

Does it make sense to teach history through thinking skills?¹

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Abstract

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The post-modernist critique of modernist historiography raises the question whether it still makes sense to teach students of history those thinking skills which are associated with history as a form of knowledge. In this paper I argue that the post-modernist critique contains numerous untenable theses, and that it is one-sided in its rejection of the concepts of objectivity and rationality. On the basis of this evaluation of the post-modernist critique the conclusion is reached that (with certain qualifications) the teaching of a certain set of thinking skills to students of history is a justifiable pedagogical practice.

1. Introduction

There is wide-spread consensus² that the teaching of history in schools and at universities should not have the recall of 'factual' knowledge of the past as its primary aim. Students should be taught 'content' through thinking skills so that they can do more than regurgitate memorized historical 'facts' in tests and examinations. They should be taught (at least to some extent) how to *think* 'historically', that is, how to think like historians do when they practise historiography as a scientific discipline.³

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1. This essay is a reworked version of a paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Critical Thinking, MIT, July 17-22, 1994. South African referees have made useful suggestions for the improvement of the essay.
 2. See for instance: Elton, 1969:184; Medley, 1988:27; Gray, 1988:20; Green, 1991:153; Capps & Vocke, 1991:6; Mumford, 1991:191.
 3. In this connection see: Elton, 1969:186; Gladwin, 1983:245-246; Karras, 1987:15; Green, 1991:156; Winburg, 1991:84; Zarnowski, 1991:3.

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This 'conventional' (generally 'modernist') view states that senior high school and university students of history should develop the following basic skills or abilities in the course of their study:

- * The ability to evaluate and generate historical hypotheses and causal explanations.
- * The ability to identify and evaluate historical evidence.
- * The ability to recognize bias, propaganda and semantic slanting in historical writing.
- * The ability to identify and evaluate arguments generated by conflicting historical interpretations.

The 'conventional' view of the kind of thinking historians do, and the assumptions underlying the 'conventional' view, have lately been questioned in such a radical way by 'post-modernists' that one is compelled to ask whether it still makes any sense to teach students skills like these listed above, or to teach skills at all.

The aims of this essay are:

- * To identify and explicate the main theses of the post-modernist critique of the 'conventional' view of history, and to clarify some of the most important implications this critique holds for the teaching of 'modernist' thinking skills in history.
- * To evaluate the post-modernist critique in order to answer the question whether it still makes sense to teach history students thinking skills (and if so, which skills?)⁴.

4. A clarificatory note about 'thinking skills' seems in order here. A *denotative* definition of this term should mention at least the following skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation. Skills like these facilitate 'critical thinking', i.e. making reasoned judgments about what to believe and do. These generalities should not obscure the fact that historical knowledge is very complex due to the component of 'background knowledge' which is always implicated in authentic historical thinking. Thinking skills in this context reflect this complexity. For instance, the identification of relevant documentary evidence and the evaluation of such evidence as to its authenticity and credibility proceed against background knowledge of the historical context of the documentary evidence. Without such background knowledge (which sometimes needs to be quite extensive) questions such as 'Does the author of the evidence have a reason to distort?' and 'Is there supporting evidence?', have no chance of receiving more or less satisfactory answers.

2. Main theses and implications of the post-modernist critique

The main theses of the post-modernist critique⁵ oppose basic theses of the 'modernist' theory of history; therefore it is necessary to explicate the former in conjunction with the latter.

2.1 History is non-referential

The post-modernist view of history posits an ontological break between history and the past. In modernist theory of history the past is 'what happened', it is 'out there'; it can be discovered and accurately re-constructed by a scientific discipline which provides the public at large with dependable knowledge about the past. The post-modernist view of history is anti-realist and skepticist: history is non-referential, there is no correspondence between history and an 'objective' past. We can never 'really know' the past. When we study the past we move in a closed circuit of stories/readings/accounts out of which we cannot get to check if they correspond to the past 'as such'.

