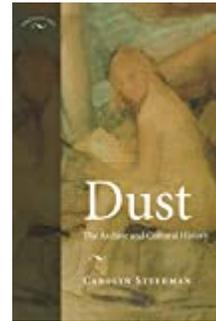


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Carolyn Steedman.** *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002. 195 pp. \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-3047-5.



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On her academic information webpage at the University of Warwick, Carolyn Steedman tells us, “Having spent most of my life—or rather, research career—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I made the bold and brave decision to move to the eighteenth. (What I told people at the time, was that I was tired of the nineteenth century; horrible clothes, hideous furniture; no jokes).” One of the most refreshing things about Steedman is that she is not afraid to laugh at herself and her work in an effort to keep things in perspective. Her new book, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, is an attempt to remind historians that much of the research they do takes place in institutions that generally did not exist before the eighteenth century and that contain discombobulated remnants of human experience. As opposed to functioning as sources of truth, they are reservoirs of stories that historians use to construct meaning out of the dust and detritus of people’s lives. State archives in particular are tied to a nineteenth century conception of political history that limits scholars as much as it helps them today. Steedman wants academics to keep these limitations in perspective, in the hope that they might open up new avenues for writing history.

This is not exactly a new insight, as the author herself makes abundantly clear by referencing Derrida and Foucault early and often. Steedman reminds us that in

*The Order of Things* (1966) Foucault suggested we could locate the true origin of modernity in scientists’ rejection of form in favor of function as the best means for classifying plants and animals. A corollary of this involved governments gathering documents to codify and categorize their citizens. Furthermore, most scholars in the humanities have read anthropologists Clifford Geertz and James Clifford, or post-colonial thinkers such as Antoinette Burton. They recognize the archive is a creation that masks as much as it reveals, and that regardless of where the author did research his voice shapes the final product. Steedman’s contribution is not to make this point for the first time, but to make it clearly in a concise book that is easily accessible to professional academics and is fun to read.

For example, Steedman speaks of archive fever, an idea borrowed from Derrida. This is not merely the metaphorical pathology of historians desperate to polish their intellectual capital by sitting in a big archive in Paris or London, however. The archives can actually kill you. In addition to developing hypertension by sitting up late at night and worrying whether or not one will accumulate enough material to write that book, there are other problems. The unsuspecting researcher might breathe in some anthrax living on the cloth coverings of old files and end up with much bigger issues. It seems

that the old cloth and animal skin coverings of many files are a perfect breeding ground for spores. The dust that attracts people to the archive can also finish them off, and this is apparently what happened to historian Jules Michelet. In the early nineteenth century he used the National Archives in France and not surprisingly discovered France had a national history, but he paid for this remarkable insight with his health. This wonderfully interesting story is placed within a very learned context of the development of modern historiography starting with Giambattista Vico and moving on to Hayden White. Steedman clearly shows that archives are impossible to imagine without a specific vision of history as a mass of material that needs to be ordered according to certain narratives.

Steedman walks the reader confidently through seven other short essays to make her point. She explains Michelet as a magistrate going to the archives to restore order and give national meaning posthumously to peasant lives. Another chapter demonstrates how historians go to the archive to get away from the distractions and disorder of real life and create an artificial reality via old documents. Steedman mobilizes George Eliot's historical fiction from the Peterloo period to reinforce this point further, suggesting the latter's political beliefs determined her consciousness in a way that no archive could have altered. An uproarious chapter on rag rugs shows how historians constructed a contemporary meaning for this item via the archive that differs considerably from how people viewed these things in the nineteenth century. We look at them as a symbol of the impossibly bleak lives and horrible conditions working class people in England endured. It seems that contemporaries saw rag rugs as evidence of a clean and orderly

home, and that the domestic disorder we often associate with this period may be exaggerated.

If some of this sounds familiar, it should. About half of the material in this book has already emerged from the dust of the archive to see the light of day in other form, most notably as an article in the *American Historical Review*. Her October 2001 *AHR* article impressively metamorphoses into two chapters in this book. This demonstrates that while Steedman possesses a healthy skepticism of documents from the archive, she surely knows how to mine them for all they are worth. In fact, in this concise book there would have been room for one more brief chapter, requiring no visit to the archive, that speculates where this new critical engagement with dust leaves historians. Although Steedman is delightfully iconoclastic, she does not reject history as something lacking in social value. She seems to suggest that the archive is interesting and relevant today insofar as it shows us the ways people use the past to define themselves and others, although she never comes right out and says this. Returning to her information web-site at Warwick, Steedman tells us that she is now leaving the dust of the old archives and, "working on service, servitude and servants, from about 1750 to 1820 ... [and] the variety of ways in which people have constructed self-identity in the past." It is good to see such an impressive intellect leaving the dust behind and moving on to new things.

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