
CURRENT BOOKS

How to Make History

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT HISTORY.

By Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. Norton. 322 pp. \$25

This book is the work of three prominent American academic historians—from, variously, the University of California, Los Angeles (Appleby), the University of Pennsylvania (Hunt), and the New School for Social Research (Jacob). Their areas of expertise include 17th- and 18th-century British and American history, the Enlightenment, modern French history, and the history of science and the scientific revolution. They make a formidable team.

Yet for this book, these authors' most important credential is probably the fact that they're not associated with conservative intellectual or political views. Why? Because the arguments they offer in defense of the discipline of history and of the professional historian's capacity to write a reasonably objective narrative in this age of rampant relativism and saturating irony and a skepticism that might have rattled Pyrrho would receive less credit in important quarters if they were put forward by card-carrying traditionalists.

The authors (and they write as a single voice) are plainly sympathetic to much that has been happening at American colleges and universities these past 20 years—to, for example, the intellectual overhaul of disciplines by new linguistic, anthropological, philosophical, and literary theories, and to calls for a multicultural agenda in American classrooms that reflects a vision of America different from the one that has served up to now. Their own scholarship, in fact, has bolstered such reconsideration and change.

But they worry that the sorcerer's apprentice of relativism that they perceive to be cavorting on American campuses (and throughout the larger society) has lost control of the broom, which now threatens to sweep away more of the intellectual enterprise than they want to see go. The current uncertainty about the nature of objective knowledge—indeed, about the very possibility of such knowledge—promises intellectual chaos. Why bother writing history at all if one version is as true, or false, as any other? Why do we need departments of history? Or professors?

The authors locate the sources of our contemporary predicament in the Enlightenment. They trace the ascendancy of the heroic mode of Enlightenment science, under whose influence historians were persuaded to turn themselves into perfectly neutral investigators capable of precise reconstruction of the past. Ideas of modernity and progress encouraged historians to discover *laws* of human development, valid and absolute as scientific laws. Then, in the 19th century, "building the nation became an absolute value, and history's contribution to that effort was assumed unreflectively." So nationalistic history came to hold sway.

As they move forward from the 16th century to our own, the authors write an intellectual history of the rise and fall of the



absolutisms—science is shown to be socially conditioned and anything but value-free, nationalistic history to be fiercely exclusionary, and so on. It was inevitable, and healthy, that these absolutisms be questioned. But the “fluid skepticism [that] now covers the intellectual landscape, encroaching upon one body of thought after another” is dangerous and debilitating “because it casts doubt on the ability to make judgments or draw conclusions.” With history’s potential for getting at the truth denied, a new absolutism—rooted, ironically, in subjectivity and relativism—is upon us.

To counter the disarray, the authors propose what they call a “practical realism”—and what no one would call a philosophical breakthrough. They are reluctant to claim too much, but they insist at the least on the existence in the world of things knowable and usable that, though separate from the linguistic expressions used to describe them, are capable of being captured in the mind by these expressions: “Words and conventions, however socially constructed, reach out to the world and give a reasonably true description of its contents.” Relying on documents and evidence, historians can pursue their vocation in this cautiously real world (too cautiously real for those of us not racked by Sausurrian-inspired doubt about language, who believe still that the distracted jaywalking Sausurrian about to be flattened by an 18-wheeler would come to terms once and for all with the link between the signifier and the signified if the sole observer, a mischievous Aristotelian, yelled “Mind the pillow!”).

Moreover, the “deeply social nature of scientific truth-seeking” and the necessarily subjective manner of individual scientists do not mean science cannot speak truth about the world. Newton was a practicing alchemist, but that did not keep him from being a mathematical genius too, or from formulating universally applicable laws of gravity.

The authors admit that historians cannot capture all the variables bombarding a single past event. But this inability does not render

quixotic or meaningless the attempt to say *something* about it—with a qualified objectivity that recognizes the artificiality of language and the subjectivity or culturally shaped character of the individual historian. Different interpretations of the same event do not alter the event, and the sum of interpretations, in the larger continuing historical enterprise, will better convey its reality and achieve a kind of collective truth. In other words, that there may be 13 ways of looking at a blackbird does not make the bird green.

