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Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History:*

For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past

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Haunting History: great alliteration, great title. It summons to mind seminal memories which refuse to go away: the Brits standing alone, fists clenched to the sky, as in summer 1940; the Russians scorching the earth while retreating tactically before foreign invaders, as in 1709, 1812, and 1941; the American pioneers circling the waggons, while, beyond, their foes brandish weapons and attack, as in the nineteenth-century Wild West. Well no, this book is not directly concerned with such legacies. But it is, in an indirect way. Kleinberg offers an in-depth contribution to the philosophy/theory of history, by returning to a well-chewed question: how can people in the present truly know about the past? For him, the haunting factor is doubt. Can professional historians really offer an objective account of the past ‘as it really happened’? Or are they producing

rhetorical analyses which are at bottom no more accurate than mythic memories?

Kleinberg is far from simply bashing professional historians. He respects their methodologies and diligent retrievals. In his view, however, they are philosophically naïve. For him, the authority on doubt, who should be haunting their consciousness, is Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). A Derridean emphasis upon the slipperiness of meanings and the opacity of language, has been, in Kleinberg's view, wrongly brushed aside. He knows full well that Derrida is now out of fashion. But that's no basis for ignoring his message, which Kleinberg here replays, not as a hagiographer, but as a keen supporter.

The approach throughout this study focuses upon the debates between literary/cultural theorists and the few professional historians who have engaged with these arguments. A lengthy first chapter reviews, broadly chronologically, the later twentieth-century arguments about postmodernism, deconstruction and the linguistic turn. The brief second chapter then focuses, less successfully, upon ideas about the relationship of past and present. Charles Dickens's ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future cavort somewhat inconclusively, to underline the theme of haunting. A third meaty chapter returns to theories of history via the German hermeneutic philosophers, Johann Martin Chladenius (1710-59), Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-84) and the influential Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911).

Then the fourth meditative chapter provides the book's core message and is the most immediately relevant to today's historians. It argues that new digital technologies are offering new ways of studying, new ways of telling stories, new ways of looking at plural pathways through history (pp. 129-33). The resulting upheaval of old certainties will generate not dour negative doubts but playful exciting pluralities. (Maybe it will also produce stimulating new ways of

writing about literary/historical theories too, a somewhat rebellious reader might mutter at this point).

A concluding fifth chapter returns to the conundrums of the past that both is-and-is-not. It is not necessary to make a binary choice between pronouncing the old ways to be either completely dead or completely living. Plentiful elements from the past survive, even if many don't. Hence Kleinberg does not privilege the present/interpreter over all evidence from earlier times. If the contents of history books were purely invented by historians, then they could notionally erase all unpleasant information about wars, famines, disease, inequality, oppression, suffering ... But long-standing communal memories, let alone other factors such as the desire from readers to learn as much of the truth as can be substantiated, preclude such extremes. (True, selective would-be histories are written as works of propaganda; but that's a different point).

Nearing his conclusion, Kleinberg offers two contrasting thoughts: 'This is a moment of heterogeneity, entanglement, polysemy, and drifting context' (p. 133). Historians should welcome doubt, debate, plural narratives. They should explore absences from the narrative (the silenced cries of the defeated) as well as archival presences. On the other hand, he accepts some limits upon invention (p. 149): 'It is folly to think the past is merely what we tell it to be'.

Readers coming from the perspective of literary/historical theory will find much familiar ground but also a helpful survey of the varied intellectual critiques of traditional historical studies. Furthermore, all readers, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic to this approach, will note that Kleinberg's defence of deconstruction stops short of a complete conceptual relativity. Just as well, since the assertion that: 'Everything's relative' is itself an absolute one.

Practising historians will probably not hasten to read this book. That's partly because their discipline remains heavily empirical – and also because

theory-based critics do not display much familiarity with how historical research actually grows. That problem applies here. Kleinberg tends to invoke the single historian reading documents in the archive or looking at artefacts in the museum/field. But there are many sub-fields within the discipline, using many different resources and methodologies, with many varied interfaces with adjacent disciplines.

Furthermore, knowledge of the past is gained not only by research and debate in every generation, but also by transmission across the generations. Historians rarely start from scratch. They build – and at times dismantle, for example when erroneous ‘factoids’ have become accepted as substantiated fact – and they submit their work to the same long-term argumentative processes.

One final comment on the unidirectional unfolding of Time: humans don’t learn from the future. Or solely from the present, which nano-second by nano-second is morphing into the past. So there is no human alternative to learning from earlier times. (This comment evidently precludes other-worldly divine instruction). Studying the vast swathes of history needs constant effort, thought, exploration and debate. Even the sceptics can (probably) agree on that. So does the elusive star of Derrida need to rise again to haunt historians? Not on this showing.