

Reflections on History

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Introduction

In this essay I shall briefly examine some of the developments in historical theory and representation since the Enlightenment, and specifically look at how certain eras of historical projects have affected both the political situation and historical representation of indigenous people in Australian history this century. To achieve this I will firstly reflect on Australian history and then briefly analyse features and effects of the Enlightenment Project, its by-product Empiricism and Positivism, as well as Marxism, Postcolonialism, Gender issues and cultural history. By using the situation of indigenous people in Australia to reflect on the repercussions of each historical project, I hope to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

I then hope to conclude having illustrated that indeed, there can be no one preferred way of knowing the past, and that theories and methods can be both useful tools but also sometimes a hindrance in our quest for understanding. Furthermore, aspiring indigenous historians might find that a functional knowledge of, and engagement with, certain projects of historical theory can be very productive for both the quest to challenge the homogenised representation of Australian history in the past, as well as the development of a uniquely indigenous critique of history.

A Reflection

When examining the production of Australian history this century, one finds elements of many theorists and historical projects, but they all have a significant central feature in common. They almost exclusively derive from western intellectual traditions, except perhaps for the post-colonialists theorists who include a reasonable number of Indian diasporic intellectuals. Virtually all of those Western intellectual and academic theories, methods and traditions have functioned in a manner that ultimately marginalised and rendered mute the voices and historical perspective of indigenous people.

From the noble savage syndrome of the Enlightenment, through the Euro-centric, elitist and classificatory Empiricism and Positivism, and even in the two great challenges to Empiricism, Marxism and Women's History, as well as the ambiguity-laden Postcolonialism, there would seem to be a systematic trivialisation and dismissal of indigenous perceptions of history. This tendency continues to this very day with eminent Melbourne University historians, referring to recent minor attempts to correct the imbalance in Australian history, speak disparagingly of a "black armband" approach to history.

This is not to say that present and past historical analysis of Australian society is altogether invalid, but it does raise issues such as, what are the effects of the exclusion of the indigenous voice and perspective from the historical history debate. It also simultaneously illustrates the way various theories and methods have contributed to that historical exclusion. Those who speak of "the black armband brigade" invoke the powerful national myths of history that intertwined with government policies toward indigenous people. Thus showing both the way in which 'history' mythology can be used as a tool to maintain the political subjugation of indigenous people, as well as then be called upon again to reassert the same colonialist mythology when the natives get restless.

The history departments all the major universities in Australia have participated in the historical conspiracy of silence that has suppressed public knowledge of the crimes committed against indigenous people this century. It was not until women activists began the most significant challenge

to the Anglo-centric, male-controlled academic history establishment in the 1970s that rethink began about the history of relations with indigenous people. Even today only a small part of a necessary major reassessment of Australian history has been undertaken, most significantly by Henry Reynolds, and yet those in the academic history establishment who somehow see this as a threat have even managed to recruit the Prime Minister to their viewpoint.

It would seem to me that the present political marriage between the Federal Government and a certain historian, is a situation which leads one to ponder the words of G. R. Elton, who said,

If he is to be a good preacher he must rest his case upon a faith; but if he is to be a good historian he must question his own faith and admit some virtue in the beliefs of others. If he allows the task of choosing among the facts of the past to deteriorate into suppression of what will not serve the cause, he loses all right to claim weight for his opinions

If this is the case, and if, as Elton further contends, that it is integrity, resting on professional training and professional attitudes, that is the safeguard to prevent historians from abusing their role in society, then I believe that the professor in question and the history profession in general in Australia are themselves an example of the flaws and weaknesses in the Empiricist tradition from which most of them come. The involvement of Australian historians, along with anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists and others, in the development, planning and implementation of the policy of Assimilation from the 1930s to the 1960s is a clear stain on the table of illusions about the "facts" and "reason".

The frequent use today of terms like "guilt industry" to refer to belated attempts to redress and counter the hegemony in Australian history, and the failure of academic historians to assume their social responsibilities in the manner of Reynolds break the conspiracy of silence and speak out to counter the blatantly untrue, does little to create respect for either their own personal standing or that of their beloved Empiricist principles and values.

The Enlightenment Project

The Enlightenment Project arose out of 18th Century ferment when disaffection with 'superstition' evolved into calls for a more rational, reasoned approach to science and methods that relied on 'experimentation, first-hand experience rather than second-hand authority, and confidence in the regular order of nature'. It therefore represents the period from which the foundations of the formal, academic study of history were largely constructed. The basic values of the Enlightenment were independence, liberty and free enterprise, and it challenged the superstition and dogma of the church, as well as the traditions and privilege of the nobility.

Other themes of the Enlightenment were universalism and "reason, toleration, happiness, scepticism, individualism, civil liberty and cosmopolitanism." But for all its allusions to reason, high principle and humanitarianism, the Enlightenment was riddled with ambiguity, inevitable given that it derived from, and gave authority to, elitism, masculinity, privilege and 'whiteness' or "Europeanness".

On questions of racial difference the Enlightenment seems to have been as paradoxical and ambiguous as postcolonialism is to many today. On one hand writers like Rousseau and Diderot decried 'civilization' as inherently corrupting and that the noble savage and exotics lived a more innocent existence in a utopian, close to nature existence. But Enlightenment thinkers certainly did not even want to embrace and include their own peasant classes let alone the exotics being 'discovered' by the explorers of the day. Nevertheless some have argued that their attitudes to the natives remained more benign than those to emerge in the 19th Century. I suspect that this might be academic to the Tahitians, who may well have been spared the worst excesses of colonialist invasion because of

romanticist notions of the "exotic" and "utopia" during the Enlightenment, but whose lands today are firmly regarded by the French Government as part of "metropolitan" France and thereby lost to the Tahitian peoples.

