

Nov. 19 **Historical Memory and History Wars**

History and Memory: Artifacts and Landscape

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In nearly every language, “history” has two meanings: events in the past as they happen, and the reconstructed version of these events in later times. In English, we sometimes distinguish the “chronicle” as a bare record from “history”, the fuller interpretation or transformation of bare facts into a narrative. German has Geschichte for history and Historie for chronicle. Chinese “lishi” combines “li” [a record of events] with “shi” [originally an official position: the Grand Historian; later used for “history”]. So all history has always combined memory with the recorded events of the past. Memories can be personal, or public. Everyone has intense personal experiences, which may or not be shared with others: I remember exactly where I was when I first heard that John F. Kennedy was shot, or when the Challenger shuttle crashed. We hold on tenaciously to these moments. They are anchors in our life. We resist strongly if someone else tries to tell us that we have it wrong. That is where professional historians get in trouble, when they challenge strongly held personal interpretations: either they are “professional remembrancers of things their fellow citizens wish to forget” [Eric Hobsbawm], or they revise interpretations of well-known events. History as a discipline evolves, scholarship makes new discoveries, and perspectives change [do they ‘advance’ and get better?]. But people as they age hold on to their fixed memories of the past, and they naturally resent it when a new generation tampers with their myths.

Artifacts – documents, airplanes, memorials, buildings, photographs, and souvenirs – have an extraordinary power to fix memories. They readily become fetishized objects, containers of memories that have nothing to do with the object itself, but which crystallize a powerful collective desire. Braudel regarded events as the flotsam and jetsam of time, evanescent as soap bubbles, but humans seem to have a deep collective need to preserve particular events from the inevitable corrosion of time. But preserving a collective memory inevitably requires radical simplification. No two of us share the same experiences: the only visions we can agree on have to be very abstract, simple, and dramatic. Hence, myth dominates over history.

The earliest historians, Thucydides the Greek or Sima Qian the Chinese, defined their occupation in opposition to mythology. From its origins, historians placed themselves against the tide. Their job is not to be comforting. Hayden White, in *Metahistory*, argues that all historians, and social theorists write in distinct narrative genres, which he, following the literary critic Northrop Frye, classifies into four categories: romantic, comic, tragic, and ironic. Michelet, for example, the 19th century nationalist French historian [who contributed greatly to the myth of Joan of Arc, for example], wrote in the romantic mode: a genre that tracks the adventures of a single hero [either an individual, or the collective destiny of a nation]. Nearly all nationalist history follows this trope.

Marx had a tragic perspective, of inevitable clashes between opposing forces, driven by underlying destinies. In White's view, nearly all modern historians employ predominantly the ironic trope. In ironic writing, the observer has a broader perspective than the people she writes about; they don't understand completely what they are doing, but the writer knows more, and can look on the actors sardonically ['what fools these mortals be!'] or sympathetically. This is only natural, since we look at past events from a distance; we don't see it the way the actors did. Much of the power of historical analysis, the only advantage it has, comes from distance gained by time. Historians certainly have no single set of coherent, logical models to give them any advantages over the man in the street. The one lever we have is that most of our subjects are safely dead.

But popular, official, and national history nearly always uses the Romantic trope. In this genre, stories are written of great adventures, dramatic escapades, heroic struggles, and triumphant outcomes. Nearly all popular novels and movies use the same genre. [The movie 'Titanic' is a romance, not a tragedy in the classical sense]. Usually, in fact, national histories use the extreme version of the romance: melodrama. This form sharpens all the conflict into two sides: one black, one white. Good struggles with evil, and after great battles, good wins. There isn't room in this saga for ambiguity, hesitation, doubt, or mixed motivations. But this middle ground is just where historians find most of humanity.

The Enola Gay curators ran smack into this conflict at just the wrong time. They really did try to create a balanced, comprehensive account. But the veterans and their right-wing supporters wanted only a melodramatic crusaders' version of World War II: a "Good War" that left no room for questions. The plane lent itself to many interpretations: the triumph of technology or the inaugurator of the troubled nuclear age. [If anyone thought that the sense of impending doom created by the Cold War nuclear arms race had ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have to recognize that India and Pakistan's detonations have opened that Pandora's box again, not to mention Sept. 11]. Stripping down the exhibit to the plane itself was a futile effort to repress multiple interpretations of the dropping of the A-Bomb. [Derrida says that we do this with every text: we cut off the unstoppable proliferation of meanings in order to make sense of anything]. But anyone who looks at the mutilated exhibit at the Air and Space Museum today will still come out with questions about the A-bomb. In fact, the video of interviews with the airmen who dropped the bomb, which is the most engaging part of the exhibit, is filled with defensive justifications of its necessity. But what are they defending against? The other side is never presented, so there is a great "absent presence" here, left in mystery. The current Enola Gay exhibit is a failed effort to hold back an inexorable process of interpretative expansion.

In the end, historians will have the last word. They always do. Reagan and Bush are gone, and the Congressmen who attacked the Smithsonian have long since moved on to other issues. But the people who really care about the past in itself are still arguing about it. Linenthal, et.al., think that the real story matters enough that it shouldn't be just a tool of a political agenda. In fact, unavoidably, the Enola Gay affair itself has now become

history, too, subject to the same tools of analysis. Historians can't do much to affect the present, but when it comes to the past, we always win in the end.

Or do we? Sites and artifacts turn into sacred locations, places for pilgrimage, veneration, and tourism. Making something sacred means putting it on an altar [like the Declaration of Independence at the National Archives], worshipping it with reverence, and developing emotional attachments to it [P.Maier]. Old bones of dead saints were venerated in the Middle Ages; now it is airplanes, documents, and sports memorabilia [see the Baseball, etc., Halls of Fame], along with battlefields, monuments, and even preserved bodies [in China and Russia]. Simon Schama's meandering, personal account demonstrates what a wide variety of symbolic interpretations have been attached to natural landscapes in different cultures. He is concerned that myth too easily replaces critical thought: the Nazis' cult of the forest deliberately rejected reason [it was seen as too French, too civilized] in favor of dark emotions. Heidegger lived in a small cabin in the forest because he rejected the urbanity of modern life. Yet progressive movements have developed from myths of nature, too. Much of the environmental movement is inspired by mythical notions of untouched wilderness, or the closeness of native peoples to nature. If we undercut these fancies, have we also cut away any solid ground of critique of modern industrial society?

Although 'post-modernism' has been attacked on many unjust grounds, there is a serious political critique underlying it. Modern media claim to create virtual worlds that will satisfy all of our individual desires, we still live in a material world of communities based on fixed locations. Capital and resources and technology may be totally mobile, but labor is not yet totally released from the ground. Extreme post-modern developments of mobility, self-designed identities, and fragmented societies lead us to the "airport transit-lounge of culture" [James Clifford], where nobody wants to live for long. Construction of sacred spaces is our reaction to increasingly unsettling forces of modern life. But can't we develop a true historical sense that recognizes that all sites and artifacts have always been imbedded in human activity, but still holds on to them with passion? Historians can be preservationists without being fetishists.

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