

MODERN APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

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Summary

The institutional teaching of history is an ideology of nationalism used to legitimate the nation state and instill loyalty to it among its citizens and/or subjects. Pioneered in Europe, it was exported around the world by European colonialism. Although claiming objectivity, the subjective nature of the enterprise, requiring a selection of facts about the past to produce “history”, makes it an inherently unstable and contested ideological construct, open to more or less explicit challenge from the counter-histories of disaffected elements and opponents of the nation state. Although the nationalist histories of the developed world have taken on a more populist form in the last third of the twentieth century, in response to the insurgencies of workers, women and other marginalised minorities during the long post World War Two boom, those on the post-colonial periphery have remained more rigid. These have either continued to be cast in a Rankean mode, or have veered into the parody of personality cults as the majority of nationalist projects disintegrated with the end of the long boom and the onset of debt triage.

1. Introduction

History as a subject for academic study arose in tandem with the blossoming of nationalism in nineteenth century Europe and was exported in this form throughout the world by European colonialism. It has been suggested that the construction and dissemination of a shared national ‘history’ has been a stronger force than even language in moulding national consciousness. Certainly, all new nation states have placed great emphasis on educating young people in the rights and duties of citizens and thereby attempting to forge a homogenous national identity. Central to the creation of the ‘imagined community’ that is the nation, has been the teaching of history in schools. The content and method of the instrumental histories purveyed under the aegis of the nation state has, unsurprisingly, met with sustained challenges from the alternative histories generated and disseminated by those disaffected with the nation state and the

particular interest groups allied to the nationalist project. The subjective nature of all history is what makes it such a contested and constantly shifting terrain. The victors might well write the history, but the vanquished are by no means obligated to accept and abide by its half-truths and convenient conceits. Indeed they almost never do, but always counter it with histories of their own. These exist more or less openly on the margins of all societies until, or unless, their bearers' fortunes change, whereupon they may become enshrined as the new orthodoxy, only to immediately spawn new counter-histories to their preferred narrative at the new margins.

2. What is History?

It is useful to distinguish “history” from the past, i.e. everything that has happened in the world up to the present moment. The latter is unknowable, whereas the former, “history”, is a selection of facts from the small amount of data about the past that survives and is thus known. In the literate western tradition, up until the comparatively recent past such data was required to exist in written form to count for the purposes of historical reconstruction, but it is now widely acknowledged that oral, archaeological, linguistic and a host of other forms of data may be employed in making histories. In the western tradition, history is also constituted as an academic discipline presided over and practised by coteries of professionals trained in its theories and methods. Similar roughly secular historical priesthoods existed in other societies, but today many professional historians would concede that ordinary people, either individually or collectively, are all practitioners of a sort, albeit on the more modest scale of the family, social organisation or community, and without the presumed professional fidelity to the notion of objectivity. The tension between the elite histories of the literate professionals and the popular histories of the masses reveals “history” in all its many guises as ideology rather than fact, and always requiring critical engagement rather than mute acceptance of its claims, assertions and demands.

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