2.2 History is interpretation

From 2.1 follows the post-modernist thesis of the priority and primacy of interpretation. Historical inquiry does not move from uninterpreted 'evidence' to interpretation; evidence is constituted as evidence only on behalf of some interpretation and does not exist outside this relation. Therefore 'evidence' does not point towards an 'objective' past but only to other interpretations of the past.

If everything in history is construction, it is clear that 'truth' cannot mean 'correspondence with the facts'. 'Truth' can only function in the discourse of history as an 'honorific', i.e. as an expression of the power to promote, regulate or trash interpretations.

2.3 History cannot be 'objective'

History is ineluctably prejudiced by the present in which the historian lives: interpretations of the past are always framed in terms of the present needs of peo-

5. Post-modernism is not a unitary movement; it has been remarked that there are as many post-modernisms as there are post-modernists (Rosenau, 1992:15). For this reason it is a risky business to generalize about post-modernists and post-modernism. However, post-modernists' critique of modernism shows some general trends which I have tried to capture in a number of 'theses'. Pointers to these trends can be found in Scott, 1989; Harlan, 1989; Himmelfarb, 1989; Hobart, 1989. The list of 'theses' given here is not exhaustive and they have been selected for their relevance for the topic of this paper.

ple(s), classes or groups to legitimize their practices and mobilize people for the attainment of their particular aims. History, therefore, cannot be 'objective' in the sense of 'free from subjective or situational introjections' on the part of the historian. The modernist ideal of 'objective historiography' is vacuous, and so are the notions of 'bias' and 'empathy' which are committed to the idea that the past can be re-created objectively. Therefore, post-modernists conclude, 'history' is not a unitary project but rather a plurality of mostly irreconcilable interpretations, a free-for-all of contesting interpretations. There is no neutral space between interpretations on which a debate between them can be conducted; there are no neutral criteria to arbitrate between interpretations.

2.4 Theory has no privileged status

History does not have cognitive aims such as a rational explanation of the past. 'Theory' is displaced by 'description', 'small narratives', 'insight' and 'local conversation'; where it does play a role in historiography, it is stripped of its modernist claims to universality and intersubjectivity: it is evanescent, 'local' and personal. It does not make any 'certaintist' truth claims and has no privileged status.

Post-modernists tend to place the creation of historical meaning beyond method and 'scientific reason'. The latter is viewed as 'instrumental reason' which, as an invention of the Enlightenment, is itself relative and nothing but the rhetoric of power of a specific culture.

Post-modernists shun historical explanation because it pre-supposes 'underlying' structures or 'background' trends which can be brought to light. For post-modernists there cannot be causal explanations in this sense, for all is surface; there are no 'inherent' meanings, 'underlying' structures, 'background' trends or 'sub-texts' on which to draw 'to get things right'. Modernist types of causal explanation are rejected because they ignore the complex 'intertextual' character of the world, which makes it impossible to establish causal direction and temporal priority unambiguously.

2.5 Implications of the post-modernist critique

From these post-modernist theses it follows (directly or indirectly) that the thinking skills which are deemed important in the 'conventional' view are vacuous and should be discarded. For instance: identifying and evaluating evidence in order to 'check' an account of the past is just not on; causality is so problematical that the historian should stick to description and try to preserve the 'discourse'. Furthermore: because there is no neutral space between interpretations on which a debate between them can be conducted, such debates are ineffective and incon-

clusive and should be dropped. The historian should rather turn to an aesthetic appreciation of 'style' and cultivate 'connoisseurship'. 'Bias', 'slant', etc. are meaningless concepts because history is a series of positioned 'readings' and there are no unpositioned criteria by which one can judge the degree of 'bias' or 'slant'. Anyway, there are no skills which can be exercised across the board: skills are 'local', contingent, non-essential elements in the plurality of 'histories'. "In other words history is not about skills" (Jenkins, 1991: 22).

