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M. Fulbrook: Historical Theory

Recent debates about historical theory have been profoundly influenced by the postmodernist attack on empiricist positions. According to the proponents of the âlinguistic turnâ, the past is only represented in discourses and texts produced in the present. Thus, conventional claims of validity and refutability have been denied by postmodernist historians, foremost among them Hayden White. They have also rejected the traditional notions of direct access to sources and inter-subjective communication. In the most extreme cases, historiography has been depicted as mere fiction, at least by some postmodernist historians For a most influential contribution, see White, Hayden, Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Baltimore 1973. Also see Ankersmit, Frank R, âHistoriography and Postmodernismâ, History and Theory 28 (1989), pp. 137-153. . The hot debates between âempiricistsâ and âpostmodernistsâ have clearly inspired Mary Fulbrook to publish her considerations on the craft of historical writing in a succinct book. Her useful overview deals with the major issues of current debates about the nature and representation of history.

Fulbrook does not aim to explore the relationship between history and theory. Nor does she seek to comprehensively acquaint the readers with theories of history. The book, rather, is concerned with the âintrinsically theoretical nature of historical investigation and representationâ (p. 4). In particular, problems involved in the selection of theoretical approaches to historical investigation and on the notions of âvalue-freedomâ and âobjectivityâ are dealt with. In three parts, Fulbrook also proposes strategies for relating historical evidence to interpretations of the present. The first part provides an overview of conceptions of history and the past. The relationship between historians and the past is explored in the second part. In the third part, Fulbrook deals with issues of representing the past, in particular the political implications of different historical narratives.

Throughout the book, Fulbrook steers a middle course between the polarization of empiricist and postmodernist positions For a similar argument, see Barkin, Kenneth, âBismarck in a Postmodern Worldâ, German Studies Review 18 (1995), pp. 241-251, esp. p. 249. . She conceives âhistorical knowledge as distinctively different

from fiction or propagandaâ, without falling into the trap of an unreflecting empiricism âresting on a simplistic appeal to âthe factsââ (p. 3). On the contrary, historical investigations and representations are depicted as constructions resting on unspoken assumptions and underlying convictions, especially about human beings as well as the ânatureâ of politics and society. Theory is thus an integral component of exhuming the past. Historians should neither give up bothering about theoretical issues nor refrain from efforts to seek accountable and verifiable ways of investigating and representing the past. Moreover, Fulbrook seeks to demonstrate that inter-subjective communication about these issues is not only possible, but also fruitful.

As historical writing evolved as a âscientificâ endeavour in the late eighteenth century, different historical approaches emerged. Fulbrook initially introduces her readers to Marxist historiography and postmodernist writers who have questioned the ârealityâ of history and cast doubt on the long-held conviction that cumulative advances in knowledge are possible. However, she distinguishes between radical theoreticians like Frank Ankersmit, who has denied the existence of past events independently from texts, and Hayden White, who has conceded that individual statements can be verified or falsified. According to Fulbrook, however, all postmodernist writers share the claim that historical narratives are exclusively represented in texts. As pieces of evidence are arbitrarily knit together by authors, an ultimate decision about superior and inferior, convincing and ill-founded representations of the past is decried as an illusion by postmodernists. While rejecting this unrestrained relativism, Fulbrook turns against empiricist appeals to ârealityâ and âthe factsâ. She also abandons the idea of an overarching metanarrative in favour of a pragmatic conception of âpartial historyâ (p. 27). Equally helpful is Fulbrookâs differentiation between implicit and perspectival paradigms, which encompass common underlying assumptions.

The central challenge of historical investigation and representation is coping with the relationship between the past and the present. A conceptual and methodological framework is needed in order to gain insights into the sources and present findings coherently. Fulbrook proposes criteria for evaluating particular partial accounts and comparing them with regard to their analytical value. She prefers âtheories of the middle groundâ (p. 62) apt to integrate historical events into coherent plots which can be to disentangled. These conceptualizations are inevitably tied to frameworks of preconceived knowledge, assumptions and questions. Although it is possible to understand a wide range of different theoretical approaches, Fulbrook states that historical accounts, interpretations and explanations are verifiable or refutable only within particular paradigms (p. 68). This proposition, however, is an uneasy and unconvincing compromise between the claims of the adherents of postmodernism and empiricism, respectively. Moreover, her rejection of universally applicable criteria for the validity of historical accounts ultimately contradicts her basic claim that intersubjective communication between historians is possible (p. 97).

An awareness and openness about the presuppositions and convictions influencing historical investigation and writing is doubtlessly indispensable, a flight into theory does not solve the tension between the historicist position of accepting contemporariesâ concepts and views on the one hand and employing an external vantage point. On the contrary, Fulbrook demands to unpack broad, holistic âtheory-drenchedâ concepts. Indeed, theories must be assailable by new evidence, which can thus affect a change of paradigms Kuhn, Thomas, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago 1962. . The findings of historical investigations, however, largely depend on the questions raised by historians. As Fulbrookâs analysis of the preference historians have accorded to structure or agency clearly demonstrates, the choice of questions is strongly influenced by underlying assumptions for example on the nature of human being and life. All in all, the basic conceptions about ârealityâ are historically conditioned.

History is mostly represented in texts produced by historians. The purposes and aims of historical representations are therefore to be explored. Historians construct and present themes and characters in their accounts. Fulbrooks pleads for historians to explicitly relate plots to the traditions and assumptions shaping their writing. They must also be made aware of the impact of empathy, which is a potential barrier to critical historiography. However, empathy may also facilitate understanding. As her treatment of the issue of political partisanship shows, Fulbrook ultimately adheres to the notion of objectivity and testability while recognizing their limits. Historians are thus portrayed as âgatekeepers and tour guides to the pastâ (p. 175).

Altogether, the book primarily appeals to pragmatically oriented historians seeking sound information on major problems of historical investigation and representation. Fulbrook convincingly argues that insights into

history are indeed possible; however, these views are unavoidably distorted by a variety of lenses. As âperspectival paradigmsâ can neither be ignored nor dissolved, only âapproximations to adequacy in accounts of the past â(p. 187) are feasible. Fulbrook retains the ânotion of history as a disciplined investigation of that which has gone before â a discipline which is self-reflective, aware of the implications of the choices practioners must make in terms of the concepts, approaches and methods they useâ (p. 188). Against the background of a polarized debate, the call of differentiation is as welcome as the pressing demand for theoretical awareness and openness Also see Lorenz, Chris, Konstruktion der Vergangenheit. Eine EinfÃ¼hrung in die Geschichtstheorie, Cologne 1997, pp. 127-189; idem, âPostmoderne Herausforderungen an die Gesellschaftsgeschichteâ, Geschichte und Gesellschaft 24 (1998), pp. 617-632. . Fulbrookâs undogmatic approach certainly merits a close reading. The book soundly explores some of the main topics and problems of historical analyses. Her proposals for a highly desirable compromise â a middle course â between the two diametrically opposed schools of thought are reasonable and convincing but not groundbreaking. Although Fulbrookâs argument encourages historians to supersede the fruitless controversy between the âempiricistsâ and âpostmodernistsâ, she depicts few new and inspiring paths to a superior reconceptualization of history. Readers who espouse a pragmatic approach to the writing of history will therefore be more convinced by her argument than theoreticians. Nevertheless, her comprehensive book is a sound and useful overview, even for students, who seek for a basic understanding of some of major issues of historical theory.

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