

## PJC BOOK REVIEW 24

**Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow (eds),**

*Manifestos for History*

**(Routledge, London & New York, 2007), pp. xii + 238**

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although the message is unchanged.*

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Postmodernist theory stresses the role of playfulness, eclecticism and irony, as characteristic of the so-called postmodernist age. These amiable qualities are contrasted with the stern, inflexible, and cold logic of the modernist era, which is now held to have receded, unmourned, into the mists of the past.

So why the sombre tone of this broadly (but not universally) postmodernist collection of *Manifestos for History*? The problem, it seems, lies with the historians, or with the majority of them. They have failed to update. They persist in trying to seek and to debate the truth about the past. Postmodernist theorists, by contrast, stress the fragility of the human access to ‘time before now’. Historical truth is an illusion, masking currencies of power. Hence postmodernists do not gain much *jouissance* from contemplating the obstinacy of historians, whether from the left or right of the spectrum.

To remedy matters, the editors offer ‘a further injection of ideas with regard to ways of refiguring and refashioning what arguably *ought* best to go on today and tomorrow under the name of history’ (p. 2). So some qualitative judgments between ‘better’ and ‘worse’ practice are clearly allowable, though the criteria for judgement remain unclear. Fifteen essayists respond, suitably eclectically, with the following advice:

*Forms of communication*: experiment (Rosenstone: ‘It’s time that we historians also learn to leave space for the bird to fly’ – p. 18).

*Big ‘timeless’ concepts*: critique them as did Foucault on power (Scott: ‘The object of critical history-writing is the present, though its materials come from the archives of the past’ – p. 35).

*New information technologies*: respond to their challenge (Poster: ‘Historians of the future will be writing a history of the virtual’ – p. 48).

*Discourse*: decode (Ermarth: ‘What takes courage today is to make the cultural syntax, the discursive system, appear ... and then to interpret the discursive systems’ – p. 65).

*Human experience*: strive to understand (Southgate: ‘My preference would be for histories driven by a necessarily unending quest for what it means to be *human*’ – p. 75).

*Mediatized memory*: ponder its challenge (Chakrabarty: ‘As historians sensitise themselves to popular uses of the past in a global and media-dominated world, they may well see the need to renew the charter of the historian’s guild that has been wedded so long to nineteenth-century ideas of citizenship’ – p. 86).

*Critical history*: study its institutionalisation but recognise its value (Joyce: ‘Critical history is not powerless: in bearing the gift of history from the past to the present, and to the future, it helps cut against the grain of the present ...’ – p. 97).

*Cultural boundaries*: cross them to celebrate difference (Denning: ‘I honour these “little people” on the “other side of the beach” [in Polynesia] – p. 105).

*Multiple media/historical fictions*: celebrate diversity (Harlan: ‘If we intend to meet the challenge of this new history ... we must teach [students] to be thoughtful, reflective and resourceful readers of *all* the forms in which their society represents the past to itself’ – p. 121).

*Interactive media*: respond to their impact (Kansteiner: ‘In the age of interactive media the social construct “historical consciousness” will take on a radically different quality because we will experience community in different ways’ – p. 144).

*Historical practice*: appreciate and share (Rigney: ‘The challenge for professional historians is to ensure that their insights play into public discussions ..., that their critical voice is heard in regard to illusions about the past, and that they help others to make informed judgements’ – p. 158).

*Critical theory*: be aware of the pitfalls (LaCapra: ‘The challenge, at least for historical understanding, is how to strive for an empathic or compassionate response that neither entails a sacrifice of analytic or critical ability nor induces a presumption to speak in the other’s voice ...’ – p. 173).

*Critical political history*: apply today (Ankersmit: ‘I’m dreaming of a new variant of political history using the lessons of the great political theorists of past and present for identifying the problems and shortcomings of our contemporary political machineries and for offering suggestions as to how these may best be remedied’ – pp. 185-6).

*History-writing as a genre*: critique (Domanska: ‘to prepare the ground for the emergence of some “post-historical” approach to the past which would correspond to the “horizon of expectations” of an audience living in the new millennium and a global culture’ – pp. 202-3).

*Futurology*: think long (Lowenthal: ‘Care of the future along with concern for the past now warrant a renewed manifesto, if there is to be ... any future of discourse at all to which historians might contribute’ – p. 216.)

In sum: no clear new direction for ‘History’ but no knock-out blow to the discipline either. Indeed, the Manifesto-writers themselves make plenty of truth-claims about both past and present. Which is just as well, because human communication would be impossible if people were to pronounce nothing but lies.