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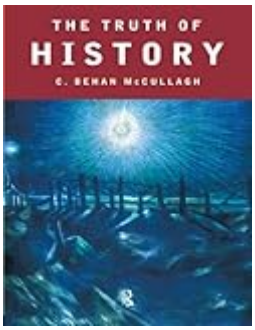

C. Behan McCullagh. *The Truth of History.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. vi + 327 pp. $75.00 (cloth) ISBN 0-415-17110-5; $24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-17111-3.

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The Truth of History?

The Truth of History is a fascinating and revealing, but ultimately difficult and frustrating book. McCullagh's ostensible purposes are, first, to examine and counter recent critiques that doubt the possibility of making true statements about history, and, second, to explicate conventional practices of doing history in order to demonstrate that these practices can and do yield true statements about the past. A third implicit purpose, which is perhaps the source of the difficulties of his book, is to mount a counterattack on what McCullagh perceives to be radical historiographies which suggest that standards of historical truth are historically and ideologically conditioned and constituted. McCullagh puts himself in the difficult situation of rejecting the contingency of the truth of history while attempting to maintain a conventional pluralist stance toward that truth, and while he goes to some length to discuss the nature of truth, he is surprisingly reticent concerning the nature of history. His own language game ultimately turns on a confusion he perpetuates.

McCullagh never quite makes clear which "history" he is discussing; history as the objective past, history as the records relied upon as evidence of the past, history as the narratives written on the basis of those records, or history as a professional discipline and social practice. This confusion between past and practice allows McCullagh a false certainty about the truth of history. It allows him to say that statements about the past can be true *and* fallible without confronting the implication that what he is talking about is not historical truth but truth claims about the past. Finally, this allows him to avoid the problems of history raised by the distinction between regarding statements about the past as true and regarding them *as if* true.

McCullagh does an excellent job of revealing the good reasons that exist for being skeptical of history as a practice, and heeffectively demonstrates why the pursuit of truth is a worthy effort, but he fails to reassure that the truth of history is not essentially contested and indeterminate. It may well be possible to make true statements about the facts of the past and still necessarily be ambivalent about their meaning for the present. If history is to be merely a recounting of facts, a keeping of the record of what happened when, then this condition is unproblem-

atic, but if history, as McCullagh seems to hope, is to be a human practice that in some way contributes to a "better" future, then contingency is unavoidable. History, inthat case, must be regarded as something which Raymond Williams calls a "keyword," and serves precisely as an example of the problematic relationship between signifier and signified identified by Derrida which McCullagh attempts to dismiss by relying on "conventional" understandings of the nature of language.

McCullagh begins his argument for the possibility of saying truthful things about history by directly confronting the ways in which evidence, culture and language constrain that possibility. In each case he argues that truth is possible within constraint. Historians cannot say more than their evidence will allow them to say, but there are general and understood rules of inference that govern the use of evidence and should an historian's personal interest or bias lead her overstep these limits, her colleagues will effect a correction. Culture is more problematic for two reasons. All observations of reality are necessarily conditioned through concepts which themselves are conditioned by culture and often operating in implicit ways. Historians from different cultures may perceive reality differently, but this does not mean that truth is defeated by cultural relativism. McCullagh argues that reality, or in the case of history, the evidence of reality, is objective, separate and apart from perception and consciousness. Perception does not create reality, rather it is a response to reality. While different cultures may describe the same events in different ways, they nevertheless describe the same events because these events exist independently of consciousness. It may be necessary to translate one culture's statement about the past into another's language, but this does not preclude the possibility that all such statements, relative to their own culture, are true. McCullagh admits, however, that pervasive cultural bias is not easily overcome. Finally, while language and its meaning can be ambiguous, McCullagh argues that common experience clearly shows that language and reality cannot be divorced as easily as postmodern theorists believe.

Because there is a historical reality that exists independently of perception and description, McCullagh further argues that there is no need to rely upon various satisfying notions that the truth of history is matter of social construction, coherence with already established truths or merely an outcome of a current consensus. Central to McCullagh's argument for the truth of statements about history is the notion that such statements be regarded as correlating rather than corresponding to reality, and that this correlation can be established by comparing the statement's truth conditions, i.e implications of the statement that must also be true if the statement itself is to be regarded as true, with all of the available evidence. He agrees that *the* truth and the *whole* truth of history may not be possible to achieve, but we can make statements and treat them *as if* they are true as long as they are adequately supported by evidence, and are fair. By this last idea, McCullagh means that all of the facts concerning the properties of a historical subject are considered and that it is, as a result, not misrepresented.

From this introductory position, McCullagh extends his argument to more complex kinds of statements about the past, and attempts to show how historians can and do truthfully generalize and classify, descriptively explain and interpret historical subjects and events despite the contentions of some that all of these practices have more to do with the creative thought of historians than the truth of history. According to McCullagh, conventional knowledge of the world reveals that many objects do share common properties. Events, lives and societies can be truthfully defined, described, and explained if the criteria of selection of evidence and of the significant features of an historical subject to be considered are specified, and if the level of generality of description and explanation remains consistent. Interpretations can be judged more or less truthful based on the adequacy and fairness of the evidence used to support them and the adequacy of the conventional logic of the inferences drawn from the evidence.

Given that the truthfulness of generalizations, descriptive explanations and interpretations can be established, McCullagh argues that truthful causal explanations can be developed for individual and collective actions and for social change. Central to his epistemology is the notion that causal explanations in history are genetic and teleological. In effect this implies identifying an historical outcome, understanding its design, and from that design pursuing the nature of the source event that made that design significantly probable. This approach, according to McCullagh, does not assign single causes to events, and is not meant to be taken as deterministic explanation. Following his assertion of correlative rather than corresponding nature of truthful statements about history, he rejects the usefulness of a "covering law" model of historical explanation. The genetic source of an historical outcome is itself an product of tendencies, and the force it creates for a particular outcome can be affected by counter-forces, so that in the end the cause or causes of any outcome are necessarily conjunc-

tural.