The Positivists and Empiricists

The end of the 18th Century saw the French Revolution and British invasion of indigenous lands in Australia; it also saw the emergence of Positivism and Empiricism as the dominant force in English and European academic history tradition. As E.H. Carr said, "the nineteenth century was a great age for facts", and advocates of Positivism and Empiricism (again exclusively white, male and European), keen that the study of history be regarded as a science, firmly embraced the 'cult of facts'. It was held that the task of the historian was to narrate events 'as they happened' and to 'let the facts speak for themselves'. The Empirical theory of knowledge was said to presuppose a "complete separation between subject and object" and Positivism argued that the point of careful observation is to find models of human behaviour applicable to other societies.

This period, which saw the first use of archives and the emergence of the profession of historian, also witnessed numerous exotics from far-flung colonies being bought to European capitals for inspection by scientists and the general public. One of the earliest indigenous contacts with the British in Australia, a chap called Bennelong, was one of those taken to London for the bemusement of nobility and the inspection of Empiricist scientists. Thus the indigene could only be a subject of the new western sciences (of which History included itself), and by virtue of his "primitiveness" and being on the lower order of the new "scale" of humanity could never be allowed a voice of their own.

Marx

It is important therefore to remember that the values of the Empiricists underlay today's academic historical traditions, and that many of those values are still taught as important. Which in itself explains why the indigenous perspective has been effectively suppressed in the teaching of history in Australia for the greater part of this century. Even the advent of Marx did little to giving indigenous peoples a voice, despite the fact he was able to offer tremendous insights into the nature of capitalism and the greed that fuels it, and was responsible for exposing its inherent, inevitable, exploitation. Whilst his work became the theoretical foundation block of numerous revolutionary movements and Communist regime's indigenous peoples of the world remained subjugated and saw their lands annexed and destroyed, often with the overt or covert cooperation of intellectual elites, including historians, in both capitalist and communist societies.

Marx's ideas represented a significant challenge to the hegemony of the elites who recorded history, and they were "scientific" in that they rejected 'theological, moral and metaphysical explanations for human suffering and focuses instead upon economic forces'. The next serious and significant challenge to the mainstream, Empiricists came from the white, middle-class women of the west.

Women's History and Feminist Theory

The 1968 student rebellion in Paris, as well as the American and Australian anti-Vietnam war movement led to dramatic social and political upheaval which ultimately saw many 'oppressed' minorities gain a voice. The most dramatic change in the seventies and eighties was the influence of the women's movement in these countries, which saw a dramatic cultural and political challenge mounted by women in all areas of society. In academia the white, patriarchal history departments found themselves confronted with an emerging feminist analysis that demystified the nature of patriarchy in history and thus exposed the bias inherent in even the most objective, Empiricist male

historian. Feminist theory argued that 'men had appropriated the definition of culture and history and prioritized a view about the meta-narrative of history that excluded women.'

The women historians who began to emerge in the 1970s drew upon a wide range of theoretical positions, including the Liberalism of John Stuart Mill, Marxism, and Existentialism (particularly Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*). This first period of what was called "women's history" began to be revised in the 1980s and 1990s and developed into feminist theory which identifies gender as the significant analytical category and is concerned with how femininity and masculinity are constructed. The subsequent gains made by white middle-class women in the academy since the seventies has seen a significant reassessment of the role of women in Australian history. This is very pleasing, but the gains made by feminism merely serve to highlight yet again the great disparity when it comes to indigenous history.

This is ironic because indigenous political activists in the 1970s also thought that they were making great gains as well. In many instances Kooris were involved in the same campaigns as white women activists, and expected to see the same gains for indigenous people that were starting to happen for women. However, as time went on it became apparent that whilst Australian society and its political and academic institutions were prepared to make some concessions to the demands of women, they were less prepared to acquiesce to the similar demands of indigenous Australia. It also soon became apparent that while sexism was on the agenda to be addressed, racism was clearly not.

Other Approaches

Since WW2 there have been a range of new approaches to history, especially in the past two decades. These have included Social History, Cultural History and Postcolonialism. All of these theories and methods have contributed to a general 'democratisation' of history, with many former voiceless groups in history now gaining attention. Some people would argue that a great deal has been done by historians from all these theoretical perspective's and approaches in the reassessment of Australian history and indigenous peoples. But despite the excellent work of Henry Reynolds and cultural historian Barry Morris, there remains an almost total absence of indigenous historians in the academies of Australia. Despite the 'inclusive' notions and aversions of Postcolonialism, Cultural and Social History, they have not been able to help Koori people challenge the white, male-determined 'truths' of Australian history.

Conclusion

It will only be when many Koori historians have access to the academy to tell our history, from our perspective, in accordance with our cultural values, that a genuinely indigenous interpretation of the events of the past two hundred years can emerge. Until then, all that is written and said by non-indigenous historians who try and convey our story from our perspective can only fail. Australian society remains culturally and socially the poorer because of the situation that continues to exist. When those Koori historians emerge, they will find that the many theories and approaches to history in the western tradition will provide them with wealth of tools and/or weapons with which to deconstruct the long held myths of Anglo-Celtic Australian history.

Gary Foley

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