This sane pragmatic position is so hardly won and tenuously held that I do not want to say anything that might erode it. It does seem, however, that the reality the authors advocate is just a slightly paler version of the one the best historians traditionally have embraced. Almost 65 years ago, the great German historian Hajo Holborn wrote in a paper for a Princeton University symposium: “[The critical historian] trusts that the ideal of a science of history can be made evident by a common effort of scholars. . . . To talk about a science of history means nothing but an affirmation of the critical and systematic approach to history, and the validity of the results achieved in this way.” Though the words “science of history” will induce horror today, the practice behind the words should not, particularly if Holborn’s words are amended to read “a common effort of *diverse* scholars.”

To argue that history can still be done, the authors do history. And that is one of the values of their book. It is a coherent narrative that, by its very existence, challenges critics who may think they have revoked the credentials of the form. Regrettably, the authors depict the events of centuries with a brush stroke so broad that one fears a lot of the paint has missed not just the mark but the canvas. For example: “For the Greeks and Romans, history concerned persons, things, or events but did not exhibit overarching meanings or patterns. History showed only the inexorable effects of human passions, weaknesses, and ambitions.” This would have come as news to Thucydides, who wrote his book precisely so that it might be “judged useful by those who

want to understand clearly events that occurred in the past and (human nature being what it is) will occur again in the future, at some time or other and in much the same way." And Polybius, Sallust, Tacitus? Were they really blind to overarching meanings and patterns in events?

In their last chapter, the authors write, "For almost a half century, [the Cold War] determined identities, magnified anxieties, and permeated every intellectual enterprise." Not *some* or even *many* intellectual enterprises but *every* intellectual enterprise? Even at the height of the Vietnam War, when I was in graduate school, colleagues working on dissertations about Latin love poetry and Greek moods—intellectual enterprises by my reckoning—did so well beyond the reach of any war, hot or cold. These are minor points perhaps, but neither statement reflects the quality of painstakingly careful judgment and nuance the authors have been urging on historians in previous chapters if they are to make sense of the past.

Incidentally, this last chapter, on "the future of history" in the post-Cold War era, promises a great deal more than it delivers—and some of what it delivers should be returned to sender. The chapter is not about the

future of history as such (it does not preach to Brazilians, Germans, or Japanese) but about the future of history in American classrooms and the need for (reflexive) accommodation to multicultural narratives: "The motifs of a multicultural history of the United States will have to incorporate themes and variations on *all* [emphasis added] the identities that Americans carry with them, because only this will satisfy our awakened curiosity about what it truly means to be part of American democracy." This chapter appears to have been included to assure readers that the authors' liberal credentials are intact and that their embrace of objective reality is not too tight.

Yet even if they have told only part of the truth about history, the authors should be commended. They will receive the criticism of colleagues both from the Right and the Left. The book will be dismissed as thin gruel by traditionalists, who want more meat. But perhaps among at least some of the modish, who are making do with smaller and smaller portions at an intellectual table set for perpetual Lent, it will have the forbidden appeal of *crème fraîche*.

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The Masculine Mystique

THE TROUBLE WITH BOYS. By Angela Phillips. Basic Books. 272 pp. \$23

WHAT MEN WANT: Mothers, Fathers, and Manhood. By John Munder Ross. Harvard Univ. Press. 242 pp. \$29.95

For the past 30 years or so, experts, activists, and talk show hosts have been thoroughly absorbed with what women want, what women don't have, and what society has done to women. The "dominant sex,"

meanwhile, has been relatively ignored in scholarly tomes and readily abused in political and pop-psych rhetoric. We hear a great deal about the "deadbeat dad," the "insensitive male," the "hormone-driven warmaker." The "problem with men," according to current wisdom, is that they are not women.

Two new books seek to bring men back into the picture, and, just as astonishing, they do so with sympathy. Phillips, a British journalist attuned to the impact of class on social