After this exploration of the nature of historical causation, McCullagh examines the strengths and weaknesses of a number of conventional ways of explaining the cause of historical actions and changes. In the process he clarifies his notion of causation, and makes clear that historians must usually cope with the cumulative effect of multiple causes in order to adequately and fairly explain historical events. He concludes by arguing that despite the value of the particular in history, it is sensible, possible, and by implication, necessary to discuss history in general terms. There is a reality to history that is more than the sum of individual actions and decisions, and that despite Lyotard's objections, objective grand narratives exist in historical reality and they can be truthfully identified. As McCullagh says, "Our forms of inference may not be perfect, but they often yield descriptions of the world which we can confirm in experience. Our forms of legitimation are not invalid simply because they are conventional and we talk about them" (p. 299).

To use McCullagh's notions, this summary of his work is not entirely fair. This book is rich and complex, and deploys a number of examples to illustrate both his arguments and his criticisms, but in the end it is not persuasive, and this is due at least in part because McCullagh is not entirely fair to the critiques he challenges. To begin with, most of the authors he cites as exemplars of the assault on the truth of history are historians, and most of them do not argue that historical truth is impossible, merely that it is problematic. Their argument generally is not about denying the objectivity or reality of the past, but it is about the obstacles, difficulties, and uncertainties that interfere with accessing and understanding the past. In another domain, Derrida, for example, does not argue that the problematic nature of language makes human communication impossible, but he does argue that understanding may not be as self-evident at it appears to be. History may indeed have a meaning, but it may well be the outcome of a dialectic in which, at times, consciousness and the perception of the past that occurs in the present play a more significant role than the record of the past.

Perhaps the most telling problem with this book is McCullagh's ambiguity regarding the dialectical nature of "history." Throughout the book he refers to events, causes, effects, lives, structures, and social entities as discrete and identifiable objects of history, and yet will also frequently refer to them as historical subjects. He admits, for example, that the boundaries of events are not often neat (p. 86), yet he seems to be unaware of how the mention of boundaries in the context of the flow of time introduces necessary creative acts on the part of historians that bridge the gap between the past as described and the past as experienced by those who lived it. His discussion of the influence of culture on the individual is based on the assumption that culture and individual are two separate categories of reality (pp. 245-247, 259). He does not grasp the possibility of a dialectic in which culture acts through individuals even as individuals create culture. This problem of reification surfaces often as he tries to separate ideology from habitus, for example, or cause from historical force, from tendency. His faith in the possibility of making truthful statements about history depends upon the analytical separation of "realities" that in the end, his pluralism will not allow him to sustain. Evidence, in McCullagh's account, appears to be a given of historical research, the objective social facts upon which true statements can be based. Yet nowhere does he confront the problem that often an historian's perception and decision that a text, a record, or an observation does constitute evidence is itself a matter of interpretation, and that the relation between evidence and interpretation is necessarily dialectic and ultimately indeterminate, as are the relations between subject and object, and self and other that constitute human reality. Perhaps this is what allows him, in a single chapter that explores the basic and secondary meaning of texts, to solve the problem of the "aboutness" of documents which has plagued the discipline of library and information science for quite some time.

Ultimately McCullagh writes himself into a contradiction he cannot escape. In Chapter 6 he offers a critique of cultural history and especially its "casual attitude towards truth" (p. 156). His primary argument is directed at what he perceives to be the inadequacy of the method of hermeneutic inquiry as a means to historical truth, because it ultimately privileges the historian's interpretation over the facts, misrepresents historical reality and thus is unfair. He describes the method this way: "the meaning of a sentence *(event)* is grasped from a knowledge of the meaning of the words *(stages)* which compose it, and ambiguities in the meaning of those words are resolved by reference to the meaning of the whole *(descriptive explanation, interpretation).* In the case of ethnographic understanding *(history)*, the alternation is between what individuals say about the object or episode *(event)* under consideration, together with the behavior concerning it, and a hypothesis about their beliefs and attitudes constructed by the historian (p. 163).

The words in parentheses have been added to this quote to reveal more explicitly how it applies to the issues under consideration. McCullagh's complaint is that the hypothesis referred to above can be, and in cultural history, usually is "fanciful." Yet earlier in the book, McCullagh approvingly quotes Fernand Braudel's description of the essence of doing history:

In my view, research must constantly move between social reality and the model, in a succession of readjustments and journeys ever patiently reviewed. Thus the model is both an attempt to explain a given structure, and an instrument with which one can examine it, and compare it, and test its solidity and its very life (p. 107).

Braudel's statement appears to describe and support the use of a hermeneutic method of inquiry for history as one that is necessary to cope with the dialectical constraints within which the meaning of "history" as the past and as practice occurs. This contradiction between certainty and contingency characterizes McCullagh's book. He desires certainty and admits contingency, but contingency troubles him and he is critical of it when it appears explicitly in the work of others. He frequently cites the possibility of multiple truths of history, of competing understandings of events and their meaning, and admits that in some cases it may not be possible to resolve the competition, but he nevertheless insists that one interpretation usually proves true (pp. 130-133). His faith in the truth of history relies upon a conventional and unexplored notion of human nature on which to ground explanations of human behavior and human history. *The Truth of History* is a good book that raises the right questions, but the unexamined assumptions upon which it rests causes one to doubt its answers.

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