as a complex series of literary products that derive their chains of meaning(s) or significations from the nature of narrative structure (or forms of representation) as much as from other culturally provided ideological factors (p. 19).

Munslow wants to provide some kind of epistemological grounding for deconstructionist history by contrasting it with the realism and empiricism of its opponents. But is so doing he is really flogging a dead horse, for as Munslow himself remarks, "[n]o reasonable historian today, or quite possibly ever has claimed ... that empiricism is a system that guarantees objective discovery of truth" (p. 82). Yet Munslow makes no attempt to argue for the ontological and epistemological primacy of language and texts. Instead he continues his polemical way, berating mainstream historians for maintaining "the fiction of history as non-fiction" and for failing to construe history as "an aesthetic and poetic act". This, according to

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15 So Spiegel can conclude: "In the final analysis, what is the past but a once material existence, now silenced, extant only as a sign and as sign drawing to itself chains of conflicting interpretations that hover over its absent presence and compete for possession of the relics, seeking to inscribe traces of significance upon the bo-.iies of the dead?". "History and Post-Modernism IV", p. 208.

16 ht his "Poetics, Theory, and the Defence of History", *Clio* 22 (1993), pp. 273-89.

17 Munslow admits, however, that practical realist historians constitute "that majority of practising historians existing between the two extremes" (p. 45).

Munslow, "generates a particular kind of *historical* truth rather than *the* truth" (p. 101, author's italics). Munslow does not spell out what his kind of historical truth is, though he does maintain that "there is always more than a single truth" (p. 102).

Despite seven sections on epistemology, Munslow's conception of historical truth remains opaque. Deconstructive epistemology, he says, "recognizes the existence of the reality-effect [produced by texts masquerading as true] rather than the fantasy notion of historical truth" (p. 166). Here Munslow is presumably referring to all historical truth claims of mainstream historians, whose work can never produce more than "reality-effects". But in that case why write history even in the name of seeking truth, if no such thing is possible? History, Munslow tells us, "can be no more, nor less [why not?] than a representation of pastness" (p. 178). But any good historical novel can produce as much. The only conclusion to draw from Munslow's epistemological meanderings seems to be the Derridian position that the only reality is language, spoken and written, and that history and fiction are indistinguishable as both are nothing but texts[18] - even though he claims at one point that "deconstructionist history is not a fictional narrative" (p. 70).

So what then is the use of evidence? Certainly not to provide an unencumbered vision of the past. As all evidence is in the fonn of texts (even material evidence must be so read), and as Munslow is adamant that we can never divine the author's intention in producing any text (linguistic or material) - he tells us repeatedly that the author is dead - all we can hope to do, if we do deconstructionist history, is to throw texts together in the hope that somewhere in the intertextual spaces so created we can invent a "representation of pastness". This is as far as I can make out Munslow's position, for as always one must disinter his own views from those which he quotes from his postmodern gurus.

I base this conclusion as to Munslow's own understanding of deconstructionist history on his commendation of David Harlan as offering "what is the clearest of statements" in defence of it (p. 108). After advising intellectual historians that "legitimate history" based upon an agreed-upon methodology is nothing but a chimera, Harlan goes on to claim that intellectual history

> is concerned not with dead authors, but with living books, not with a return of earlier writers to their historical contexts but with a reading of historical works in new and unexpected contexts, not with reconstructing the past but with providing the critical medium in which valuable works from the past might survive their past - might *survive* their past in order to tell us about our present. For only through such telling can we ever hope to see ourselves and out history anew.19

This is the statement of which Munslow heartily approves.

Now as I read Harlan, what he is saying is that the only context in which we can read past texts is our present context, never the context in which they were written.

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18 Munslow sees the history text as "more real than the past itself' (not in the obvious sense that this is true), and "history in its narrative fonn" as "more real than the reality [sic]" (p. 178) - whatever that means.

19 David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature" *American Historical Review* 94 (1989), p. 609.

So we should read texts written in whatever unknowable past just for what they can say to us about the present. We can do this critically, but only in terms of textual comparisons in whose intertextual spaces interesting ideas may arise. One can see what Harlan wants to say. It is an approach that sits well with the New Historicism, and New Historicism is attractive for Munslow since it deals with "history emptied of its association with past reality" (p. 31).