A more general post-modernist rejection of the skills-approach to the teaching of history states that this approach commits the "technicist fallacy": it identifies a whole theoretical discipline with specific parts of its technical instrumentation (Jenkins & Brickley, 1986:5). Consequently, it does not give students a correct impression of how histories are made (Jenkins & Brickley, 1986:4). Therefore it is necessary to move "beyond skillology to methodology" (Jenkins & Brickley, 1980:5), to "more reflexive, penetrating, rich and critical considerations" (Jenkins, 1992:15). This "move beyond skillology" entails a switch from a largely superannuated vocabulary (*objectivity, bias, empathy, etc.*) to a vocabulary which consists of concepts such as *pre-discursive, discourse, textuality, rhetoric, deconstruction, etc.* According to Jenkins proficiency in the latter vocabulary is a precondition of and a pathway towards participation in contemporary debate, intellectual enrichment and possibly empowerment (Jenkins, 1992:15).

3. Evaluation

Post-modernism is not a united movement. Some post-modernist writers on history seem to be on the verge of abandoning the whole project of history; however, there are less extreme views. In this section I shall address some of the less extreme views and focus mainly on the positions of Keith Jenkins and Franklin Ankersmit. This narrowing of the focus of my evaluation is necessary because it is only through close reading of a particular author that one can pick up the tensions which are present in his or her position, but which may also be exemplary of that *type* of position.

The first part of my evaluation will be negative because I shall highlight theses connected with the post-modernist position which appear to be arguably untenable. The second part of my evaluation is based on the premise that the post-modernist position is one-sided and that it is possible to salvage some tenable sense of the concepts of rationality and objectivity from the post-modernist critique.

3.1 Untenable theses

3.1.1 It is useless to strive for truth

The post-modernist re-description of truth as a 'honorific' which is connected with power, and the limitation of its use to 'local' contexts or even the statements of a particular person only, seem tantamount to sawing off the branch on which one is sitting: post-modernists do seem intent on convincing more people than the 'local' crowd of initiates by way of rational argument. Keith Jenkins (1991:14), for example, argues that it is useless to strive for objectivity and truth, and gives reasons to make this conclusion acceptable (i.e. in some sense 'true'). In doing so, he implicitly affirms the possibility of truth.

3.1.2 There are no generally applicable criteria

If there are really no generally applicable criteria to arbitrate between interpretations (Ankersmit's view), there is no way to reject those which are obviously irrelevant or irrational, for example Keegstra's 'historical' interpretation of the evidence of the extermination of Jews during the Second World War: his interpretation posits a conspiracy to create a myth that the Holocaust occurred (Blair, 1986:159).

3.1.3 Terms like *bias* and *slant* should be dropped

The complete rejection of terms such as *bias* and *slant*, because they imply criteria of 'objectivity' and 'truth', seems unwarranted. Keith Jenkins (1991:37) argues that the concept of bias is 'central' to the empiricist kind of historiography where it "means the skewing of sources to fit an argument, the withholding of documents, the falsification of evidence ...". Jenkins does not seem to be aware that he uses the term *bias* in two senses, i.e. in the meanings listed above, and in the sense of the limitations which a 'point of view' imposes on historiography. As to the latter sense, I tend to agree that all interpretations of the past are 'positioned' (but more about this later). The other meanings of *bias*, however, tie in closely with certain modes of fallacious reasoning: 'special pleading', 'ignoring the facts' and 'suppressed evidence'. There are good reasons why these expressions of 'bias' in reasoning are to be rejected: if they are viewed as legitimate strategies of reasoning, most hypotheses, theories and interpretations (including any Jenkins might venture) would become wayward, arbitrary and immune to criticism. Jenkins also seems to be aware of this possibility, for in his review of a book by Bennett he is worried that his "interpretation" could "distort" Bennett's arguments, and takes appropriate measures to lessen the chance of that happening by giving "a close reading of his [Bennett's] text via short and long quotes" (Jenkins, 1992:16).

