

PJC BOOK REVIEW 33

Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance*

(Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2013), pp. xvii + 293

ISBN 978-0-300 14037-8 (ppbk). Price: \$50.00

Review by: Penelope J. Corfield

Published in

American Historical Review, 199/3 (June 2014), pp. 843-4

*Text subject to minor editorial corrections since publication in 2014,
although the message is unchanged.*

© P.J. Corfield (2014; 2019)

Distance is in (or so it is claimed here)! Both historical proximity and historical teleology are out! Not only does Salber Phillips here provide a richly nuanced analysis of how historians cope with the ‘otherness’ of the past but, in literary studies, Franco Moretti has very recently collected his observations under the title of *Distant Reading* (Verso, 2013). It is all reminiscent of the celebrated dictum from L.P. Hartley’s 1953 elegiac novel *The Go-Between*: ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’. And indeed, this quotation, described as ‘the historian’s motto’, appears early in Salber Phillips’s account (p. xii).

An awareness of distance is particularly important to drum into newcomers to historical studies. On the other hand, exactly how distant is the past? Some features of history persist through time. The human genome, or set of genetic information for *homo sapiens*, is something that co-exists with all humans. It is true that its origins stem from an immensely long-term genetic evolutionary process. Thus when the human genome diverged from that of our close genetic relatives, the human sense of smell weakened in comparison with that of other

mammals. Yet that divergence occurred so long ago as to constitute now a human norm. The genome is part of the here-and-now, not the ‘dead past’.

In effect, the balance between continuity and change is never static. Culturally speaking, one person’s admirable tradition to uphold is another’s nightmare oppression to overthrow. Aspects of history that once seemed permanent may turn out to be adaptable, after all – and sometimes, indeed, *vice versa*: aspects that are thought of as ‘socially constructed’ may turn out to be strangely resistant to revamping.

Certainly, enough things survive unequivocally through-time to make ‘living history’ into a valid counterpoint to the ‘dead past’. Distance is not the whole story. Hartley’s dictum is thus challenged by a rival, which also comes from another elegiac novel. William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) declares that: ‘The past is never dead. It is not even past’. Discuss!

Salber Phillips approaches these issues by exploring how scholars have learned to appreciate and to represent historical distance, at different times in the past. The combined effect of so much detail is almost too much; but specialists will appreciate his myriad of case-histories.

Three big sections are presented, focusing upon broad moments. The first, *circa* 1500, works well. It is comparatively brief, highlighting the contrasting historical approaches of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, who launched a new Florentine tradition. Old-style chronicles were turned into considered histories. All this makes the point that serious scholarship preceded the European intellectual ferment known as the Enlightenment. Yet Salber Phillips is not in quest of ‘origins’, which he considers an unhelpful approach. Instead, he demonstrates plurality as Machiavelli and Guicciardini, with their different intellects, framed contrasting histories. There was no one ‘right’ way.

A second, much longer section tackles the production and representation of history in largely British scholarship and historical paintings *circa* 1800. These chapters are much more heavy-laden and almost unbalance the book. Pride of

place is given to David Hume for his blend of historical irony and sentiment (while the oft-praised Edward Gibbon does not even make it into the index). Then follow discussions of contemporary and subsequent responses to Hume. Contrasting narratives are explored, including Carlyle's *Past & Present* (1843) and Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836) – indicating that Salber Phillips's nodal date of 1800 is very generously defined. Historical paintings and literary scholarship are also discussed as offering alternative vehicles for bringing the past 'alive' but keeping it suitably distant.

Lastly, a third shorter section focuses upon *circa* 1968 and what Salber Phillips sees as the contemporary stress upon studying affective experience and everyday life. Here his exemplars are drawn from later twentieth-century Western scholarship and museumology. A study like *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998) by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen represents the 'sentimental mood' post-1968.

Here 'distance' is clearly at risk of succumbing to historical proximity. Indeed, the remembered past may become too cosy. It's vital to access difficult aspects of history (conflict, wars, hatred, resistance), in order to avoid either condescending to the past or prettifying it. Somewhat strangely, the Marxist historical tradition, let alone the recent turn to global affairs and Big History, are not discussed, despite all these approaches being very concerned with distance. But those omissions rather make Salber Phillips's point. History-writing is such a pluralist endeavour that no two overviews of the field would choose the same exemplars.

The study concludes (p. 236) with Georg Simmel's resonant reminder of 'the unity of nearness and remoteness', welding cool analytical distance with close human empathy. Clearly, mental time-travelling is far from exact science. The past *is* different; the present-moment *is* always changing – yet, throughout, the forces of deep continuity also haunt the tale.