Here lies the problem. Munslow remarks that the study of history (he must mean historiography) "usually tells us as much about the historian's constructive narrative in the here and now as it does about past reality" (p. 108) But here the measure of Munslow's confusion becomes evident. For what does he mean by "as much"? A text read in the "here and n0w" thereby survives its past (which is the sense in which Harlan wants to rescue his historical texts), but it can tell us nothing about "past reality". Munslow cannot have it both ways. If the association with past reality is "empty", then all we can do with history texts is juxtapose them with some other texts and see what creative ideas spring to mind that might apply to the present. And any texts will do. We can read E. P. Thompson in relation to Umberto Eco and Bruce Chatwin. What we cannot do, if Munslow were prepared to follow his own logic, is read Thompson in the expectation of learning anything about the rise of the English working class or the state of England in 1968 - in the case of the former because of radical doubt that any of Thompson's research methods are able to tell us anything about the past, and in the case of the latter because none of our own can.

So what are we left with? It would appear pointless for the deconstructionist historian to worry with the drudgery of archival work, for the only "evidence" worthy of imaginative consideration presumably comprises past texts whose tropic structures and associated meanings can be compared with later historical narratives. This would allow full rein for literary theory while eliminating awkward considerations touching on truth and reality. Were deconstructionist historical texts increasingly to replace tho$e written in the belief at least that they were saying something about past reality, however, the whole linguistic game in the end would loose all touch with any pas conceded once to have been real.

What this kind of "history" might do for the present is anyone's guess, but it surely would put in jeopardy any relation between knowledge and power. For much of the efficacy of history in empowering marginalised groups previously ignored comes from recognition of the truth that in the past they were deliberately excluded. **But** curiously, given Munslow's veneration of Foucault, the relation between deconstructionist history and power is never spelled out.

When he turns to theory used to construct the past, Munslow is keen to counter any claim that history could in any way be scientific. Along with Marxism, the *Anna/es* school is a particular target. Its scientific pretensions are disposed of, however, by pointing out that even its founders recognised that history "could never be based on first-hand experience, observation or experiment, since there was no Cartesian calculus or geometry in historical knowledge" (p. 48). Febvre and Bloch

would turn in their graves! This ludicrous statement is not the only place where Munslow demonstrates his almost total ignorance of science.[20]

The sections on theory are particularly vacuous and repetitive, mostly consisting of criticism of the "impositionalisf' use of any theory in history. No deconstructionist use of theory is elaborated, not even literary theory. Only Foucault's theory of epistemes is taken seriously. This, according to Munslow, "is likely to have the greatest resonance for constructionist historians" (p. 130), but actually "radically departs from traditional constructionist stage-theory history [by which I take it he means Marxism]" because of its "non-constructionist assumption that the four epistemes do not grow organically out of each other ... [but] ... spontaneously appear ..." (p. 131). Only Foucault, apparently, has been able to come up with a non-constructionist (non-theoretical) construction (theory) of history acceptable to deconstructionists.[21] We are no more enlightened by Munslow's conclusions on theory, which consist of a three page wander from Carr's "unconvincing view" that historians write history according to the "dictates" of the evidence (yet again), to narrative, and on to Foucault, White and even Vico - all without clarifying any deconstructionist position.

On narrative, as might be expected, Munslow has something more sensible to say. He points to the "unavoidable" way historians impose themselves on the past by inventing narratives to try to explain or interpret it, and warns that instead of thinking narratives could provide true accounts, we should view them "as propositions [sic] about how we *might* represent a past reality, suggestions of *possible* correspondences rather than *the* correspondence" (p. 69, author's italics). Good narratives will be coherent and sensible (how determined, Munslow does not say), but will not be "epistemologically self-assured" since good deconstructionist history is "self-reflexive enough to acknowledge its limits" (p. 70).

At the same time, Munslow argues that narratives are both explanatory and interpretive, and that they give meaning to the individual statements of fact that they include (rather than facts determining the kind of narrative that is told about them). Despite their fictive nature, Munslow also plays around with the idea that historical narratives might reflect some narrative structure or emplotment characterising the past itself - though mostly in the form of rhetorical questions (e.g., on p. 175).[22]

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[20] A wonderful example of Munslow's muddled w1derstanding of philosophy of science occurs on p. 77 where he says: "Thomas Kuhn, arguing in favour of so-called paradigmatic shifts whereby science suddenly challenged and transformed its dominant theoretical constructs, seemed to be opening up scientific proof to the influence of social forces. This apparent ending of objective science was denied by Karl Poprer, who argued that he was no positivist because tmth in science could be grasped only through non-falsifiable logical processes which might yield the covering laws of historical constructionisrn rather than the messiness of empiricism."