3.1.4 Skills are not central

Jenkins' post-modernist rejection of the skills-approach to the teaching of history is decidedly ambivalent. On Jenkins' own account, certain "historians' skills" are part and parcel of "making histories": historians "generate hypotheses, formulate abstractions", call on methods for the close working on material, for "checking it for its origins, position, reliability ..." (Jenkins, 1991:21-23). The point Jenkins wants to make is that skills (generally) are variable, 'optional' and peripheral in the process of "making histories": histories are constituted not by skills but by ideologies. Jenkins relegates a (more or less 'traditional') skills-approach to the teaching of history to the "lower school"; a shift towards "historian's methods" (meaning Jenkins' version of 'deconstruction') should occur at 'A level' (Jenkins, 1992:15). In this connection it should be noted that although Jenkins 'decentres' skills in the teaching of history, some skills are 'central' to his way of teaching history, i.e. typically 'post-modernist' skills like deconstructive reading which reveals the internal arbitrary hierarchies, contradictions, certaintist pretensions, etc. of texts and interpretations (Jenkins, 1991:68).

3.1.5 Causal attribution should be dropped

According to the post-modernist view historical causality is so complex that it cannot be unravelled; causal attribution is always in some way arbitrary. Giving explanations of 'why things happened' is not really part of the job of the historian. Nevertheless, many post-modernists seem to be unable to refrain from giving lots of (from their point of view irregular) causal explanations.

Ankersmit, for example, restricts causal language to states of affairs described by individual statements. In his view causal language results in confusion and unsubstantiated claims when it is introduced on the level of the text and "narrative substances"/interpretative concepts, e.g. 'Cold War' or 'French Revolution' (Ankersmit, 1990:284). However, it seems as if Ankersmit is not consistent in this respect, for he does give causal explanations of interpretative concepts and hypotheses like "overproduction in historiography" (Ankersmit, 1989:137) and "fragmentation prevails over synthesis" (in historiography) (Ankersmit, 1990:287).

A negative result of the reticence which post-modernists show towards causal explanation is that causal categories are often used in a vague, unreflective way. A sample from the book by Keith Jenkins (1991 [my italics]) could illustrate this point: the condition of postmodernity "*affects* the sort of views you and I might hold about history" (59); he wants to show how a certain type of post-modernism "has *produced* a situation where there has now developed a mass of historical genres ..." (59); he asserts that "no social formation we know has so systematically *eradicated* intrinsic value from its culture so much as liberal market capi-

talism, not through choice, but *through the 'cultural logic of late-capital'*" (63). All the italicized expressions suggest causal attribution which is not clarified.

3.2 One-sidedness

Post-modernism has, with some justification, criticised modernist scientific rationality for its one-sided emphasis on the 'technology of research procedures'. However, in some respects the post-modernist critique is not critical or radical enough: it fails to distinguish itself from the position it criticises, and is itself one-sided. Modernist historiography, in its endeavour to be 'scientific', excluded the creation of meaning in historical interpretation from 'science proper', by awarding priority and primacy to the scientific research process. Post-modernism, which gives priority and primacy to interpretation, does the same, the only difference being that scientific research procedures are marginalized, and not the creation of meaning: the latter proceeds 'beyond' the procedures and standards of scientific rationality in the sphere of power interests, ideology and rhetoric. In the post-modernist view history is not constituted by research procedures, but by power interests and ideology. In Jenkins' (1991:17) words: "history *per se* is an ideological construct ...".

However, even if the point is granted that historical meaning is created by a poetic-imaginative process and not by the research technology of the discipline and by reasoning, it does not follow that it is 'beyond' rational evaluation and argumentation. If this were the case, various types of irrational creation of meaning would have legitimacy and every irrefutable mythologizing history or conspiracy theory would have to be taken seriously. Irrational creation of historical meaning has flourished on National Socialism and Apartheid and has affected the lives of millions of people in an unequivocally negative way. Practical consequences thus militate against taking the irrational creation of historical meaning seriously, except to criticise it by way of rational assessment, that is by questioning the reliability of its sources, the validity of its methods and the cogency of its arguments. In short: by bringing into play some historians' thinking skills.

