Book Reviews

Telling the Truth about History, by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1994. xi, 322 pp. Notes, index. $25.00 cloth.

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The currently contentious atmosphere in academia is filled with such shibboleths as political correctness and multiculturalism. Underlying all of the furor is one question: what is truth? Our former faith in an objective reality that can be discovered through scientific method has been undermined by attacks from many sides, but especially from literary critics who espouse postmodernism. Ironically, it is English departments rather than the social sciences that have developed the almost impenetrable jargon that attacks the very possibility of knowing "facts" at all—a position that undermines the entire discipline of history. Perhaps that is why most historians have ignored this challenge to historical method and interpretation. Nevertheless, the pervasive insistence that "truth" is a problematical concept requires a response if historians are not to be written off as naive and theoretically unsophisticated.

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have managed to explicate the ideas of the critics of the notion of objective truth in clear, understandable prose (no mean feat), to expose the weaknesses in their arguments, and to take what common sense dictates from their theories (yes, every generation writes its own history, and yes, things look different from different perspectives, but that is no reason to throw out the baby—facts—with the bath). The result is what they call "pragmatic realism": the notion that "truths about the past are possible, even if they are not absolute, and hence are worth struggling for" (7). These truths have the best chance of emerging through a democratic practice of history, that is, one where many voices are heard, because with a multiplicity of voices competing accounts of the past can be subjected to comparison with the documentary remains, permitting us to discriminate among them. One account is *not* as good as another, as postmodernists would have it, but must be replicated by others on the basis of the historical evidence.

Most of the book is devoted to an intellectual history of science, showing how it became established during the Enlightenment as a

weapon against tyranny. The authors then examine how this seemingly impregnable edifice came under attack from Progressive historians such as Charles Beard, social historians of the 1960s, and Thomas Kuhn and historians of science. The authors' purpose, ironically, is to situate the notion of scientific objectivity within a historical narrative that sees intellectual ideas as part and parcel of the age in which they appear. If this strategy places the authors in the camp of the postmodernists who argue that truth is relative at best because it looks different from different perspectives, it positions the authors to counter such nihilistic thinking by socially situating the postmodernists themselves in today's world, implicitly arguing that this, too, shall pass. Thus they see postmodernists as arising out of the democratization of higher education. The idea that history is only an ideological and linguistic construct appeals to many of the women and racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities whose experiences had not been addressed by previous scholarship.

The most useful part of the book is the final third in which the authors explain the theories of the postmodernists in everyday language. Postmodernists believe in neither progress nor autonomous individuals, and they argue that reality cannot transcend the language in which it is expressed. Indeed, this language and the "truths" of a particular society are a form of ideology that disciplines some of its members by establishing the hegemony of others. For anyone wanting a concise statement of the main ideas of theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the authors have provided the most accessible account I have seen to date.

Whereas philosophers may think that the postmodernists have taken critiques of objectivity to their logical conclusions, the authors of this book argue that they have simply overstated their case. Thus the authors find much that is useful in the postmodernists' critiques without accepting their more extreme claims. For example, they accept as true that history is "constructed" and therefore not neutral, but they argue that no philosopher has ever proven that facts are only in our heads and have no existence "out there." As the authors so convincingly put it, "The very objectiveness of objects—their failure to accommodate all interpretations—helps explain why scholars quarrel among themselves" (259).

This book is must reading, not only for anyone interested in understanding current intellectual debates in academia, but for everyone interested in writing or reading about history, because it forces us to face formerly unstated assumptions about meaning in general and narrative strategies in particular.