[21] Munslow says: "unlike most historians who view change over time as the linear or diachronic wlfolding of a coherent narrative of interconnected process [which seems eminently reasonable], Foucault views it [i.e., change over time] as a network or synchronic structure of power relationships ... "(p. 173). Really?

[22] Munslow often leaves points hanging, and just passes on to the next comment by some presumed "authority"; e.g., pp. 96 and 97, where no response is given to constructionist criticism, and even White is left undefended.

No sustained examination of this possibility is essayed, however, and no indication given of how any such structure in the past might be discovered (given Munslow's view of evidence). The only clue he provides is when he states that "historical narratives are representations of cultural memories rather than mimes. Historical interpretation is nothing more than a re-presentation of those memories" (p. 114). So the structure of the narrative may re-present the structure of such memories (Munslow uses the term "match", p. 175). But how could these memories be captured?

Munslow believes that constructing historical narratives is the only valid way of writing history, even though this is wilfully to ignore all structuralist history. His purpose, of course, is to emphasise the common textual form of history and literature as fictional constn.cts, and to separate history as he wants to define it from any way of writing about the past that might situate history closer to science and thus further from literature. This is why constructionist (theoretical) history is so adamantly rejected. Non-narrative forms of history are condemned for "aping" science for, as Munslow triumphantly maintains, in the end they too are unable to "escape the conventional devices of literature" (p. l09).

As a defence of the postmodern approach to history, *Deconstructing History* is a disaster. This is partly due to the structure and style of argument, and because of Munslow's inept use oflanguage[23] (where was his editor?) and lack of philosophical rigour.[24] But it is also because Munslow is uninterested in methodology. The result is a frustratingly inadequate study. If this were the best postmodemism could provide by way of arguments for a new kind of history, the orthodox position would have little to fear.

It would be a mistake, however, not to take the postmodernist critique of history seriously. One who does so, though the term does not show up in his index, is Martin Bunzl in *Real History.* (He does, however, engage with post-structuralism, especially with Foucault.) What Bunzl sets out to do is to establish realism as a reasonable philosophical basis on which to assume objectivity in history as a methodological principle; that is, as a basis for and outcome of historical practice.

Bunzl begins by separating realism from any necessary dependency on a correspondence theory of truth. That is not too contentious, but it does seem to weight any debate between realism and anti-realism against the realists. He then goes on to argue that "realism is properly understood as a style of reasoning that only engages in certain kinds of situations" (p. 20). But then so too, of course, is anti-realism. What good reason do we have for preferring one (with its external reference) over the other (depending as it does only on internal coherence)?

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23 Not just his polemicism. Keith Jenkins, despite his equally polemical approach and colourful language, is a model of clarity compared with Munslow. See *Re-thinking History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); and *On "What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

24 Particularly annoying are frequent contradictions (or apparent contradictions, for Munslow is often ambivalent about where he himself stands when citing other authors). Thus, for example, at one point Munslow will tell us that deconstructionism embraces radical relativism; at another that the relativism of deconstructionist history "remains limited by the nature of the evidence" (p. 74).

Here Bunzl takes his lead from philosophy of science, not as McCullagh, and even less Munslow, might understand it, but as "an historical entity, growing and changing under various internal and external pressures".[25] Such a characterisation leads philosophers of science like Arthur Fine to avoid labelling science either realist or instrumentalist (anti-realist), for as practice its outcomes do not depend on either a notion of truth that assumes the existence of a real world or of one that assumes we can only have instrumental interaction with a world whose reality we can never know. In certain situations a realist notion will assist the process; in others an instrumentalist one.

Bunzl, however, wants to go further. He too focuses on historical practices (methodology), and asks "what are the minimum conditions of adequacy needed if we are to make sense of them?" Note that he is not asking about what any individual historian does. Bunzl is interested in history in the way Fine is interested in science, as "an historical entity, growing and changing under various internal and external pressures". Conceived in this way, an adequate understanding of history as practice would require us to take into account at least three conditions: one is that disagreement occurs among historians (so at least there must be some common object to disagree about!); a second is that historians want to capture possibilities of experience in the past that present experience alerts them to (that is, they want to escape the horizon of the present - or at least the great majority do, a few extreme postmodernists like Munslow perhaps excluded); and a third is that to take "the social construction of our lives" seriously means recognising its causal implications - and to theorise this reveals "our realist commitments" (pp. 23-25).