Post-modernists have, again with some justification, criticised modernist versions of a rationality which is divorced from all situational context, and is circumscribed in terms of universal and a-historical criteria and procedures. This critique has tended to be extreme in its rejection of concepts such as rationality and objectivity, and in its affirmation of the relativity of all interpretations.

Relativism in post-modernism seems to have undermined the possibility of rational debate between interpretations. Ankersmit, for instance, argues that as there is no neutral space between a plurality of interpretations on which a debate between them can be conducted, rational debate can only be "clumsy", "ineffective" and "inconclusive", and should therefore be dropped. For Jenkins, on the other

hand, relativism is an affirmation of pluralism, which is a liberating and empowering way of looking at things: "Reflexively, you too can make histories" (Jenkins, 1991:24). 'Making histories' is Jenkins' alternative for rational debate between interpretations.

However, even if absolute knowledge (Hegel) or some other position beyond historical situatedness are not options any longer, it does not follow that rational debate between differing and even competing historical interpretations is not possible. Gadamer's hermeneutics offers a model of how this can be achieved.

A hermeneutical approach affirms 'point of view' and 'historical situatedness' (which includes the political affiliations of the historian) as pre-conditions for understanding and interpreting the past. This approach does not marginalize the importance of research methods (such methods are complementary to the hermeneutical approach) nor does this approach deny the plurality of interpretations which results from different 'points of view'. However, it takes the plurality of 'points of view'/'perspectives' as an indication of the limitedness or 'bias' of each particular point of view, which can be overcome in a process of dialogue. In a process of dialogue (which involves the 'research technology' of historical studies) the limits of particular perspectives can be overcome through mutual compromise and agreement, resulting in a widening of their scope. In this way, then, it seems possible to achieve not an absolute objectivity but a limited, *historical* objectivity. Jörn Rüsen (1993:56) suggests two criteria for such a historical objectivity: the first is the broadness of experience of the past disclosed by the compromised perspectives/interpretations (an empirical criterion), and the generality and applicability of its significance for addressing problems in orienting practical life (a normative criterion).

Moreover, to my way of thinking, 'objectivity' in historiography can have at least one more tenable meaning, and it is one Jenkins also calls for: in this sense it is synonymous with 'reflexivity' in the historian's presentation of the past. Reflexivity consists in calling overt attention to the process of production of a specific interpretation, in explicating and elaborating the hypotheses and questions which direct the research, in clarifying important concepts (e.g. 'causality') and in laying ideological pre-suppositions on the table (cf. Jenkins, 1991:68).

4. Concluding remarks

In view of the deliberations in section 3.1 it seems appropriate to reject the post-modernist alternative to 'modernist' historiography in so far as the former position is incoherent (in the sense of self-undermining) (3.1.1; 3.1.3), inconsistent (3.1.4; 3.1.5), and so vague about the demarcation between historical and pseudo-

historical accounts of the past that it cannot criticise irrational 'historical' interpretations (3.1.2).

However, it has also been argued (3.2) that the post-modernist critique of the modernist emphasis on the 'technology of research procedures' and 'contextless' rationality should be taken seriously. Therefore I can agree with Jenkins that history is not primarily about skills. However, to the extent that history is still regarded as a form of knowledge (which Jenkins also seems to do, *malgré lui*), history is about skills, more specifically *thinking* skills. This statement does not encourage what Jenkins and Brickley (1986:4) call "skillology", i.e. a one-sided emphasis on skills at the cost of 'content' and 'critique', neither does it condone efforts to make students fully-fledged historians in their own right (cf. Medley, 1988:27). What it does support is the aim to develop students' abilities to cope with history as a specific form of knowledge; that is, amongst other things, to recognize and criticise irrational historical interpretations; to reconstruct the 'point of view' of various historical interpretations; to evaluate and criticise reasoning in historiographical texts and debates; to evaluate the use of historical evidence and the reliability of sources referred to in historiographical texts; to understand and critically evaluate historians' use of causal attribution; and to engage in rational debate with different historical interpretations so as to widen the scope of their own experience of the past.

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