Bunzl goes on to discuss the nature of historical facts, arguing that two principles of the Rankean conception of the past - its fixity, and the possibility of providing complete accounts of it - must be relinquished. Nevertheless, Bunzl maintains, some facts about the past are fixed and complete, in the sense that no subsequent event will add to them (in the way that Isaac Newton's birth in 1642 could be added to after 1687 by describing the child as the author of the *Principia).* But there is a set of facts about the past that do not change, and those are "facts about the interpretations of historical actions" (p. 42). Of course it is precisely this set of facts that postmodernists argue historians are not in a position to determine.

Bunzl's response to the postmodernist argument that historians cannot reach beyond language to reveal the intentions of the authors of texts is to turn again to practice. Taking the work of Joan Scott as a case study, Bunzl points out that while strictly speaking terms like "gender" and "power" can never carry transhistorical connotations, yet historians continue to use them in non-historically localised ways. Or to put it another way, while we can deconstruct the meaning of such terms in particular historical contexts, in practice we make use of them to refer to historically changing entities - and we know very well to what they refer. This use of language

[25] A. Fine, "Unnatural Attitudes: Realist and Instrumentalist Attaclunents to Science", *Mind* 95 (1986), p. 172.

is both instrumental and pragmatic. Historians do understand each other. We are not temporally trapped in the languages we use.

But if the linguistic challenge to history can be turned aside, what of the theoretical challenge? Here Bunzl examines why Foucauldian theory has not, by and large, been appropriated by historians. Bunzl argues that it is not Foucault's presentism that is the problem, but "his explicit disavowal of the importance of causal determinations in general and agency in particular" (p. 57). Foucault's approach to the past has not been adopted by historians because his methodology conflicts radically with the practice of history, which seeks causal connections (cf. the third condition of adequacy above).

Bunzl has some "concluding worries", but these are largely philosophical. What is important for the debate over the status of historical knowledge is that Bunzl has gone a long way towards establishing a reasoned basis for the "practical realism" that even Munslow grudgingly admits now constitutes the philosophy and practice of most historians. And he has done so on three very important bases: by looking to the philosophy of science rather than to literary theory for ways to think about history; by focusing on what it is that historians actually do (practice, methodology); and by conceiving of history, like science, as itself an evolving historical entity to which successive generations of historians make their various contributions.

I believe these three principles offer a better basis on which to establish the epistemological foundations of history as a discipline than anything offered by either a modified empiricism or deconstructionism. These I develop in a forthcoming article. What I propose is a conception of history as an ongoing cognitive discourse that seeks ever more sophisticated understanding of complex past events, human action and social change in relationship to a changing present. It is not the once real past that changes, but the present. So history as the discourse between present and past necessarily evolves as the present opens up new ways of describing and interpreting the past. Historians use narrative as their principal mode of presentation, but the stories they tell purport to say something true about past reality. They are not fiction, but they are not *the* truth either, and never can be. Historical narratives are hypothetical reconstructions of how the world was in the same sense that theories in science (especially evolutionary and environmental science) are hypothetical gereralisations about how the world is. And like theories in science histories will stand until replaced by better accounts - better as critically determined according to the canons of historical practice by the body of professional historians in discursive debate.

But these canons are not static; our criteria of what constitutes good history also change over time. Here lies one contribution of the postmodern critique, for it has forced historians to be more aware of the subliminal (and some rather less subtle) messages that texts (their own included) carry. We expect more of historians now, and more of their histories. We expect them to be more comprehensive (we are aware of omissions), more sophisticated, more reflexively self-conscious.[26] And we

[26] For an excellent discussion of what such self-conscious reflexivity might entail, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass.: The

make such comparative judgements because as historians what we write itself forms part of an historical development in historiography. Here postmodemism makes a second contribution by making us aware of the tropic force of rhetoric and ways of textualising our representations. But the texts that historians juxtapose to create their own configurations in intertextual space are previous historical descriptions and narratives and present accounts of critical theory and practice. The creative ideas (theories, interpretatbns) that arise (in the present) are applied to new narratives about the past (hypothetical constructions) that, as they form part of our present social/cultural matrix, will enter into knowledge/power equations of which we, as historians, need also to be aware. Here lies the modem challenge, and in meeting it historians will contribute to producing not science (though they will make defensible claims to knowledge), and not literature (though they will couch their findings in narrative form), but history as a distinct discipline defined by its own self-reflective practice evolving over time.

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), especially chapter 9. Berkhofer's is in fact a far more sophisticated and challenging study than any of the three books under review.